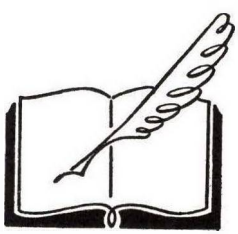
BASS PLONI LEPLONI

MARRIAGES ARE DECIDED IN HEAVEN
(Soteh p. 2)

בת פלוני לפלוני
(סוטה ב:)

BY BENJAMIN SCHREIBER



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Gratefully, B.S.

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BY BENJAMIN SCHREIBER

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7515

To the memory of my beloved and unforgettable wife

CECILIE HOFBAUER SCHREIBER ע"ה

my life's companion of fifty-seven years, who shared the progress of this volume, but was not destined to see its publication, this book is reverently dedicated and presented to friends and relatives.



MRS. CECELIA SCHREIBER

1948

FORTIETH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

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PREFACE

"LUGANO!" the conductor announced, his musical voice rudely interrupting my meditations. The very name of the place charmed me with its melody. When the train entered Lugano station, the sun was high on the blue southern firmament, and the magnolias and the tall palm trees swayed gently in the mild breeze. A porter took my baggage, and I was free to take the funicular railway from the elevated station down into the charming lakeshore town.

The short trip was an experience in itself. All around the station were rose gardens in full bloom, and the tracks had to wind their way between laurel groves and rose hedges. The ivy-clad, wall-like hedges extended all the way down into the town itself. Shrubs studded with flowers brushed against the train and formed arches over its path. Thick clusters of black grapes hung down from the carefully tucked-up vines on the many arcades. From afar I saw the beautiful lake, its wondrously blue waters reflecting the mountains round about. As I walked, the melodious cadences of the Italian language and the rhythmic pronunciation of the townspeople

sounded like music to my ear, with the stacatto beat of their wooden shoes keeping perfect time. Old women carried on their bent backs the basket, locally called "hutter," filled to the rim with grapes. I breathed in the dreamlike beauty of this town with its well-kept streets and the houses with their magnificent arcades.

The sun was about to set and I quickly walked to the lakeside to watch the beautiful sunset. Before me was the grayish-green top of Monte San Salvatore, formed like a Ticino 'paneta'-cake. Its dense cover of trees gave the impression of a green overcoat. Behind silver-coated Monte Bre, the sun's glow was slowly fading. Looking like a narrow golden ribbon it threw its last rays on the shining lake. Then night settled down.

I sat there, completely captivated by the charm of the colorful miracle of that sunset, enjoying the cool evening air. A belt of innumerable colored electric lights started to sparkle all along the shore and threw a dim light on the lake which seemed at first to rest motionless in the dark, and then like a gently moving mirror began to reflect the lights. It looked as if dancing lightning bugs were bathing in the lake. A light, westerly wind and flower-decked gondolas bearing merry excursionists rippled the lake. Sailboats and rowboats carrying Chinese lanterns in many colors, joined the nocturnal traffic. From somewhere came the strains of an accordion, and the sound of popular Ticino songs accompanied by mandolins.

Strolling along the lakeshore, I felt a strong urge to put this experience into words while it was still fresh in my mind. I partly hoped to fulfill a promise I had made to my little friends in Engelberg to write some short stories for them. Hesitant, I sat down on one of the bright red benches on the chestnut-bordered promenade facing the lake, took out my pad and pencil and set about to compose a story for the children. But somehow, each time I tried to invent a plot, it would be displaced by another fantasy before it could take clear shape. Somehow, I could get no further than the

title "Children of the Golden Sun" after the Sonnengold Inn, where we had been waiting for our immigration permits to the New World.

Finally my memories set out on paths of their own. Long-forgotten scenes from my childhood came into clear focus. Many a long-lost voice seemed to come to my ear again. The past and the present merged. As the urge to give concrete expression to these mental images became stronger and stronger, memory became interwoven with imagination. Finally, I took heart and began to write it all down: memories of Jewish life in Europe ... customs going back to far-off lands ... legends, the tragic ... and the comical....

Turn the pages and see for yourself.

1

VAMIA

WHEN I was a child – Vamia, where I was raised, was a small Slovak town under Hungarian rule. In the late 1890's, about nine thousand five hundred of Vamia's ten thousand inhabitants were Slovaks, three hundred were Hungarians, and two hundred, Jews.

We Jewish children were therefore forced to speak several languages, and language being the key to knowledge, this training eventually helped us develop a broad, cosmopolitan outlook on life.

At home we spoke German, but instruction in the public schools was in Hungarian. Indeed, the Hungarian rulers of Slovakia succeeded in imposing their language and culture on our town to such an extent that we children were forbidden to speak any language other than Hungarian in public. Nonetheless, the school authorities were sufficiently tolerant of cultural differences to excuse the Jewish students from attendance on Sabbath and Jewish holy days.

Our Hebrew teacher's little boy came home from his first day of public school in great excitement. "The teacher issued a decree that we may only speak Hungarian," he shouted.

"But you don't know Hungarian, Yudele!" his father countered, smiling.

"Never mind," said Yudele proudly, "we'll talk Hungarian anyway!"

Our three months of vacation were taken care of by the German-language school run by the Jewish community. Through our Biblical and Talmudic studies, we also acquired a knowledge of Hebrew.

As a fourth language we spoke Yiddish, which our Talmud instructors used as a medium for translation, and which we eventually came to speak among ourselves as well.

The Slovaks, who constituted the vast majority of the population, spoke only Slovak. Most of them were ardent Slovak nationalists. Those few among them who knew Hungarian or German disdained these languages. We children had to know Slovak, if for no other reason, than the frequent fights we had with Slovak boys.

The Slovaks regarded the Jewish children as one with the hated Magyars. The Hungarians, on the other hand, hated us because they considered us Germans. Indeed, the only thing the Slovaks and the Hungarians cherished in common was their hatred of the Jews. In contrast, the government and the higher officials were more kindly disposed toward the Jews. There were Jewish mayors, and high Jewish army officers and there was even a Jewish Cabinet Minister. A large proportion of the intellectuals were Jews.

In 1917, Charles, the last Hapsburg emperor, invited Wilhelm Vazsony, a Jewish lawyer, to his palace in Vienna and offered him the portfolio of Justice in the Hungarian Cabinet. In order to circumvent an old law requiring a Cabinet Minister to be sworn in according to church ritual, the young emperor had issued a special decree that the oath could be administered according to the Jewish rite. Whether this appointment was made in honest recognition of Vazsony's abilities, or whether it was merely a solution to a dilemma, is difficult to say.

* * *

Laid out like a ribbon along either side of a highway, but otherwise cut off from the big world, Vamia made a very friendly impression. Though situated on a plateau on the spurs of the Carpathian Mountains and in a setting of beautiful spruce and pine forests, it lacked sights worthy of mention. There was no real industry in town, unless one counted the small weaving enterprise where prayer shawls were woven by hand. We children were very proud of this factory, for while its production was not great, the products were said to be of high quality.

A second industry was the bottling of soda water. In our local pride we called the little shop a factory. At that time soda water was still considered a luxury, to be served only at festive occasions. No wonder, then, that we thought the term "soda" derived from 's'uda' the Hebrew for "banquet," and called the drink 's'uda vasser."

The peasants considered soda water a cure-all and would come to Vamia from the neighboring villages to buy it for some relative who was seriously ill. But they came up against a major problem. The dealers would not trust them with the expensive bottles unless they paid a high deposit. As a result the less affluent would be forced to transfer the water into their own pots; and by the time they got home all the sparkle would have gone from the miraculous medicine and it seemed no different from ordinary water.

The gentile population was dominated by superstitution and mysticism. The town also had its own colony of gypsies whose women told fortunes with playing cards or from the palms of their customers. Most people consulted the gypsy chief Matej and his wife Maria, who were considered particularly reliable palmists. Very few people knew that Matej was almost completely blind.

The gypsy colony was at one end of the town and consisted mainly of mud huts, some reinforced with wood from crates and boxes. Most of the huts looked as if they were going to come tumbling down any minute. Some gypsies lived in mere holes in the ground that looked like molehills. These dark fellows with the fiery eyes stole almost anything that could be moved. At night

they would dig up the carcasses of the animals which the veterinary authorities had buried that day. The fact that this meat had been contaminated with carbolic acid did not seem to disturb them: They would boil it several times considering that procedure sufficient protection against disease.

We even had treasure hunters in town. An occasional glimmer in the peat swamps was enough for the superstitious to start digging there for treasure at midnight. They eagerly marched into the swamps, with only slippers on their feet. Popular belief has it that one only had to throw a slipper in the direction of such a glimmer, and the treasure would come to the surface at once. It would not have paid to try to convince the good people that the glimmer was nothing but natural gas rising from the swamp and igniting upon contact with the air.

There were weather forecasters, too. When the snuff in their snuffboxes felt moist, they predicted rain. This procedure, of course, was based on actual fact, an increase in the humidity in the air would tend to make the tobacco moist and sticky.

In the winter, the women would spend long hours splitting feathers. Every economical housewife worthy of the name had the fluff pulled off the larger feathers. Only goose feathers were used for stuffing quilts; chicken feathers were considered unhealthy because they tended to retain moisture. The stuffing was done for a few pennies by young girls who would tell each other gruesome ghost stories to amuse themselves as they worked. My classmate Lavlor and I would listen from a corner of the room and, although our rabbi had taught us that it was against Jewish law to believe in ghosts, these horror tales left their imprint on our young minds. To this day I recoil from such stories.

Hodul, the awe-inspiring night-watchman, encouraged our childish belief in the supernatural. The very sight of this watchman, tall as a pine tree, filled us with fear. When he made his nightly rounds, Hodul would bawl out the hours in a mighty roar that shattered the nocturnal silence. As soon as we heard his shuffling steps in the night, we would feel uneasy. His raucous voice in the

dark night dispelled all sleep. We visualized eerie cemetery scenes —for Hodul was also the gravedigger in the Jewish cemetery— which we felt to be peopled with ghosts and apparitions. To keep the visions of demons away, we would pull the covers over our heads and stuff their corners into our ears. Other aids to sleep were seven sips of water, followed by lying on the right side and counting to one hundred. We even placed fir cones under the mattresses.

Yet sleep would not come. Nothing we tried was of avail; for hours we would lie awake in bed, counting every quarter hour struck by the town clock. Every turn of the weathercock on that tower was accompanied by an eerie sound. This, too, was supposed to protect people from demons. No wonder that we greeted the crowing of the cock in the morning with great relief.

It was with special fervor that we would recite our final evening prayers before retiring. Somehow we assumed that the only purpose of repeating the complete 'Shma Yisrael' when going to bed was to protect us against demons. So we were all the more surprised when we learned that another reason for this repetition was that the evening prayer ('ma'ariv') had been said in the synagogue before nightfall in combination with the afternoon prayer ('mincha'), to save the community an extra trip and while it is permissible to pray 'ma'ariv' before, 'Shma' must be recited again after nightfall.

2

RABBI SHOLEM GASSER

Rabbi Shlomo Gasser, the rabbi of Vamia, considered the education of the town's Jewish children his lifework. He was a pious, unworldly man whose personality instilled confidence and won people's hearts. There was something irresistible about the way he spoke. He had a keen sense of observation and could get to the bottom of things with dispatch. He was not only the religious leader of the community, but also the counsellor of all those in need of advice and the comforter of the afflicted. He considered it his first duty to assist those who needed help, to give them new faith, and to restore their confidence.

Rabbi Gasser's "yeshiva," the school for higher Jewish studies he conducted, was known far and wide. He was not only the teacher of his students, but also their personal friend. He was always ready to help and to act as a father to the needy and suffering. A descendant of Aaron, he followed in the paths of his ancestors, loving peace and pursuing it humbly and sincerely. His warm sympathy, human simplicity and great capacity for friendship gained him the esteem not only of his own Jewish community but also of the Gentiles.

We children had an additional reason for the affection in which we held the rabbi. Without fail, he would visit the school every year on the day before 'Shiv'a Asar b'Tamuz,' (the fast of the 17th day of 'Tamuz,') and tell our teacher firmly not to whip his students during the three weeks of mourning for the temple that followed. The teacher promptly hid his rod until after the fast of the ninth of 'Av' ('Tish'a b'Av'), for it was feared that a whipping given a child during that sad season might cause accidental serious injury. Thus the days which we should have regarded as a period of sadness became for us a span of relief from the teacher's rod.

The rabbi occupied a simple residence. His modest home was always well-kept and comfortable, but the study was its chief attraction. A large family portrait, somewhat faded by sunlight, covered part of the light-green wall. The ancient brown bookcase that took up the rest of that wall contained an ample library of Mishnaic, Talmudic, Agadic, and Cabalistic tomes, and many other precious works of Jewish learning. Each volume was wrapped in sturdy blue paper. There were other bookcases too, lining the walls, filled up to the ceiling with scholarly Hebrew books that had been collected by Rabbi Gasser's father and by his father before him.

Among the other patriarchal fixtures in the rabbi's study was an old clock in a polished brown case. Its shaky yellow pendulum, swinging far to the right, then again far to the left, the clock striking every quarter hour, fascinated me whenever I was allowed to enter the room. Another special attraction were two red, worn-out, plush-covered couches with yellow tassels. These antique furnishings made the room seem warm, cozy and homelike.

It was always a treat for me to be sent to the rabbi with a sh'aila, a question of Jewish law calling for a rabbinic decision. The rich women, having long realized that the rabbi would try his best to interpret the law as leniently as possible if the problem involved a poorer family, made it a practice to send the gullets of their geese with poor children to find out whether the force-fed birds were kosher. Force-fed geese were a national institution in Hungary. One tear in the gullet, an injury that could occur easily

as the result of force-feeding, was sufficient to render the whole bird trefe---unfit for consumption according to Jewish law. The rabbi caught on to the trick when he noticed that the poor families seemed to be having two geese a week, while the rich families had practically none at all.

The central attraction in the rabbi's study was a display in a glass case which, in addition to some old-fashioned silver dishes, contained the record of the circumcisions he had performed, his two double-edged circumcision knives, and his special forceps, whose handle was of fine Venetian filigree.

There was one object displayed in this showcase that never failed to stir my imagination. It was the strange-looking halitza shoe, the ceremonial utensil needed by the rabbi for the halitza ceremony which released a man from the duty to marry his childless brother's widow. The shoe was large and clumsy, with two long straps, and of no particular color. The appearance of the aged, untanned leather somehow made me afraid. Later I learned that the halitza shoe had to be made from the skin of a ritually pure animal, preserved in its natural state, and that it could not even be oiled or greased. Its straps were white, sewn on from the outside; at one end there was a separate white strap for wrapping around. There were also three hooks and eyes attached to it. It is easy to understand that all this attracted our childish curiosity. Yet it was not so much the appearance of the shoe alone that caused such great uneasiness, as the thought of the exciting scenes that might have accompanied the ceremonies in which this shoe had served. The widow of a man who dies childless may not remarry unless her husband's brother performs the chalitza ceremony with her. Since this combination of circumstances rarely occurred in Vamia, the halitza shoe was hardly ever used. I would not have touched it for any money in the world.

In spite of himself, the rabbi was also active in the field of commerce. It was an old Hungarian custom to send the rabbi gifts of coffee and sugar in appreciation of his special semi-annual Talmudic discourses delivered on Shabas Hagadol, the Sabbath

before Pesach, and on Shabas Shuva, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kipur. The rabbi's contract with the congregation entitled him to receive about four pounds of coffee and twelve pounds of sugar on those occasions, but the individual members would add gifts of their own. As a result, the rabbi often received much more than his own household could use, at times more than the average grocer would keep in stock. This excess he would then sell back to the merchants.

The rabbi's household was managed by Elizabeth, a Gentile woman who had been with the Gassers for many years. A loyal and faithful servant, she took care of the rabbi's children. The rabbi and his wife treated her very well, and she was very much at home with them. The fact that they had different religions was hardly noticed. She would recite the Hebrew evening prayers with the children, and when she came to the name of G-d, she did not pronounce it, but would merely say "Nu!" as the children pronounced the Name, just as she had heard their mother do. She would also check whether the boys' ritual fringes, the tzitzis, were in good condition. If one of the boys inadvertently had his head uncovered she would remind him and scold him, "Goy!"

* * *

3

REB ELYA THE SHAMASH

Rabbi Gasser's immediate subordinate in communal matters was Reb Elya, the 'shamash.' Although somewhat younger than the rabbi and his inferior in scholarship, Reb Elya was always treated with the utmost respect and courtesy by Rabbi Gasser, and the community followed suit. Reb Elya was Rabbi Gasser's right-hand man, and the community loved him too, for, unlike many of his confreres, he was a lovable person, a handsome man of noble character. With all his humility, he was never obsequious. In spite of his lack of wordly goods, he always seemed free from care and always had a happy smile on his face. His life was one of calm contemplation, far removed from the world and its cares. He seemed to be a living enigma: friendly yet withdrawn. But the wrinkles on his forehead and the gray of his hair betrayed a past filled with sorrows.

He was known as "the 'ba'al t'shuva'," the "Repentant Sinner." The older people said that he had been wealthy as a young man, but less pious. Then, somehow, he had lost most of his fortune. Yet, with every material setback, his spiritual stock increased, and he grew closer to G-d and to His Law. He reached a point in his

devoutness where taking off his hat and leaving his head uncovered when transacting business at his bank began to trouble him. To avoid baring his head he transferred his account – despite his friends' warnings against trusting his remaining money to that small institution – to a small bank where he could do as he pleased. Unfortunately these fears were confirmed when that bank lost most of the money he still had left there. Calmly, he accepted these misfortunes as just punishments for his past sins. Perhaps, he had not acquired the money in full accord with Jewish law and ethics. And rather than wait to lose what he still had left, he gave it away himself, to charity.

Reb Elya had adopted a second name – Chayim – as it is customary for people who break with a sinful past to show that they are now different persons. But in his case no one cared to take note of the change in name. Everybody had known him as Reb Elya, and Reb Elya he remained. For himself however, the new name was very real, and as a "new" person he hoped for a change in his fortunes. When he was called up to read from the 'Sefer Torah' he could and did insist on being summoned by the name of "Elya Chayim."

His clothes, as befit his situation, were all very simple and old-fashioned, but always clean. He insisted on neatness, recalling the saying of Rabbi Yohanan that clothes determined the way in which others would look upon their wearer. Besides, he used to say that as we were all created in the image of G-d we must not degrade that image by neglecting our personal appearance. But for this, all there was required was cleanliness, neatness and simple good taste; elegant clothes, might easily cause the wearer to become arrogant, and this Elya was most anxious to avoid. He had no more than five suits of clothing in his possession at a time. One, a suit of better quality was for Sabbaths and holidays. A simpler suit, still in good condition, was reserved for 'Rosh Chodesh' (The New Moon) and the intermediary days of the festivals. A simple suit served for weekdays. He reserved a special garment, his very best one for the High Holidays. A fifth one, especially old and shabby,

was set aside for the mourning of 'Tish'a b'Av. Reb Elya also owned five prayer shawls, each corresponding to one of these suits.

Oh yes, Reb Elya did have one other garment worthy of mention. Day and night, in summer and in winter, he would wear next to his body a rough hair shirt to atone for his sins. He tried to keep this a secret, and he was very much embarrassed when someone once noticed it at the ritual bath.

The 'tochacha' in the Book of Leviticus and the 'tochacha' in Deuteronomy are two Biblical sections containing admonitions to us to mend our ways, and threatening us with increasingly severe punishments if we should continue to transgress the laws of G-d. Many were superstitious about being called up to these readings, and it was difficult for synagogue officials to select persons to call up for those passages, for such a selection could too easily be misinterpreted. Reb Elya had no regard for these scruples and fully accepted what Rabbi Gasser had taught him: namely, that the Torah was a balm of life, and no undeserved ill could ever come from it. Even the peasants around Vamia seemed to respect the 'tochacha.' There was a saying current among them that no change would occur in the weather before the Jews had read their Biblical curses. Because many wished to avoid being called to the Torah at the reading of the 'tochacha,' it had become customary to pay a fee to the one who would accept the call. Reb Elya volunteered to accept those calls, but he never kept that money for himself. He gave it to the needy. Although himself a poor man, Reb Elya always punctiliously gave one-tenth of his income to the poor.

In front of Reb Elya's door there stood a small table, on which he kept a large loaf of bread and a knife at all times, so that anyone passing by could satisfy his hunger. On Friday, the baking of the Sabbath 'chala' would begin early in his household, in accordance with Ezra's decree that Jewish women should rise early on Friday morning to bake, to make sure enough bread would be available for the poor.

In his will, Reb Elya requested that his coffin be made from the boards of the old-fashioned table on which he used to study, just as some Spanish Jews used to make coffins from the tables on which the deceased had served the poor, and that his body should be immersed in the ritual immersion before burial. In accordance with a widespread custom, he also had a complete set of shrouds prepared while he was still living to remind him constantly of the transitory nature of life. Besides, he wanted to make sure that if he were to die on a holiday there would be no need to have a Gentile make the shrouds for his burial.

For us children he was a man of authority. No one would have dared address him in familiar terms. To be so much as spoken to by Reb Elya was an honor and a distinction, and we always greeted him respectfully. There was no doubt in our minds that he was one of the thirty-six righteous people on whom the continued survival of the world depended, and who were therefore free to appear daily before G-d without special permission, and behold the splendor of His presence.

In one of the spare rooms in Reb Elya's house there stood Reb Elya's own tombstone, covered with a piece of cloth, all ready to be placed over his grave. Hewn of smooth, grey limestone, it was engraved with his name, but lacked the extravagant epitaphs and words of praise usually seen on headstones of the time. Next to it was a little bag of earth he had brought home from a pilgrimage to Mount Zion. When he died, the community abided by his last will and testament not to add one word to the inscription on his tombstone except the date of his death. They complied with this request, but commissioned a stonemason to engrave on the headstone a bunch of grapes, the Talmudic symbol for a perfect human being.

* * *

4

SARAH THE NEWSLADY

One clause in Reb Elya's will provided that all his furniture was to go to a widow the town called "Sarah the Newslady." This woman did not sell newspapers. She got her by-name from her practice of finding out all the news in the community while it was still hot, and then spreading it quickly all over town. She was something like a walking local gazette. If someone happened to need her, she would never be found at home, for she was always at some neighbor's house, gossiping. Walking through town she would always be followed by groups of people eager to learn the latest news. Anyone interested in spreading a rumor only had to confide it to Sarah as a secret, and it was sure to make the rounds of the community like wildfire. Yoina the Coachman would often use this convenient means for his pranks and, sure enough, it worked each time.

Even on Sabbath afternoons the townfolk would crowd around Sarah to discuss the news of the day. She always contributed the most, and the most important, topics for the idlers' conversation. For good measure she would always oblige with supplementary special editions to complete the up-to-date communal gossip. What-

ever had or had not happened during that week was thoroughly discussed, analyzed, and commented upon. Sarah kept a strict account of joyous occasions in all of Vamia's families and reminded the 'shamash', Reb Elya, to prepare the 'Sefer Torah' presented by the happy family for use during the Sabbath service, in accordance with established local custom.

If a wedding or some other happy occasion was to be celebrated in town, Sarah would take it upon herself personally to invite all the guests, and to impress upon them the need of bringing their own silverware, for nobody owned so vast an amount of table silver that he could have provided for all his guests. It was also her personal privilege to bake the large 'chala', the festive loaf with raisins, for these occasions. When a child was about to be born, she would come to the house and recite psalms and supplications for the safety of mother and child. Later she would bring the messages of congratulation, in person, to the young mother.

If there was a wedding, she would go to the city to select and buy the fish, which, as the symbol of fertility, were never lacking in a Vamia wedding menu. The morning before the wedding she would go to the cemetery to visit the graves of the departed close kinfolk of the couple to extend an invitation to their spirits to attend the ceremony. She also would insist that both the groom and the bride start the march to the canopy with the right foot first and would even call out: "Right foot forward!" Then she would shower the bride and groom with rice.

Sarah's importance in the communal life of Vamia was enhanced by her official position. She was superintendent of the ladies' ritual bath and enjoyed free bathing privileges as part of her salary. Of course, such an office required much discretion and restraint. Many were the complaints about Sarah, particularly that she often abused the functions of her office. It was up to her to decide whether the ritual immersions had been complete and in accordance with the law, and it was said that she made women who had incurred her disfavor, plunge into the icy water countless

times before declaring herself satisfied that they had performed their duty properly.

Another function of hers, harmless but lucrative, was that of cemetery guide. Every year, between the new moon of 'Elul' and 'Yom Kipur', scores of out-of-towners would come to Vamia to visit the graves of relatives. Sarah would help them locate the graves and recited special prayers for them, recalling her grandfather's words that the place where pious people were buried was holy and pure, and prayers said there had a better chance of being answered than those recited elsewhere.

* * *

5

STRANGE VISITORS

One day something happened that threw all Vamia into a dither. Sarah the Newslady, put on her blue-dotted Sabbath-dress and a flowered kerchief in honor of the event before she waddled 'round the town to spread the news. She alone was able to supply reliable information on what had happened, and had volunterred to give it to everybody. However, it was impossible to get a clear and coherent account from her. The words bubbled forth from her so rapidly that they became entangled and tripped over each other before they had a chance to become complete sentences. What facts there had been soon became interwoven with the working of her own vivid imagination. For, while still at the beginning of her story, she lost all patience and tried to run ahead of herself.

So much, however, seemed authentic: A magnificent stagecoach, drawn by handsome, silver-harnessed horses, had stopped in front of the Jagerhorn Inn. The guests had not been satisfied with the rooms at that hotel, and she, Sarah, had referred them to Reb Elya, the 'Shamash,' and had personally conducted them to his house, where they had found convenient and suitable quarters. The

strangers were Americans. The husband was a giant of a man, most likely a retired sergeant-major, with a broad scar on his fine features. His majestic platinum-blond wife was modestly but expensively dressed. The third member of the party, apparently the couple's daughter, was a well-dressed charming, young girl with curly black hair. Her modest, unassuming air had impressed Sarah very favorably. Unable to describe the girl's real beauty, she compared her with the moon in all its glory, saying that on beholding her, one would have to pronounce the special blessing reserved for the sight of extraordinary beauty.

Such a rare occurrence of necessity aroused the community's vital interest. The news of the strangers' arrival had spread through the town like wildfire, and had lured the people out of their houses. Reb Elya's house was soon surrounded by a curious crowd. The customary exaggerations and sensational rumors were whispered in confidence from one person to the next. There was no end to conjectures about these strangers. Hoping for more clues, people kept circling the house, but to no avail. None of the three showed their faces at the door.

Guesswork was all that was left to the curious, and they made the most of it. Some claimed to know on good authority that Sonya, Reb Elya's long-lost daughter, had returned. Others contested that theory: "Sonya had black hair. That lady is blond," they asserted. A few of the most cunning and enterprising bribed Czenki, the town clerk, with a pack of cigarettes to learn at least the official data about the strangers. But even this procedure was only partly successful. The clerk told them the name of the family was Kievski, and that they had come from America. Both the man and the woman had registered as natives of Russia. The woman's maiden name was Wasiliev; she had been born in Siberia, and was not Jewish at all.

Such fragmentary information only served to encourage further guessing, and new rumors and stories made the rounds. Nobody, however, could think of a reason why these distinguished people should have wanted to stop at Vamia, of all places.

A few days later the town's curiosity grew even more, and the sensation reached a climax when the American gentleman was seen entering Rabbi Gasser's home in the synagogue building. As usual, the rabbi was seated in his simple armchair behind dense clouds of smoke, studying the wisdom of G-d from the heavy folio volumes of the Talmud in the dim light. Before him he had a pile of books: commentaries on the codes and volumes of responsa. The old-fashioned desk held a heavy metal inkstand with two pots, one containing violet-blue ink, the other some yellowish blotting sand. The rabbi's delicate fingers held a well-sharpened goose quill and carefully printed fine Hebrew letters in rabbinic cursive on narrow-lined sheets of paper.

Next to the rabbi, carefully filing the writings, was his house-'bochur', a combination graduate assistant and personal orderly. Since Judaism placed main emphasis on everyday living, a student was expected not only to imbibe the theoretical teachings of a scholar, but also to improve his knowledge by closer contact with his master in the form of personal services. This sort of service which thus benefited the student as well as the teacher was the only service the teacher could accept without laying himself open to the charge of abusing his scholarly authority for selfish ends. When Elizabeth, the housekeeper, announced the visitors, the 'bochur' discreetly withdrew.

As the American entered the study, the rabbi put down his pen and peered at the blue-eyed visitor through his round, shell-framed eyeglasses. He extended his hand to him in a friendly manner with the cordial, old Jewish greeting, "Sholom alekhem."

"Alekhem shalom," Mr. Kievski replied.

With a dignified gesture that admitted no refusal the rabbi bade him to sit down.

His face still showed signs of strenuous concentration as he reverently closed the heavy folio, leaving his spectacles inside it as a bookmark so that that holy tome would not lie open while not in use.

Kievski was fascinated at once by those clever eyes. The vener-

able appearance of the man in his prime; the patriarchal head, the high forehead and the snow-white hair, most of which was covered by a black velvet skullcap—all this impressed Kievski immensely. He observed the well-kept, flowing beard that surrounded the still youthful face, the neat sidelocks embellishing the rabbi's temples. After a few more draughts the rabbi pushed his long-stemmed black pipe aside, and turned his armchair toward the guest, thus indirectly encouraging him to open the conversation.

"I own a fur farm in Alaska," Kievski introduced himself, "where, as the Rabbi is surely aware, there are not many Jews. My wife and I are observant Jews, and we want Gabriela, our only child, to receive a Jewish education. Alaska has no Jewish schools, nor do there seem to be any in the United States.

"As part of our trip around the world, we stopped at Carlsbad to enjoy the baths and to be examined by the doctors there. Some of them felt that the journey we had planned would be very hard on the girl. It seems that the relatively mild climate of the Carpathian pinelands will benefit her no end.

"Being European ourselves, we would like Gabriela to have the benefits of small-town Jewish life, to find a family who will rear her competently in the Jewish way and so, at the suggestion of a Jewish friend we made in Carlsbad, we have come to Vamia, and I hope you will be able to help us."

Rabbi Gasser grew pensive, took a pinch of snuff from a silver box inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and absently slid his hand slowly across the box. Rabbi Gasser sat silent, deep in thought. The connection began to grow clear to him as he surveyed the situation. He pensively combed through his beard with two fingers of his right hand, while his left dangled by its thumb from the second button of his waistcoat. At last his frown vanished, and a triumphant smile spread across his face. No wonder the Vamians regarded him as a veritable prophet and insisted that he was a "spark that had sprung from wise King Solomon himself."

Rabbi Gasser's conclusions led him to send his 'bochur' to Reb Elya. Reb Elya immediately appeared. The rabbi told him of

the American's problem, and closely observed his reaction. Then just what Rabbi Gasser had expected happened.

"Rabbi, I would be greatly honored if Mr. Kievski were to entrust his daughter to my care," Reb Elya said, "I have only Moily, our youngest son, living with me. And in a home accustomed to the bustle and noise of three children, it is often too quiet for me. Mr. Kievski, if Rabbi Gasser approves my suggestion, I hope you will allow me the privilege of raising her."

"Mr. Kievski, you can find no finer home in Vamia for Gabriela than Reb Elya's," Rabbi Gasser added.

"I am overwhelmed by your generosity, sir," the American said. "Thank you for this wonderful suggestion. It might have been presumptuous of me to ask this favor of my host, but now that your suggestion has been approved by Reb Elya, I accept your offer with many thanks.

"One more thing, Mr. Kievski," Rabbi Gasser said. "Since Gabriela will be among Jewish children who are accustomed to Jewish names, she may feel uncomfortable if she has no Jewish name. Although it is quite true that "Gabriela" is derived from the name of the archangel Gabriel, I think it is uncommon enough in these parts to warrant a change. Perhaps a simple name like Gittel could do?"

"Thank you Rabbi. I would never have thought of that," Kievski said. Gittel is a fine Jewish name..."

"Pardon me," Reb Elya said, "Gittel was my late wife's name and it will be a great pleasure to me to have another Gittel in my home."

"Then it is settled. Gittel Kievski it shall be. Now that you have solved my problem for me, I would like to leave and attend to a few small matters before I return home."

The rabbi had observed the American throughout these proceedings, and the man's reactions served to corroborate the rabbi's opinion. Now that all was settled, he bade Mr. Kievski farewell and sent him off with many good wishes for his future.

To show their joy that everything should have gone so well, the Kievskis went straight to the cemetery to visit the grave of Gittel, Reb Elya's wife. Then he made an advance payment of board and tuition for the child, deposited a substantial sum with the congregation to be used for the poor, and donated an extra amount to be used to prepare a tombstone for the late Gittel. After taking leave of their child, he and his wife left Vamia, fully satisfied that the girl was in good hands.

Gabriela (we never called her Gittel — Gabriela sounded so much more intriguing) was soon comfortable in her new surroundings. She played all kinds of games that no one in town understood at that time, and she became the playmate of Moily, Reb Elya's youngest son and one of my school chums. The two soon learned to like each other and became close friends, and Lavler and I, too, attracted by the visitor from far-off Alaska, became frequent callers at Reb Elya's.

* * *

6

THE GREAT SLICHOS MYSTERY

With the approach of the High Holy Days—the "days of awe"—the excitement at the strange visitors yielded place to the serious business of repentance before facing one's Creator on the Day of Judgment.

It is difficult to describe our feelings at the approach of these days. With the announcement and benediction of the New Moon of Elul—the last month of the old year—in the melody of the 'mussaf kaddish' of the High Holy Days, we began to sense the solemnity of this period of preparation for the most serious of days which was further underlined by the daily sound of the shofar.

The sounds of the shofar would often penetrate into our schoolroom as people tried out their ram's horns. The admonishing, broken, yet resounding voice of the shofar shouted into my ears its challenge to contemplate and repent. Our teacher pointed out to us that the sounding of the shofar always begins with the first day of Elul, because it was on that day that G-d told Mosheh "Ascend, and let your departure be announced by sounds of shofar."

Starting with the Sunday preceding Rosh Hashanah 'slichos', special atonement prayers, are recited before the regular morning service. The long, drawn-out singing of 'barchu' on the eve of the first day of 'slichos' impressed us as especially sad and was enough in itself to fill us with thoughts of repentence. This preparatory period of 'slichos' is taken up again, with still greater intensity, during the ten Days of Penitence between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kipur.

Long before daybreak, as early as three o'clock in the morning, Reb Elya would have Hodul or whoever happened to be the town watchman on duty that night waken him. Then he got up and made his rounds, pounding so loudly on our windows that it sounded if as if a drum corps were marching outside. After his first knock, Reb Elya would flash the light of his lantern through the window and keep knocking until he noticed a light going on inside.

Reb Elya had a special handkerchief tied around his hand to cushion his knuckles from the glass windows. If people objected to his knocking on the Sabbath because of the ban on producing a mechanical sound, he would reply that the prohibition applied only to the playing of musical instruments. Only if he was pressed would he admit that some acknowledged authorities held that rapping on windows, too, was forbidden.

Hearing him pounding, we children would be afraid to remain in bed any longer; we would jump out, dress quickly, and hurry o tside. The empty street, dimly lighted by a few kerosene lamps h nging over loorways, was an eerie sight. The large forged-iron candelabrum in the market square---a Vamia landmark – with its four branches, cast a faint light on the streets whenever it was lit, that is – for as a rule the lamplighters never remembered to light it except at full moon. Every few minutes another lantern would move through the dark, but instead of spreading real brightness, their flickering light would only add to the eerie atmosphere. From time to time a beam of light would reach the street from the door

of Madam Chana's small cafe. Many men made it a practice to fast daily from daybreak to nightfall during 'slichos' week, and Madam Chana's fresh cheesecake and hot coffee offered an excellent opportunity for a quick bite before the start of the daily fast.

We entered the synagogue silently. Since gas and electricity were still unknown, at least in this small town, the best light available was that of candles. Large candelabras hung from the ceiling. Dripping candles, coating the candelabras with shimmering wax, spread a modest light. Small flickering lights shone dimly from brass brackets, the light being reflected by mirror-like plates affixed to the wall. To supplement the meager lighting, each worshipper would bring a candle of his own which he would affix to his stand with dripping wax. The famous, magnificent synagogues of Granada and Lisbon which, according to tradition, were illuminated with six hundred and thirteen candles (corresponding to the 613 commandments) were beyond the imagination of anyone accustomed to Vamia's dimly-lit 'shul,' as was the talmudic account of the great synagogue of ancient Alexandria which was so huge that the sexton had to wave a flag as a signal to the congregation to respond to the prayers with 'Amen'.

We children were awed. The many older people who interspersed their prayers with sighs and moans heightened our feeling of fear and solemnity. It rarely happened that a member of the community would absent himself from these early services. The women's gallery, too, would be well filled. We knew, because, being children, we would be allowed upstairs during services. Even feeble-minded Leah, who was unable to read the prayers, would come on time with her sister, though instead of praying, she would count the windowpanes, interrupting her counting to repeat as well as she could whatever she had overheard her neighbor recite aloud.

If anyone was absent from 'slichos,' it could only have been for a serious reason. Thus you will easily understand the surprise and curiosity aroused the first 'slichos' morning that year when

Reb Mordche, a respected householder, was not there when the service began. He had a reputation for being the first one in 'shul' every day of the year, yet that morning he arrived toward the end of 'slichos'. This was particularly strange since Reb Mordche was president of the 'Chevra Shomair Laboker', the Early Risers Association. Not only was he usually the first one to arrive in 'shul,' pounding three times on the doors for the live spirits to depart, but he was also the last to leave. Slowly and with dignity he would walk up to the aisle, and stop to bestow a reverent kiss on the curtains of spun gold. Before leaving, he would stop at the door and sit down on a bench again before finally going out, to demonstrate his reluctance to leave that holy place.

To us Reb Mordche was a special hero. A good cantor with a pleasant voice, he used to accept positions as cantor for the High Holy Days in other communities. The fees he collected for officiating as 'chasan' he never used for himself, but earmarked them for the dowry and trousseau of some poor orphan bride. There was a popular saying in Vamia that a girl who made a good match did so because she had "prayed well." When one of Reb Mordche's protegees would marry, people would say, "Reb Mordche has prayed well for her."

That 'slichos' morning, however, Reb Mordche entered the synagogue late, embarrassed and upset. He went straight up to Reb Elya the 'Shamash'.

'Reb Elya," he shouted so loudly that everyone could hear "why didn't you knock at my door this morning?"

Reb Elya reddened, "It looks like I forgot..."

"You forgot!" Reb Mordche shouted. "But we live right next door to each other. We have the same backyard. And you have been awakening me for years now. So now, all of a sudden, you forgot?"

Reb Elya was obviously miserable. Turning to look for a sympathizing face, his gaze fell on Herr Werner, the president of the 'shul'. But Reb Mordche was ahead of him.

"Herr Werner, our 'shamesh' has just insulted me. Not only did he neglect to wake me this morning, but he refuses to give me an explanation for his failutre to do his duty."

Herr Werner was at a loss what to do. Such a thing had never happened before in the history of the community. He took Reb Elya aside. "Reb Elya, what have you done?" he demanded.

Reb Elya, obviously upset, seemed unable to reply. Noticing his consternation, Herr Werner realized that there must have been a very special reason. He therefore attempted to coax Reb Elya out of his silence.

"Reb Elya, tell me what happened. Only something unusual could have kept you from rousing a Jew to go to prayers, especially during 'slichos' week. What was it, Reb Elya?"

Reb Elya whispered something to the president in a very low voice and, as he spoke, Herr Werner's face turned red. The president seemed agitated, and he began to nod his head energetically in sympathy. Then he began to calm the visibly shaken Reb Elya.

Moily, Lavlor, and I had observed the whole scene carefully and, Moily in the lead, we approached Reb Elya full of curiosity. Moily asked his father why he had not called Reb Mordche. Reb Elya, who was still far from composed, glared at his son and curtly replied "I'll tell you when you are older!"

The second day of 'slichos', Reb Elya again failed to knock at Reb Mordche's. When the latter again came late to the synagogue, all the members showed their disapproval of Reb Elya's omission by strenuous head-shaking and stage whispers. Herr Werner succeeded in re-establishing order with a single, clear "Shah," and after 'slichos', he solemnly announced: "I Shim'on Werner, president of the congregation, hereby relieve Reb Elya of the duty of knocking at Reb Mordche's door every morning."

This announcement was enough to infuriate even good-natured Mordche. Even before this incident little love had been lost between Mordche and Herr Werner, for the president, himself endowed

with a pleasant voice, was Mordche's chief competitor as 'chazan' in the synagogues. It was customary for the officers of the congregation to officiate on the High Holidays since it was considered that their familiarity with the need of the congregation made their prayers more effective than those of a paid cantor. For this reason, Reb Mordche's jealousy was more a friendly rivalry than a serious preoccupation. But this was too much.

In his wrath, Reb Mordche decided to bring his complaint before the town's highest authority. He appealed to the rabbi, almost dragging Herr Werner to the Rabbi's house. Startled at first, Rabbi Gasser slowly stroked his beard, lost in thought. Finally, he asked Werner, "Why did you relieve Reb Elya of his duties?"

Excuse me, Rabbi, but I promised Reb Elya I would not tell the reason to a soul."

Rabbi Gasser was a very just man. As no plausible reason for the omission of the daily knocking had been offered, he had to find against Herr Werner and hence also against Reb Elya, his own sentiments to the contrary notwithstanding. "Herr Werner you are not authorized to relieve Reb Elya of his obligation to every member of the community without good reason. Be sure to tell Reb Elya that he must call Reb Mordche on every one of the remaining days of 'slichos'."

Completely downcast, Herr Werner returned home to catch some sleep. The rabbi, who had also risen especially early, did the same.

Rabbi Gasser had hardly fallen asleep when he awoke in a sudden sweat from a nightmare. He washed his hands and rubbed them over his eyes as if to wipe away something obnoxious. He rose quickly, dressed hastily, changed his white nightcap for his wide brimmed black hat and, with beard and hair disheveled, he hurried out of his house. He straightened his clothes on the run and, rounding the next corner, went straight into Reb Elya's house.

Those who saw him or heard the story later were amazed. This was extraordinary. Normally, if the rabbi wanted to talk to Reb Elya, he would have sent for him, as was in keeping with the difference in their positions. But that day was obviously an exception. Surprise grew greater still when the two men were seen walking to the cemetery together soon thereafter.

Stranger still, on his return home, the rabbi called for Reb Mordche and urged him to forego his right to being called in the morning. Wild guesses flew hither and yon for days. But only three men knew the true reason.

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7

THE GRAVEYARD DESERTER

Even the great 'slichos' mystery – unsolved – receded into oblivion with the passage of time. The townspeople had another exciting event to occupy their imagination. The hero of this story was Yoina the Coachman. It was that year that he earned the strange by-name "The Graveyard Deserter."

Yoina owned two jaded nags, one black and one white. As the official community electioneer, Yoina was naturally a fervent Hungarian patriot. This prompted him to give his horses Hungarian names. The white one he called 'Csardas', after the Hungarian national dance, and the black one bore the name of 'Gulyas', the Hungarian national dish. Their names truly fitted the animals. Before any trip, 'Csardas' would tax poor Yoina's patience so much that he would be compelled to use his whip, and the stubborn animal reacted with leaps and jumps not too unlike the dance for which it was named. 'Gulyas', on the other hand, was old and blind, and for all practical purposes ready for conversion into dog food. Since Yoina's patriotism was far in excess of his economic strength, these horses were so ill-kept and scraggy that

it was difficult to discern which of the two was white and which black.

Elections in Hungary were thoroughly corrupt. Part of the votes were bought through the electioneer, a certain portion of the campaign funds were set aside for that purpose. Officially, of course, this procedure was strictly forbidden, but the black market in votes flourished nonetheless. The electioneer would shake hands with his "old friend"—any voter whose vote was for sale—tickling his palm with his finger as many times as the amount he was willing to pay for his vote.

Yoina operated a shuttle service between the railway station and "downtown" Vamia, from which he derived a meager living for himself and his family. Hard work had made Yoina old before his time. He used to say of himself, "My sled rests in the summer, my wagon in the winter, but me, I don't rest at any season---except when the River Sambatyon rests." The Sambatyon was the river which we were told, flowed every day except on the Sabbath. Sometimes he would fall asleep atop his loaded wagon; but there was not the slightest danger of accident, for his horses knew the roads as well as Yoina did.

All week long Yoina looked forward to the Sabbath, for only on that day could he allow himself to take a nap. He would often fall asleep during the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, and then apologize, saying that he had been lulled to sleep by the soothing tune of the reading. Usually he would mark his arrival at the synagogue with a loud and hearty sneeze, to which the entire congregation would answer with a somewhat ironical 'asusa' (Gesundheit). He seemed to enjoy the attention he attracted, and was content, too, in the belief that a sneeze during prayers held a promise of Divine favor.

One Sabbath, however, Yoina was the victim of an embarrassing incident. That day, again, the chant to which the Law was read had had its usual effect on him. Each time his head began to nod, Yoina let his Bible drop to the floor. Automatically he would

reach down, pick it up and kiss it. Then, he was rudely awakened by a call to the Torah. He rose, pushed his hat back into the right position and, still drowsy, he stood rubbing his eyes, squinting at the reader to make sure it was really he who had been called. Satisfied that it was, he rushed to the raised reader's platform in the center of the synagogue, and with his nicotine-stained fingers began to swing the long fringes of his prayer shawl wildly to the right and to the left like the whip over his horse's flanks. Before he realized that he was supposed to be touching the fringes first to the Torah and then to his lips before pronouncing the benediction, he caught himself shouting "Giddy up!," as if indeed, he were driving his horses.

Yoina never missed removing the week's accumulation of stubble from his face in honor of the Sabbath. Since Jewish Law forbids the use of a razor, he used aurum, a depilatory prepared with quicklime with which he covered his entire face. Remnants of this reeking, ghoulish-green paste, which would eat the hairs down to their roots, would still be visible behind his ears, on the Sabbath, and after the manner of devout Jews preparing for the Day of Rest, Yoina never forgot to say "'Lichvod' Shabas", when applying the depilatory. Unfortunately Yoina did not know that these words simply meant "In honor of the Sabbath." He thought they were a magic formula to protect his face from being burned by the strong chemical.

Once it came to pass that Yoina was on the road on the intermediate days of Sukoth. After driving two or three hours he remembered that he had forgotten to take his 'lulav' and 'ethrog' along. Sitting atop his heavily-laden wagon, he saw a Jewish farm girl, walking through the fields toward a nearby farmhouse holding the palm branch and citron he needed. "This is Divine Providence," he said to himself. He jumped from the wagon, and ran across the fields shouting after the girl. Stupefied, the girl stopped. In a very kind and friendly manner he asked her to lend him the 'lulav' and 'ethrog'. But the girl, who was on her way to bring

the plants from the home of her father to his brother, explained sadly that she was compelled to adhere strictly to her father's orders not to lend them to anyone else. And despite Yoina's pleas and arguments, she remained firm. Even force could not solve the problem, for, as Yoina quickly assessed the situation, the girl was stronger. Then, quick as lightening a happy idea came to Yoina. He pronounced the benediction, then lifted the girl up into the air, 'lulav, ethrog' and all, waving his burden in all the directions as prescribed by Jewish law.

Yoina had come by his strange nickname, "The Graveyard Deserter," honestly. It all happended this way:

For some time business in Vamia had been bad, and Yoina was hard hit by this depression, for—as less merchandise was sold, less was ordered, and fewer goods arrived at the station to be carted. Yoina was forced to borrow money and to ask his customers for advances. Indeed, his financial state was so precarious that the communal Free Loan Fund had to help him out twice. He had to economize on the fodder for his horses and he claimed that his heart broke every time he had to look at his half-starved nags. His worst fears were realized when Csardas collapsed on the road and died. This misfortune hit him very hard, but an even greater blow was the suspicion voiced by a few malicious fellows that he had sold the horse on the road and had made some money on the sale. Against his will he was forced to be idle, for the roads were too steep to even think of negotiating them with just one horse. His only way out was to seek another loan, but all his efforts and promises were in vain, for no one listened to him. His last-ditch attempt to move the heart of Aunt Chayka, the president of the Women's Charity Group, also failed. No one seemed to trust him any more.

In a last, desperate effort to help himself after all else had failed, Yoina thought of a strategem. One of the functions of the Women's Charity Group was to supply families in mourning with food during the 'shiva', the seven days immediately following the

funeral. No distinction was made between rich and poor. The Group would bring the bereaved the first meal after the funeral, which mourners should preferably not eat from their own supplies, in addition, the Group allowed no poor man who lived from hand to mouth be put to shame for lack of food when he stopped working for the entire week of mourning. The collection boxes posted in every mourner's home were never locked, so that a poor mourner, who could ill afford the loss of a whole week's income, could take out whatever he needed for himself. And lest someone be put to shame, even wealthy mourners would receive the box unlocked.

In addition, the members of the Charity Group also performed the ritual washing of the female dead. One morning as Aunt Chayka was deciding whose turn it was to help with the body of a woman who had died an hour earlier, Sarah the Newslady bustled into the Aunt's house and croaked out the news that Yoina the Coachman had suddenly passed away. Hearing this, Aunt Chayka rubbed her hands against the moisture that had accumulated on the cold window panes. Then, thus "washed," she pronounced the blessing on receiving sad tidings: "Baruch dayan ha'emess – blessed be the righteous Judge." In her fervor to do her duty she did not even inquire for futher details, but immediately filled the large mourners' basket with an ample supply of foods. Even the wine for the 'tahara', the ritual washing of the dead, was there. Loaded with all this she strode quickly to Yoina's home, blaming herself along the way for having refused the poor man a loan; and wondering whether her failure to help him had contributed to his untimely end.

Yoina's home was neat and clean, but poverty was evident in every cranny. The kitchen was filled with the odor of borsht and a pot of leftovers was still standing on the stove. The floor was stamped mud strewn with sand, and in one corner a knife was buried in the ground up to the handle. Apparently, Aunt Chayka thought, the knife had been used to cut through a worm-infested

apple, and was now being koshered. Three notches in the handle marked it as limited to dairy use. The custom to put these "cuts" on dairy utensils but none on utensils used for meat was a way of avoiding confusion, based on the Biblica verse – though of a very different meaning – 'Leviticus' xxi:5, "And they shall not 'make incisions' in their flesh.

The mirrors and pictures, all in simple, crude frames were turned toward the wall in mourning. In a frame high on the wall, there were still a few faded photographs facing the room. Apparently they had been overlooked. One of them showed Yoina as a smart Hungarian hussar. Another showed him as a happy bridegroom beside his beloved Pessel.

A dark hallway with a low ceiling was clogged with odd and broken bits of furniture. This hallway led to a neat nearly bare room with whitewashed walls. Between the brown crossbeams of the ceiling lay the "library" of the master of the house: a few worn and tattered Hebrew books, festival prayer books with many pages missing, 'slichos, t'chinos', and old calendars, all without covers. A shadeless petroleum lamp with a blackened flue hung from an iron crossbar. Some clothes and hats hung from nails driven into the walls. The iron beds were covered with cheap flower-patterned cotton blankets, from beneath which ancient red-checked covers protruded at the ends of the beds. In the center of the room stood a table of indefinite color covered by a blue-edged cloth. The heavy 'Karban Mincha' prayer book still lay open atop the table. The function of other pieces of furniture was filled by egg crates nailed together in a makeshift manner. The windows, doors, and especially the doorknobs were surprisingly clean and shiny. Even in the dark kitchen the battered tin utensils sparkled.

Standing in the bedroom, her bowed head covered with a black lace kerchief, was Yoina's wife, Pessel, bereft and broken. She and her husband had always lived together in harmony. She kept smoothing down her black apron, at the same time wiping her eyes with its corner. Three little girls in outgrown but im-

maculate dresses of navy blue clung to her skirt, releasing their hold only to blow their noses.

The body was still on the bed. In accordance with tradition, Yoina's face was covered with a cloth to conceal the change of expression that comes with death. The upper half of the window, the gateway for the soul ascending to heaven, had been left open. On a stool stood two burning candles.

Aunt Chayka placed a light in a niche in the wall near Yoina's body. A draft from the open window made the weak light flicker and threatened to extinguish it altogether. On a half-broken chair stood a basin, and next to it a pitcher of water with a broken handle, a clean towel was draped across the back of the chair. Originally these items had been prepared so that the men in attendance could wash their hands for prayer. But when popular superstition took possession of the custom, giving rise to the belief that it was done because the soul would return to the death chamber each night of the 'shiva' to wash itself, many sages demanded its abolition.

An old-fashioned clock struck the hour with a wheezy sound. To Aunt Chayka it was a signal to leave. With a few words of heartfelt sympathy to the widow, she deposited the basket filled to the rim, in the kitchen, promising to see to it that the Burial Brotherhood would come at once to make the necessary arrangements, and also that two men would be sent to the house to hold the wake and study Mishnayos for the soul of her departed husband. Then, pressing a banknote into Pessel's hand, Aunt Chayka left.

After walking a few blocks, Aunt Chayka realized that she had left her parasol at Yoina's. Returning, she knocked and opened the door to the living room. The sight that greeted her there left her speechless and almost paralysed with shock. There was Yoina sitting comfortably at a well-set table, enjoying a good meal. As Yoina poured the wine meant for his 'tahara' into a goblet – he later remarked that the wine was better taken internally

as a drink than externally for ritual purification – Aunt Chayka recovered her voice and, croaking 'shma Yisrael', staggered backwards out of the house and away as fast as her stubby feet could carry her.

The money Chayka had given Pessel was just enough for Yoina to buy another slightly-used nag and to get back into business. Some townspeople maintained that the new horse was really Csardas, returned together with Yoina from the other world. As Yoina remarked naively sometime after the incident, he had never imagined death to be quite so beautiful. And so, Yoina the Coachman, was known forever after as Yoina the Graveyard Deserter.

* * *

8

YOINE THE BROKER

Yoina's classic "desertion" and ridicule of the whole town, did not alter his disposition one bit. He kept on seeking new victims for his special brand of humor.

Reb Mordche was a thoroughly pious man, and his honesty in matters of business had earned him an excellent reputation and respect even outside the Jewish community. Now Yoina minded his own wagon all week, but on those Fridays when market was held in town, he would leave his equipment and concession to another coachman and pursue more profitable activities. Frequently he would act as broker, but even in this field his reputation was far from aboveboard. The one skill he had mastered to perfection was card-playing, a predilection which he contrived. with honest devotion to good strong drink.

One Friday, the eve of 'Shabas Shuva', the Sabbath between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur a big grain market was held in town. Reb Mordche was one of the important local grain dealers, but he did not do well, as was only to be expected, since traditon teaches that there is no luck in trading with grain. Wise King

Solomon said in his Proverbs long ago that people will curse one who hoards grain for purposes of speculation. The Talmud, too, severely condemns the hoarding of grain. The rabbis of the Talmudic and Mishnaic periods engaged in many trades and professions, but rabbinic sources hardly mention even one who was a trader or a broker. Apparently this kind of business was held in low esteem. According to a popular saying in Europe, "No rich grain dealer ever died," meaning of course, that no grain dealer ever died a rich man.

That day Reb Mordche had ample merchandise and could not handle all the market business alone. He therefore hired Yoina as his assistant for the day. Mordche was fortunate, for business was unusually good. Small wonder, then, that Yoina persuaded him to celebrated this prosperity with a few drinks. The two men sat down all by themselves in the windowless private room of the town tavern. This arrangement suited Reb Mordche very well, for he did not care to be seen in the tavern with Yoina.

Yoina's motto was, "A good business deal is worth a shot of brandy, and after a day of bad business you can use a drink, too." But Yoina was not satisfied with just one shot. While Mordche was not used to so much liquor and suffered the inevitable effects, Yoina, who was accustomed to strong liquor, remained perfectly sober. He took out of his pocket a candle-end left over from the Sabbath lights, of which he always carried an ample supply on his person, lit it, and fixed it to the bottom of an inverted beer mug. Then he pulled a pack of playing cards out of his pocket.

"Nu, Mordche," he said with a wink, "how about a game?"

Mordche, still half-sober shuddered at the thought. "It'll be Sabbath soon," he mumbled, and another shiver ran through his body as he recalled that, according to rabbinical decree, anyone playing cards for money was liable to partial excommunication.

"Come now, Mordche, just a little game. It'll only take a few minutes. Come, come, it's all right, you know, among friends. You won't mind if I win a couple of pennies from you, nor would

I be angry if you should make some gain at my expense. Come on, Mordche, take a hand."

Repeated 'l'chayims' had weakened Mordche's willpower. When Yoina made his final appeal – "Come on Mordche, we'll only play until the little candle-end is gone, and that won't be long," – Mordche, his eyes agleam, nodded assent.

As could be expected, Mordche lost heavily, for he was no more experienced at playing cards then he was at holding his liquor, while Yoina was an expert at both. When Yoina had already won a tidy little sum, they changed seats, "'M'shaneh makom m'shaneh mazal', a change of place may bring a change in luck," Mordche mumbled.

By that time Yoina had twice replaced the original candle-end without Mordche's realizing it, before Mordche regained command of his senses, threw the cards on the floor, and rushed out of the tavern. To his consternation, he found the streets empty and in utter darkness. He could hardly bear to think of it, "Now...in my old age...for the first time in my life...I...Mordche ben Ya'akov.. I have desecrated the Sabbath. And on 'Shabas Shuva' to boot...the day when we are especially urged to mend our ways...I...Mordche ben Ya'akov...a sinner before G-d...gambling on the Sabbath...the Sabbath of Repentance. At cards... I...Mordche ben Ya'akov...a sinner...."

He ran home, as quickly as his doddering legs could carry him, moaning to himself, "a sinner...an old sinner...." As he entered his house his wife and children rushed to him, frantic with worry.

"Thank G-d you are here!" his wife cried, relieved, "We have been looking for you all over town. We have even been to the Rabbi's to find out how we could search for you on the Sabbath."

The grief Reb Mordche had caused his family added to his embarrassment. He felt very unhappy and very depressed. As there was no possible alibi for him to offer, he told them all exactly what had happened. Meanwhile a messenger from Rabbi

Gasser's arrived to inquire whether Mordche had returned, "Tell the rabbi that I thank him for his concern," Reb Mordche instructed the messenger, and please tell him that I shall call on him soon." He told his family that he would not be able to eat or to pray before he had spoken to the rabbi.

He put on his coat and hat and walked over to the rabbi's house. The family, relieved of its original worry for Mordche's safety, remained alone once more, deep in dismay.

Reb Mordche entered the rabbi's study, his head bowed, his eyes fixed on the floor, the picture of utter dejection. Overwhelmed by remorse, he could scarcely stand up. Indeed, he was hardly able to look into the rabbi's face as he told him his harrowing tale. Only after he had completed his account could he finally raise his eyes and look at the rabbi.

Please tell me, Rabbi what I can do to atone for my sin. There must be some penance that even an old sinner like me can bear."

The rabbi was deeply moved by Mordche's frank and pathetic description of his misstep.

Stroking his beard, and frowning, he said; "Come to me Sunday morning at nine and bring Yoina with you. Till then, have a good Sabbath and don't worry."

When the two men appeared on Sunday, the rabbi gave them a stern lecture. "You have both committed a grave sin. Many rabbis consider card playing a sin liable to excommunication, and many communities have enforced the ban on gamblers."

Then, looking at Yoina so fiercely that the latter had to lower his head, the rabbi continued, "But to lead a fellow-Jew astray, to talk him into drinking, into gambling, and to cause him to desecrate the Sabbath – that is infinitely worse."

Yoina burst into tears, "Rabbi, is there anything I can do to make amends?" he wept. "I'll give up drinking, I'll give up cards, Rabbi, anything. My own sins I thought I could bear, but the thought of being to blame for the sins of another. Rabbi, help me. Help me... get... forgiveness...."

Impressed by the apparent sincerity of Yoina's self-abasement, the rabbi made the two men vow never to play cards again. He also exacted from them the pledge that they would not touch wine or whiskey, except for 'kidush' or on 'Purim', for one whole year. Reb Mordche promised at once, and Yoina somewhat reluctantly agreed. The rabbi then instructed them to recite certain appropriate prayers and psalms, and to donate a specified amount to charity. Finally, he ordered them to place peas into their socks for 'slichos' services the following day.

All through the penitential service the next morning, Reb Mordche was in agony for he did not dare ease by even one iota the harsh physical penance the rabbi had imposed on him. Yoina, on the other hand, apparently bore his penance with patience and resignation, for while Mordche lamented and moaned, Yoina seemed to endure the punishment without any outer sign of pain. However, the reason for Yoina's serenity lay not merely in the fact that his constitution was more robust than that of Reb Mordche. It was just that the rabbi had not said that the peas had to be raw. Accordingly, Yoina had made sure to have them well cooked before placing them in his socks.

* * *

For years, Reb Elya had been observing Yoina with concern and had considered ways of reforming him. This latest prank of his spurred Reb Elya to translate his intentions into action without further delay. Whenever he had the chance, he would take time to talk with Yoina and soon had established a close rapport with him. As Yoina's confidence in Reb Elay increased, the latter's influence on Yoina grew accordingly. Thus Reb Elya discovered that Yoina was receptive to chasidic preachments. Making use of this revelation, Reb Elya taught Yoina as much of the idea and philosophy of Chassidism as he felt the simple man would be able to grasp. In fiery words he first developed the basic ideas of Chassidism and, rousing Yoina's interest, then proceeded to describe the saintly life of the Rebbe of nearby Lavbrec.

Reb Elya's expectations were justified. Yoina's enthusiasm knew no limits, and as his soul became imbued with this new outlook on life, he really turned over a new leaf. He resolved to end his days in complete repentance, and he underwent penance after penance in search of a saintlier way of life. Indeed, before we realized what was going on, Yoina had embraced Chassidism with such fervor that he no longer fitted into our sober Ashkenazic community. Eventually he sold his horse, his carriage and all his earthly belongings, and moved to Lavbrec, where the great Rebbe lived.

* * *

9

SHABOS BOCHUR

Reb Mordche's piety was not confined to the diligent study of the Law, to which he devoted several hours every day. He was also a very charitable man. His well-known hospitality was just another aspect of the daily routine in his home whose door was always open to the needy.

Every Sabbath he would invite several poor people to his home. Whenever possible, he would select men sufficiently familiar with the Talmud to be able to engage in scholarly discussion with them. Unfortunately, he was not blessed with sons of his own to share his devotion to the study of our Holy Torah. His pretty daughters, execpt for the youngest were all married, but the interest of his sons-in-law were far removed from talmudic learning. They were professional men – one a physician, the other a lawyer, and the third a civil engineer. They were all observant to some degree, but, as the town jokers used to say, "None of them had studied enough of the Law to become a real heretic, just enough not to be a 'chasid'." All three shocked the sensibilities of the townspeople by going about bareheaded.

GRATZ COLLEGE LIBRARY
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Mordche had received a genuine "'Morenu'" degree from the late Rav, of blessed memory. His sons-in-law also carried that title, not because of their Jewish learning, but as a courtesy title bestowed upon all holders of secular academic degrees in the community.

One day a 'yeshiva'-bachur stopped over in our town. He was a pleasant young man whose Talmudic erudition, combined with a sound general education, was striking. He visited Rabbi Gasser's 'yeshiva' and discussed many scholarly problems with him. The young student was an impressive personality in his own right, who had the added advantage of being, descended from a family of scholars. Reb Mordche was more than glad to invite such a guest for the Sabbath. When the brilliant guest accepted, Mordche was overjoyed in anticipation of the spiritual delights the learned young man would contribute to his Sabbath-table.

The Sabbath came. Mordche–in his special Sabbath dressing-gown made of fine camel's hair, the belt tied very loosely to make allowance for the heavy Sabbath meal, a gold-embroided, black velvet skull-cap atop his head, was every inch the gracious host. His eyes glistened as the expected Talmudic discourse took shape. Mordche was very much pleased for he had found a worthy partner in the well-mannered and intelligent young man. His pleasing appearance, his sparkling wit, his careful choice of words and his good manners greatly impressed Mordche's family.

The young man, one the other hand, had not failed to inform himself about Mordche and his family ahead of time. Having reached an age where marriage was no longer a matter of the far-off future, he was displeased to see that so learned a man as Mordche should have taken 'amay ha'aretz' men ignorant of Jewish learnings as sons-in-law. Stranger still, not one of these "educated" young men was able to make a living from his profession so that all three were still getting free board at the home of their father-in-law. The three sons-in-law were known to be taking life rather easy, and this did not help to improve their rather dubious reputations; many a malicious joke made the rounds at their

expense. And despite all this, Mordche was still not interested in finding a true scholar of the Law for his youngest daughter, and the young yeshiva student did not hesitate to give expression to his astonishment at his host's apparent blindness to the realities of Jewish life.

Imagine, therefore, Reb Mordche's surprise the next day when, on his Sunday morning walk through the street of the town he passed in front of a small Gentile tavern and saw, sitting right near the open window, at one of the heavy wooden tables, the pious erudite student who had been a guest in his house only the day before. Mordche could hardly believe his eyes. Dumbstruck, he stopped and stared at the lad inside who was slowly and contentedly sipping a glass of wine. Mordche could not imagine anything else but that by some quirk, the pious young man had mistaken the tavern for a kosher restaurant. Poking his head through the open window. Mordche whispered into the young man's ear, "'Nessech' – This is Gentile wine." At first these two syllables were all he could utter. A moment later he added, "Perhaps you don't know, young man, that this is not a Jewish place."

"I know," the young man calmly replied with a smile. In the face of this brazen reply all Mordche could do was mutter again, hoarsely, "'Nessech', Gentile wine." The young man retorted with a sly smile, "The main reason for the prohibition against drinking Gentile-made wine in our days, when there is hardly any likelihood that it was used for idolatrous purposes is to prevent our having drinking feasts with Gentiles which might lead to mixed marriages. Now why should I have reason to fear that the Gentile inn-keeper would accept me as her son-in-law, when a scholar of the Law like you takes only ignoramuses?"

"Besides," the lad continued as Mordche listened, speechless, "you have no cause for alarm. This isn't really grape wine. It's just apple cider. Won't you come in and have a drink with me?"

"Of course I am familiar with the prohibition against drinking Gentile-wine." The student resumed when Mordche was seated at his table sipping cider, "In my part of Hungary, where wine

is one of the principal products, the priests read special masses to consecrate the wine. The blessed wine is then distributed to the farmers who pour some of it into every barrel when a new crop of grapes are pressed. I know, too, the pagan purposes for which the ancient Greeks would use wine. Naturally, that in itself would be enough reason not to touch wine pressed by Gentiles. So you see, I'm not a sinner, after all."

A week later, the clever young man was engaged to Mordche's youngest and most attractive daughter.

* * *

10

VIENNA SOIRREE AT GABRIELA

The Cafe Central in Vienna was the meeting place of the writers. Wealthy young men, slovenly of dress, would sit around a table at which some modern writer was presiding while, at a marble-topped table in another corner, a group of fledgling poets held forth. They had let their hair grow long and sported wide black bow ties – both considered the indispensable mark – of the poet. The chess club met daily beneath the patio skylight, moved closer to the gaslight when it grew dark. We entered the cafe with a kind of breathless awe at the sight of the many celebrities who frequented the smoke-blackened, old-fashioned hall that had become a cultural landmark in the Vienna of 1908. Tony, the old faithful headwaiter, was serving the third generation of Cafe Central customers; Tony had become an institution in his own right with his black tail-coat, heavily-starched shirtfront, and order book always in hand.

I, too, was part of the charmed circle there, for I would meet regularly with Reb Elya's son Moily and Gabriela, whose parents had brought her to Vamia from far-off Alaska. As "regulars" we

always had our favorite table in an alcove reserved for us.

Moily had taken up sculpture, but was earning the necessities of life at the main plaint of the Hefa Furniture Company. Ten years after her arrival in Vamia, Gabriela, who had gone to Vienna to study art, was one of that city's most promising young painters, and had ripened into a real beauty. She led an active social life. I myself was about to graduate from the Central Theological Seminary, but was doing some freelance short-story writing on the side. So it was not unusual when, at one of our meetings at the Cafe, Gabriela invited me to read a "nice short story" at her next soiree. I accepted the invitation and came a few days later to Gabriela's house.

The door to the large, brightly-illuminated parlor was wide open, and the streams of delightful music played by an orchestra that drew the guests right in. Gabriela welcomed each visitor and, as a token of our old friendship she favored me with a smile.

The lavender-colored walls of the rococo room were covered with Flemish tapestry. The charming gobelins covering the armchairs and the easy-chairs represented scenes of the world of Louis XIV embroidered in minute stitches on bright, brimstone-butterfly-yellow backgrounds.

A small fountain in a corner splashed water into a little pool at its base in which shimmering goldfish disported themselves.

Every detail testified to Gabriela's exquisite taste. With the help of her maiden aunt, who shared the apartment with her, she had succeeded in arranging the various pieces of furniture in a charming manner. Precious cut-glass vases and silver urns were filled with fire-red lilies and purple irises that perfumed the air with their fragrance. The table was laid with exquisite china paired with artistically-wrought stemware and silver, and the whole apartment sparkled with color—a setting of unusual elegance and beauty. Waiters in white dress jackets moved about silently and swiftly, serving the food from shining silver dishes. There were pastries in abundance, sweets and exotic fruits, as well as imported cigars and cigarettes.

The guests were in a gay festive mood. Soon our amiable hostess reminded me of my promise to read one of my short stories. I was slightly embarrassed, for, though I had several manuscripts with me, I had no great desire to test them aloud before they were published. I thought hard, examining even the remote chambers of my imagination's storehouse and, unable to find anything suitable. I finally decided on the story I had planned as part of a serial for a small weekly in Hungary.

At first I was nervous and read in a low voice. As I read I substituted the real names of the characters for those I had used in the newspaper story. Annoyed at myself for not having overcome my shyness, I gradually forced myself to regain my composure. The story was based on my experiences in Vamia. Its original title had been "The Legionnaire."

* * *

11

THE LEGIONNAIRE

It was a summer Sabbath afternoon. The men were in the 'beth hamedrash', listening to Rabbi Gasser's brilliant discourse on the chapter from the Ethics of the Fathers read that day. Some of the young people, their hands behind their backs, were strolling in the nearby pine woods; others were relaxing at the banks of the small river; another group was satisfied to promenade back and forth on the recently-built asphalt road.

A little before two, I left the promenaders, because Reb Elya, the sexton of our synagogue, had invited me to his home. I walked to that small one-story house with the green porch overgrown with Virginia creepers, and entering the narrow gateway, passed the woodshed and the chicken yard, crossed the courtyard, and entered the symmetrically-arranged, well-kept flower garden beyond. An atmosphere of Sabbath peace permeated the whole garden. In the background was the monotonous murmur of the river winding through the valley. From time to time, this peaceful spell was broken by the clickety-clack of the nearby water mill. In a creeper-overgrown bower in the shadow of the

surrounding trees, sat Reb Elya, dressed in his Sabbath clothes, resting from his week's labors, apparently deep in pious contemplation.

As he greeted me Reb Elya's serious features showed signs of intense agitation. He seemed lost in an infinity of suffering, and suddenly I was sorry that I had accepted his invitation. Yet he had pressed me, almost begged me to come, emphasizing that he had a special matter to confide to me. Though Reb Elya, was in full command of German, he preferred to speak in Yiddish, particularly on the Sabbath. Excusing himself, he removed his coat loosened the handkerchief he was wearing tied around his waist as a belt in order not to carry it in a manner forbidden on the Sabbath, and wiped his forehead. He grasped my hand impulsively as we sat down. "It's really nothing new I have to tell you," Reb Elya began with a sigh. "My friends kept telling me to pay more attention to the doings of my daughter and son in Vienna. But like every father, I was blind to their warnings, unable or unwilling to see that their life was not above reproach. My daughter Sonya had become the owner of a nice size perfume shop in the city, and she seemed to be doing nothing to disgrace herself or me. She had a good foundation of Jewish learning and observance. In fact, she was a Hebrew teacher before she'd bought the shop.

"But she had one customer, Lieutenant Antoniu Revesz, who was known as a gambler and a drinker, and who tried to become familiar with Sonya. Of course my Sonya did nothing to encourage him. When he saw that he could not succeed by gentle persuasion, he resorted to deceit.

"My son Armin was assigned to the Seventh Hussar Regiment as a cadet, and excelled in fencing. All his comrades liked him because of his good-natured ways. So nobody could understand why his superior, that scoundrel Antoniu Revesz, should suddenly have begun to pick on him.

"One day a large poster displayed outside the army service club announced a program of festivities to be held a week later in the club's garden to celebrate the graduation of the cadets at the conclusion of their tour of duty, with prizes to be distributed to

outstanding graduates.

"The town's high society was present without exception. The colored electric bulbs hanging from the tree branches and Chinese lanterns of various colors swinging in the breeze must have made the garden look like a fairy-land. They had Bengal lights, of full moon, fireworks and all that.

"They even had oriental tents pitched on the lawn to create the atmosphere of a country fair. There were booths of many colors, a giant wheel-of-chance, and shooting galleries. The army band of Infantry Regiment 72, played resounding dance tunes and marches. It must have been some celebration.

"The last fireworks were just going off, when a fanfare was sounded: flourishes, drums and all that. Then the regimental colonel, Count von Palkey, came riding in on a splendid horse. The short mane of the grey-and-white thoroughbred was decorated with plaited ribbons, and its harness was mounted with silver. There was applause, then silence. He dismounted and tossed the bridle to the orderly who was standing by. Then he stroked the legs of the horse and patted it on the neck. As a goodby gift he offered the animal a lump of sugar on his flat hand. The horse took it, and shook its head as if to say "Thank you," then threw its head upward and whipped itself with its clipped tail. The orderly covered it carefully with a saddlecloth and led it away.

"With his switch in his gloved left hand, and his silver spurs clanking, the colonel mounted the dais to deliver a patriotic speech. He was saying good-bye to his regiment, for he was leaving that same night for India to join a tiger-hunt. Following his address, the colonel awarded a fine hand-chased golden cigarette-case to a Baron Soffuth.

"In Von Palkey's opinion, my son Armin should have had the award, but in order not to get him into trouble he handed the award to Soffuth without protest. However, after the official distribution of prizes was over, Colonel von Palkey asked to see Armin and, privately, with Lieutenant Revesz, as the only witness, gave Armin an exact duplicate of Soffuth's prize. Immediately thereafter the colonel left the festivities. The regimental band struck

up a lively march and the banquet began.

Baron Soffuth's cigaret-case went from hand to hand at his table, then from table to table among the cadets. While admiring it, Revesz got an idea. Some time later, when Soffuth asked for his cigarette case back, it could not be found anywhere. At first people thought it was a bad joke, but when all searching proved to no avail, the guests were embarrassed and dismayed.

"Revesz then ordered a thorough search. No one was permitted to leave the scene before having submitted to a personal examination. Armin had no qualms about subjecting himself to the examination, for Lieutenant Revesz himself had seen how he had received the cigarette case now in his pocket. When Revesz drew the cigarette case out of Armin's pocket, pretending indignation and shouting insults at him, my son first thought the man was making a bad joke. He called the misunderstanding to Revesz's attention, but that fiend just told him to shut up. Revesz knew that the colonel was by now beyond reach, and wouldn't talk, in fact, who knew whether he would ever return? Perhaps a tiger somewhere in India would tear him to pieces. So my son was taken into custody and locked up in a military prison."

Reb Elya took a deep breath and signed plaintively. After a while, he continued.

"The news of her brother's arrest affected Sonya very strongly. She was fully convinced of his innocence, but the fact that Revesz was the chief witness in the case was disquieting to her. She avoided all mention of the matter when the lieutenant came to her shop. But he never missed an opportunity to bring up this painful subject.

"Soon he intimated frankly that any effort she might make to get her brother out of jail would be in vain; that Armin's fate was solely in his, Revesz's, hands; and that he alone could save him. If she was at all interested in Armin's release, she could obtain it by acceding to Revesz's wishes. This Sonya naturally refused to do.

"Sonya was allowed to visit Armin at the fortress. On the occasion of one such visit, the warden told her that he too was convinced of her brother's innocence, and that he would have

released him, were it not for Revesz's insistence that he be kept there indefinitely until further orders. The commander of the fortress, Captain Menzey, always tried to console Sonya, telling her not to lose hope. Her brother would be released eventually.

"All this affected Armin very deeply. Armin, was cut to the quick by his public arrest and disgrace. His hopes for acquittal at a court-martial depended on the return of his old regimental commander, without Von Palkey, he could not reasonably expect to be cleared of Revesz's charges for years, if ever. And the shame and disgrace he would have to endure until then ... and perhaps forever, he couldn't bear to think of it.

"One month after his arrest, when Sonya came to visit Armin, the warden greeted her with the news that her brother, unable to bear his disgrace any longer, had taken his own life that day. The shock was almost more than Sonya could bear. She almost fainted, but she made a desperate effort to regain her composure and left the fortress with her head held high.

"She rushed to her shop and took a small vial from a shelf. Then she went out to get Revesz wherever he might be. She found him all right, booted and spurred and in high spirits at the Cafe Nirvana, a notorious night club. When he first saw her, Revesz, half-drunk, couldn't believe that this girl could possibly be Sonya, what would that old-fashioned girl be doing at the Nirvana? But he was in no mood for problems now. So he popped a bottle of champagne, and invited her to join him at his table. He sidled close to her, she acted reserved at first. Soon, however, she allowed him to move closer and, after some passionate persuasion on his part, she agreed to yield to his demands. In drunken anticipation of his conquest the lieutenant failed to notice the surprising change in Sonya's attitude, nor did he see the occasional sarcastic twitch at the corners of her mouth.

"On the assumption that Revesz had not yet been informed of Armin's suicide, Sonya requested him to hand over to her the duplicate cigarette case and to give her a written affidavit exonerating her brother. In order to reach his end now – to obtain Sonya, the goal of his desires – Revesz promised everything. He

hailed a cab and Sonya went to his apartment with him.

"Once there, Revesz filled two cut crystal stem-glasses with dry wine. Raising the goblet to drink to her health, he moved closer. But she repulsed his attempt at further intimacy, insisting that he first give her the cigarette case and the affidavit. Revesz reluctantly agreed and, leaving the goblets on the sideboard, withdrew to his study to prepare the statement. Sonya used the short time she was alone to pour into both glasses the poison she had taken along, and to compose herself in an easy chair. When Revesz returned, he dumped the paper and the cigarette case into her lap, and immediately grabbed one of the goblets. Sonya saw at a glance that the statement had been properly drawn up, rose, and took the other glass. With his arm around her, he drained his glass in one gulp, then let it drop to the ground. Raising his free hand toward Sonya, he suddenly collapsed, dragging Sonya with him as he slumped to the floor, dead.

Sonya rose, dazed; she was no longer afraid of death. What she had done seemed to her an act of justice to avenge her brother's life. Mustering all her strength, she lifted the dead man and laid him on the couch. The she picked up the cigarette case and the affidavit, pressed the case into the hand of the corpse and left the document on the scoundrel's forehead."

When I came to that last paragraphs, Gabriela shivered several times. I read on.

"Disguised as a sailor, Sonya fled the scene, and crossed the border the next night, in the midst of a frightening thunderstorm. After many difficulties and an arduous journey, much of which she made on foot, she reached the port of Marseilles. The music of a phonograph playing loudly to attract guests drew her, exhausted, to a sailors' tavern.

"Accordion music from the smoke-filled taproom mingled with the raucous bawling of drunken sailors, fishermen, and taxi dancers, interspersed with bursts of wild laughter and the tinny sounds of a player piano. Clouds of tobacco smoke from the taproom mingled with the steam rising from a large stove of blue Dutch tiles at the rear wall of the bar. Huddled in the corner,

half asleep, was a husky man wearing the uniform of the French Foreign Legion. His weatherbeaten features were sharp and firm, with a determined, cleft chin. His thick wavy hair curled down into eyes that betrayed a certain softness.

Near exhaustion and weak from hunger, Sonya staggered into the bar room and fell to the floor in a dead faint. A sailor who entered stepped over her, thinking she was just another drunk, and ordered a drink. The legionnaire, half-opening his eyes, saw what he thought to be another drunken sailor after a few moments' hesitation, got up and dragged the unconscious figure out of the middle of the floor to a spot near the stove. He was struck by the absence of the usual liquor smell from the sailor's breath. It occured to the Legionnaire that the fellow might not be drunk after all but simply exhausted. He tried to revive him with rum and to rub his face briskly with cold water. But his efforts proved vain. With quick determination, he lifted him onto his broad shoulder and bore his heavy load out of the tavern through alleys and finally up the stairway to his small room.

"By the time he reached his shabby attic, the Legionnaire was sweating profusely. The rusty lock squeaked as the key turned, and the entrance was so low that he had to stoop to get his burden through. The modest room was meticulously clean. The floor, brown clay stamped firm by the tread of many feet, was partly covered with a mat of yellow cocoa fibers. The ceiling was so low that a grown man could easily have touched it by stretching out an arm. The one tiny window which let a little daylight in was broken and held together by paper tape glued on criss cross, and rattled with every step one took in the room.

"Atop a washstand made of crude boards, stood a battered aluminum wash basin. Dangling from the wall on a piece of string, was a fragment of what once was a mirror. A rickety table, a cot covered with old straw, a tiny tin stove, and two worn out chairs made up the furnishings. Over one of the chairs lay a gray army coat made of coarse stuff. Pasted to the walls were some battle pictures, cut out from illustrated magazines. Dirty rags stuck out of a torn suitcase, emitting an odor of old clothes which mingled

with the stale tobacco smoke that filled the room.

"Gently the legionnaire placed the sailor on the narrow, hard cot. He then took a piece of cloth, dipped it in cold water, and wiped his forehead. He lit a little fire in the tin stove, and its crackle gave some life to the gloomy room as grey smoke swirled forth from the narrow stovepipe to add its woodsmoke smell to the stale air when the sailor opened his eyes. The Legionnaire warmed some milk atop the stove in a small, blue pot, fed it to him slowly with a battered spoon. Gradually a faint trace of color appeared on the pale face. But before long the sailor seemed to have drifted off once more into unconsciousness.

"The Legionnaire began to undress the half-conscious figure. But as he pulled off the 'sailor's' cap, he stopped, dumbfounded. 'Well, I'll be....' –he muttered when he regained his composure. 'It's a girl.' Now he hardly dared touch her or even look at her. He closed his eyes and turned his face away as he loosened her belt and opened the collar of her tunic. Here his fingers felt something metallic. It was a 'matbai'a', a medallion with a raised Hebrew 'he' upon it. After covering her up to her chin with his threadbare overcoat, he pushed her curls back from her face and once more began to wipe her moist forehead gently with a piece of cloth.

"The feeble light of two candles mounted on empty beer bottles shone on Sonya's pale features. The legionnaire put up a sheet of newspaper between the cot and the candles as a kind of lampshade to screen off the light. He gently shook the girl in an attempt to waken her. Her breathing was hardly noticeable. Her eyelids began to quiver and her teeth chattered in ague. From time to time she murmured unintelligible sounds.

"The sun was midway in its morning's work in drying the streets of Marseilles from the rains of the night before. Sonya's frightened eyes darted 'round the room, but her mind did not register what she saw. She attempted to analyze her completely unknown surroundings. She wondered whether she was still dreaming. The jumble of the events of the last few weeks flitted through her mind. Suddenly everything seemed to slide into focus, and

she clearly recalled all that had happened. As her sorrow reawakened, she began to sob, and tears flowed down her cheeks. Wiping her eyes with the heavy cloth that covered her, she felt that the cloth was coarse and discovered it to be a man's great-coat. Sitting up, she noticed the makeshift screen around her cot, and heard the gentle snoring of a sleeping stranger. She looked at him timidly, her eyes wide open. She wanted to scream, to question him, but she was unable to open her mouth. Then to her bewilderment she saw that the man was tied to his chair. She could only assume that he had been the victum of an assault, she slid off the cot to free him from his fetters.

"The loosening of the strap roused the legionnaire. He immediately understood her intent, and hastened to clear up the confusion. Seated on the cot, while the legionnaire told how he had found her unconscious on the barrom floor, and that he had tied himself to the chair in order to make sure that he would stay away from her, she hid her face in both hands and looked up every now and then, occasionally moaning in despair.

"Sonya was impressed by the stranger's self-control and willpower. She looked up at him with respect, though timidly and with reserve. His circumspect behavior had earned him her confidence, and she told him her story."

Reb Elya could not continue. His voice choked, and he began to sob. I rose and walked about a little while he regained his composure. Then he continued.

"After Sonya had finished her tale, the legionnaire told her the story of his own life. And all of a sudden he began to talk Yiddish to her.

"'I was the owner of large estates near the Russian border. Years ago, in one of our Jewish leap years, which had a particularly rough winter as Jewish leap years always do, my troubles began. Roads had become impassible. Game and beasts of prey were without food and, driven by hunger and cold, they ventured to approach sites of human habitation. In the dark nights, the fearful, piercing howls of the wolves sent shivers down our spines. Sometimes we could see the glittering eyes of the wolves looking

out from between the trees of the forest.

"'It all began on the sixth day of that 'Hanuka'. The lights of the 'menora' were shining brightly, spreading a magic glow over the snow covered field outside. Some friends and relatives, who had their estates nearby, had come to celebrate with us. Suddenly we heard a loud neighing and stamping from the stable, accompanied by the yelps of dogs. Followed by two servants with loaded guns, I rushed to the stables. There we found a terrifying spectacle. A pack of wolves had pounced upon my horses. At first we could only look on in horror as they sank their teeth into the flesh of their victims. But then, with several well-aimed shots, we succeeded in killing some of the wolves, while the rest fled, except for one exceedingly wild, bloodthirsty she-wolf who knocked me down and mauled my face and body. With one single shot, one of my men killed the beast, saving me from certain death. I was taken to a hospital where I remained for many months. Fortunately all that remained of my wounds is that scar on my cheek.

"'When I was well on the way to recovery, I wanted to thank the physicians and surgeons who had attended me. But they refused my thanks. It was not so much their skill, they claimed, or even medical science, that had saved me, as the devoted care of Katya, my nurse. Katya was Jewish. During my convalescense I had ample opportunity to get to know her better. Before long I had fallen in love with her.

"'When I left the hospital, Katya left with me, and we were married. In due time we had a little girl who became the joy of our lives.

"'Our big bulldog Hector was her special friend and delight. It was a joy to watch the child romp over the open steppes with the big dog, her bright red cheeks shining, her black curls clinging limply to her neck after her romp. Little did we know that one day Hector would take her away from us. You see, once he gave her a playful nip which didn't hurt at all at first, but we later learned that he had been the carrier of a deadly germ. At any rate the little girl fell desperately ill and had to be taken to the hospital. As her mother was a trained nurse, she was given

permission to care for her in the hospital.'

"'My wife sat at the child's bedside day and night. Apparently she was utterly worn out. It's the only way I can explain what happened next. When she gave the child her regular injection, she somehow gave her double the prescribed dose. So while Katya dropped off to sleep the child died.

When she awoke and saw what had happened, she became hysterical. The nurses who rushed into the room to tell me, that before they could have stopped her, she grabbed the needle and gave herself the same injection that had killed her child. As she did it, she cried "Sholom, you are avenged!" Then without another word she died in the arms of one of the nurses who had rushed to her side, too late. It was clear to us what had happened, but who Sholom was, and what, if anything, he had to do with the death of Katya and of our child is a mystery that has driven me mad and has put me on a perpetual flight from the past.'

"Sonya sat there, cheeks feverish, listening attentively yet nervously to every word of the legionnaire's story. Her own mind was in a turmoil, and from time to time she burst into wild spasms of weeping. She could not yet muster the courage to tell him that Katya, his late wife had been her sister.

"The legionnaire told her how, after the double funeral, he had returned home to liquidate all his assets, and invested the proceeds in a fur farm across the seas in Alaska. But even in Alaska, thousand of miles away from his memories, he could find no peace. Hoping to forget the past through adventure, he had finally decided to join the Foreign Legion.

"Sonya found a room in Marseilles with a Jewish family. She saw a good deal of the legionnaire, they took long walks together, and they became firm friends. Sonya soon realized that the legionnaire was not a typical rank-and-file member of the French Foreign Legion. He was not a common adventurer, but a deeply religious man. Eventually these two people, each of whom was alone in the whole wide world, decided to become man and wife. Since he did not want to be married in Marseilles, where there was no Orthodox rabbi, they left the city and went all the way to Poland,

taking the train for Cracow. Soon after their arrival in Cracow they visited a rabbi and informed him of their plans. As the rabbi knew neither Sonya nor the legionnaire, he was reluctant to perform what for all he knew might have been an illegal marriage either from the Jewish or the Polish point of view. Despite the personal documents they showed him, the rabbi elicited as much information from them as he could.

"The rabbi, a good psychologist, understood from the story of the legionnaire and Sonya that he was dealing with honest, sincere people. He asked them a few questions aimed at putting them on the spot, but they stood the test to his full satisfaction.

"And so Sonya and the legionnaire were married in Cracow. Soon after the wedding they left for Alaska to take the management of the farm into their own hands. After a year, a little girl was born to them."

Thus I ended my story. Everyone had listened attentively and applauded. No one had noticed that Gabriela had wiped her eyes surreptitiously several times during my recital. Now that she was sitting apparently composed, smiling, it did not occur to anyone that my story could have had anything to do with her own life. No one except to Moily, that is, the one of whose fate old Reb Elya might have told me. The other guests, however, did not give it any thought at all and, when the evening was over and the guests had left, Gabriela and Moily both had a great deal to think about.

* * *

12

KATYA'S DIARY

After Katya's tragic death, a diary was found among her possessions by her husband. He forwarded it along with other mementoes to Katya's father, Reb Elya. He entrusted me with this diary with the permission to use parts of it, as I saw fit as background for my description of events in his family.

From the bits of Katya's diary, I have pieced together as reasonable an account as possible of what must have passed through her mind on the last day of her life.

Sitting beside her dying daughter's bedside (no, the child's name was not Gabriela) she saw herself back in her father's house in old Vamia. Faces she had not see in many years took shape in her mind once more, and the scenes of her childhood passed again before her eyes.

She remembered her first Purim celebration. In little Vamia, everybody was up early to hear the reading of the Book of Esther. The whole town, young and old was out full force, carrying scrolls of the Book of Esther in beautifully decorated containers. Some even had illuminated 'M'gilos.' She saw herself wrapping

her mother's fringed Turkish shawl around her own shoulders and making sure that her little sister was asleep. She had had little knowledge of things Jewish at that time, but she was curious to know what the excitement was about. That day Katya paid her first visit to the synagogue. On Purim, the 'shul' offered a special attraction. Except for 'Simchas Torah', Purim was the only occasion when the windows that closed off the women's gallery from the rest of the hall would be opened for parts of the service. For women, too, are obligated to hear the reading of the 'M'gila', since the miracle of Purim was brought about by a woman, Queen Esther.

On a little table near the entrance to the ladies' gallery there stood three plates. Katya, watching the other women, placed a half-'kroner' on one of these plates: The money went to the synagogue and to the poor. The custom recalled the half-'shekel' every man had to contribute to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem at this time of the year. With great interest and rapt attention, she followed the events from the ladies' 'shul'.

The peculiar way in which the reader folded his 'M'gila' struck her as strange, and at the first harsh sound of the 'gragger', the rattle that was twirled whenever Haman's name was read, she became frightened, but when she saw everyone exuberant her smile returned. When the name of evil Haman was read again and the 'gragger' started again, she clapped her hand to her ears to shut out the noise. And when the congregation lustily joined in some of the verses, she listened with bated breath.

As Katya looked down into the men's section, her eyes settled on one young man who was sitting well toward the front of the synagogue. Athletic and taller than most of the others, his ruddy face surrounded by the faint traces of a blonde beard, he stood out from among all the rest. At first she thought she did not know him. But then she recognized him as Sholem, Rabbi Gasser's son, and her face lit up. His large, dreamy eyes had given him away. After an absence of many years he had returned home from the great rabbinical academy and the previous Sabbath had delivered an interesting Talmudical discourse which her

father had praised at home, declaring that it had all been much too deep for him. As a reward, the young man had been showered with the gifts of coffee and sugar customary on such occasions, and many a father with an eligible daughter at home had added a bottle of fine wine to honor the guest.

As Sholem stole a glance up at the woman's gallery, Katya experienced a feeling she had never known before. Of course, she had met a number of young men at dances and skating on the frozen pond, but none had ever made her feel quite this way.

As she hurried out of 'shul' after the services, she stopped at the exit to admire a Purim poster painted in colored letters and decorated with appropriate cartoons. It was an advertisement for the annual Purim play, inviting the congregation to attend the show that night at the synagogue hall. When Katya finally got home, the family was just about to start its sumptuous Purim supper. Our father ▸who was to become known as a true 'Baal T'shuva' in years to come, was not too devout then, but a feast never left him cold. The 'piece de resistance' was the customary smoked meat, which had hung in the chimney all winter long and the whole family did full justice to the dinner. Suddenly, in the middle of the meal the shrill sound of a 'shofar' was heard from the street. Katya rushed to the window and saw a little procession of Purim mummers, followed by a band of eager children. A nondescript man in a wide, flowing shroud, riding on a white donkey, headed the parade. His long, white, forked beard streamed in the breeze while a man with a venerable-looking beard pasted on his face followed on foot, prodding the animal with a long stick. Clad in a long 'kittel', the driver held a 'shofar' in his hand, and sounded one perfect note, after another, crying out in between: "Good Purim, Jews! Good Purim! The Messiah has arrived!"

Her Father permitted Katya to go to the Purim play. Chaperoned by Fanya, the family's faithful maid, she rushed off to the evening's celebration. She shivered with delight at the thought of seeing Sholem again. The festive hall was packed with an eager audience, craning their necks to see the stage the young men had

built themselves. The boys were disguised in a many different costumes, making merry and playing practical jokes on each other.

The musicians, stationed on an improvised bandstand, were fiddling around (literally and figuratively) without cease, their faces hidden behind weird masks. This band which played also at the town's weddings, had two violinists — one of them the band leader, a cellist, and a flutist, and although the band leader struck elegant poses with his violin after the manner of a virtuoso, all the four players were anything but professional musicians. Music, so they claimed was only a sideline of theirs. But no one knew what occupation they really made their living from.

The cellist and the flutist were brothers, both of them well over six feet tall. They were known in town as "The Brothers Og," and it was said of them that they were as tall as the Exile of Israel was long. It was a matter of official record that Henach – the cellist – had served as a master tailor's journeyman when he was young, but no one in Vamia could remember ever having seen him at work. When people asked him how he made a living, he would answer succinctly, "From Heaven, praised be He!" Some jokster claimed that he probably mended the sky whenever it was damaged, and so Henach acquired the nickname, "The Sky Mender."

His younger brother Chuni was even taller. Because his right shoulder was markedly higher than the left, he would stagger as he walked, and it looked as if his right shoulder were continually pushing some unseen object upward. Since he – like his brother Henach – was perpetually unemployed, mockers claimed that he was earning his keep by moving the clouds about, and so Chuni came to be known as "The Cloud Shifter."

Suddenly Sholem appeared and offered Katya a seat beside him. A group of youngsters was performing in a homey Yiddish, the story of Joseph, the tale of how Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers. Katya who did not know Yiddish, and had little knowledge of the plot, turned frequently to Sholem for explanations. Sholem explained everything readily and politely, calling her attention to points she might miss. Katya found his comments witty and entertaining. His amiability, however, was by no means

surprising, for Katya was not only a very beautiful girl, but also the daughter of Reb Elya, the wealthy lumberman. Soon the two forgot all about the Purim play and saw before them the first act of a chaste little romance – their own.

During his subsequent meetings with Katya, Sholem elaborated on many an interesting topic. There was something in his words and in his voice that completely fascinated her. Sholem had a most skillful way of bridging the gap between their backgrounds. He conveyed to Katya an understanding of his own devoutness. Katya saw that he was natural and unspoiled. When she compared him and his unsophisticated nature with the other young men she had known, she found them all empty and vain.

Reb Elya had known Sholem from before, and thought highly of him. He was impressed with his good manners and with his scholarship. After Sholem had been a regular caller at the house for some time, Katya asked her father to "buy" her that young man, much as she might have asked him to buy her a toy she fancied. Reb Elya gladly agreed.

Unfortunately, Reb Elya was not then among the devout members of the community. Sholem's father, the rabbi, would only agree to the match if Reb Elya woul henceforward close his business on the Sabbath and keep a strictly kosher household. This he promised to do. To everyone's surprise, the bethrothal compact was soon drawn up, and the engagement was celebrated in the traditional manner. Naturally, Sarah the Newslady invited everyone to the celebration, advising all, as usual to bring their own silverware, since the hosts could not possibly have enough to accommodate all the guests.

But Sholem still had to broaden his knowledge. A family council was held, and it was decided to send him to the Rabbinical Seminary of Pest, where, in addition to his Jewish studies, he could acquire some secular education as well. He would stay away for three years.

The day before Sholem's departure there was much excitement at the rabbi's house. Sholem's mother slipped him a large wad of bills she had saved from her own household allowance, and

prepared plenty of food for him to take along on the journey. The rabbi gave him a letter of introduction to his colleagues.

Now Katya experienced the pain of separation and waiting. But finally three years came to an end.

Meanwhile, strange things were happening to Reb Elya. He became an abject penitent. He withdrew from the world and its pleasures, and embraced Hassidism with a vengeance, neglected his business and gradually lost a good portion of his wealth. What he had left, he gave away to the poor and for other good causes, for he feared that he might have acquired it by transgressing G-d's Law. He even had new clothes made, and discarded all his old garments, for he did not expect his prayers to be heard if he were to recite them in clothes he had acquired with money earned on the Sabbath.

Finally, he had a knapsack made, put his prayer-shawl and phylacteries into it, and left home for a year's self-imposed exile, to live the life of a penitent wanderer. He made sure to put a Jewish calendar in his pocket, so that he could keep track of the days as they passed and properly observe the Sabbaths and Holy Days. He took a loaf of bread and enough food for several days. Nor did he forget his shrouds, for it was considered a disgrace to be buried in shrouds not one's own, and Elya was fond of quoting the popular adage that the Angel of Death was not concerned whether or not his customer had his shrouds ready when he called.

And so Elya set out into the wide world in voluntary exile, giving up his home for a life of homelessness in strange land, a life without rest, as befitted a repentent sinner. During the period of his penance he would not permit himself to remain at any one place longer than one night. In the case of penitents like Elya, the Talmudic tradition that a change of residence may change one's luck implies also that self-imposed exile atones for past transgressions.

He took along a few coins to distribute for charitable purposes, for that made him a 'sheliah mitzvah', a man bent on an errand of mercy of whom it is said that no harm can befall him

while he is engaged in carrying out his mission.

Katya's memory wandered on, and again she saw before her the scene of Sholem's return to Vamia after three long years of study in the big city.

The train rolled into the station. She saw Sholem, her betrothed, now a doctor of Philosophy emerge from a second-class compartment in elegant, stylish clothes, and with a sophisticated expression on his face. He greeted Katya with a cold, formal bow.

Katya was confused and embarrassed. This was not the Sholem she remembered – the natural, unsophisticated young man – but a complete stranger. Even the beautiful beard that had framed his face like a halo had shrunk to a small, pointed goatee. It was all too much for Katya to take in.

Soon she also learned that he wanted to be called Mirko – the Slavic version of Sholem. Nearly every word he spoke showed the complete change that had taken place in his outlook on life. His occasional exaggerated displays of affection seemed to Katya nothing but acting. The profuse compliments he would pay to the ladies with whom he talked made him appear as if he were wearing a mask. Katya tried to talk things out with him, but his answers to her questions were distant and evasive.

Bitterly disappointed, she confided in her Father and contemplated breaking off the engagement. But her Father would not hear of it. He advised Katya to go through with the wedding as soon as possible, and then, if necessary to obtain a divorce. To a Hassidic Jew like her Father, who had become extremely devout in the three years Sholom had been away, a divorce is less of a disgrace or tragedy than a broken engagement.

No one attending the wedding would have thought that the couple was planning all the while to get divorced. Katya remembered how she had approached the wedding canopy and eventually stood beneath it, her head and that of her bridegroom covered by a large prayer shawl. She could still hear the crack of the glass as Sholem stepped on it.

At first Sholom had refused to consider a divorce, but, moved

by Katya's tearful pleadings, he finally agreed. The last night before the divorce, he had come to see her but had been unable to speak. Katya sobbed softly as she recalled his face, twisted with anguish, his long tearful gaze. He had apparently hoped to be able to change her mind in the last minute. But she, Katya, had remained firm. Again she heard him pronounce those Hebrew words that she could not understand, and which he had shouted at her like a terrible curse until she had to run from his stare, not even turning back when she heard him leave and snap the lock shut behind him.

Suddenly a shiver ran through her body. Sholom's last word to her had been a curse. Was this curse about to strike her child? No! Perish the thought!

It was in that half-awake state that Katya gave the child the fatal injection. The rest of the story we know.

While I was on a business trip abroad, I received a letter from home with the news that Gabriela and Moily had become engaged. Moily had done well in his profession, and had obviously been no less successful in winning the favor of the beautiful Gabriela. Soon I received an invitation to the wedding, which was to take place one month hence. I changed my itinerary so that I might be back home in time.

I arrived at the Hotel Wandel with a basketful of red rosebuds, late for the wedding: The religious ceremony had already been celebrated in the yard of the nearby synagogue. I checked my coat and top hat in the check room, and was led by the maitre d', who knew me by name, to a spacious corner room on the mezzanine. He asked me to take a seat and assured me I would not be alone long. Moily and Gabriela soon entered and bade me a cordial welcome. I was embarrassed by my lateness and taken aback by this tete-a-tete meeting. As I offered my congratulations, my voice betrayed my wonder, and Gabriela noticed it.

"Today, on our wedding day," she said, "I feel I should part with a secret that I have carried with me until this very hour." She gracefully rose and took a small parcel out of a table drawer.

Then she brushed her hand across her forehead, displaying her new, sparkling wedding ring, and continued solemnly:

"You know about the first part of my life from the story old Reb Elya, told you" As she spoke, she handed me an elegantly-tooled leather case containing old newspaper clippings. Surprised, I reached inside with such great excitement that I nearly dropped it. As I drew out a yellowing newspaper, the heavy print of the headline caught my eye, "LEGIONNAIRE," the headline read. The letters began to dance and to blur before my eyes, and the paper fell from my hands. I was thunderstruck at the way in which Gabriela had chosen to present her surprise. The bride was sitting in an armchair, toying nervously with the fringes on the upholstery.

"It is now my turn to continue the story," Gabriela finally said. You know by now that Reb Elya was my grandfather. You have also gathered that his daughter Sonya is my mother, the legionnaire was my father. Katya, my mother's older sister, who died under such tragic circumstances, was my father's first wife. After their marriage, my parents lived in Alaska and became very wealthy, but my mother wanted very much to see her parents again. But the file of the Revesz case had not yet been closed, and detectives were still seeking clues to his death. Consequently my parents were compelled to use fictitious papers and to disguise themselves, traveling to Vamia incognito. They decided, at the same time, to leave me with my grandparents so that I would get the Jewish education that I could never have obtained in Alaska.

"The boat on which my parents were returning home ran into an iceberg and sank. My father was one of the hundreds who drowned. My mother was one of the few survivors. My father owned some hotels in the United States, and mother, after selling her assets in Alaska, moved to New York. We expect to join her there and help her manage the hotels. Would you consider going to America?"

"No," I replied, "I have other plans for the immediate future."

Now Moily assumed the role of narrator, "You probably still remember the uproar in Vamia on that 'slichos' day when my

father did not want to knock at Reb Mordche's door. I can still see the look on my father's face as he told us, you'll understand 'When you will be older!' Years later, when I was indeed older, I once visited home around 'slichos' time and, asked my father for a explanation again. At first he hesitated, but finally he told me the story.

It seems that at the time we had the Chief Clerk of the Township, a man named Tausky, boarding with us. Gabriela was a very pretty girl, and Tausky tried more than once to make advances to her. So Father made sure that the two never stayed alone together in the house.

"That first 'slichos' night father had a dream. He saw Tausky spying all around the house to see whether anyone was home. My father took this dream as a sign, from Heaven, a warning not to wake up Tausky by knocking at Reb Mordche's door to waken him for services for that knocking would have told Tausky that the house would soon be unchaperoned. But after Reb Mordche's just complaint, the rabbi ordered my father, to knock at his door, and he was in a quandary. While the rabbi was taking his after-dinner nap that day, my late mother appeared to the rabbi in a dream and told him Tausky's evil intentions. The rabbi immediately revoked the order he had given my father, and went with him to the cemetery to visit my late Mother's grave and to calm her."

* * *

13

SHOLEM'S FATE

But let us return to Sholom Gasser, Katya's first husband, whose name she cried out in despearation at her child's death bed.

Sholom had no knowledge whatever of Katya's fate.

The night before the divorce he had returned to the home of his parents utterly disconsolate. There was only one thing he now wanted: to forget Katya and start a new life, one entirely different from what had been before. But, even this half-decided resolve to forget brought him no peace. The grief he had suffered was too profound, his disappointment too great.

In this spiritual dilemma, he returned to his sacred studies and took refuge in the Torah.

But Sholom found that this was not enough. As he went ever more deeply into the world of Jewish learning he came to long for a more adequate means of expressing his devotion to his Creator. His rediscovered piety took on a Hasidic slant. Consequently, Sholom one day packed his belongings and moved to the residence of the miracle-working rabbi in Lavbrec. Far away from the bustle of life, he hoped to become a 'yoshev'—one who, repenting his

sins and racked with mental anguish seeks refuge and spiritual contentment in the seclusion of the Rebbe's court. Whoever came to the court of the Rebbe was received kindly and affectionately, and these men formed a highly-knit community of their own where they lived simply and frugally, recognizing no other claim on their short sojourn on earth than the quiet service of G-d. Their detachment from earthly affairs gave them a measure of spiritual stability, with the holy Rebbe functioning as the focus and the symbol of their hope and the essential factor in their lives.

The Rebbe's court with all its adjoining buildings and annexes formed a community in itself, closed off from the rest of the town. There were men who had never in their lives left the enclosure. And, of course, this quarter also held a special attraction for tourists in quest of the quaint.

For a time Sholem was indeed able to live a life of contemplation, as if the outside world had never been. He felt that as if he had been born anew and he was able to penetrate ever deeper into the Torah and to be absorbed by its study. For it was an inexhaustible source of power that gave him renewed vigor everyday.

* * *

14

MARRIAGE BY PROXY

Sholom's retreat was abruptly ended by an official notice advising him that he had been drafted into the army as a chaplain and was to report for induction within one week. He left the Rebbe's court immediately to visit his aged parents and to take leave of them with their blessing.

"Sholom," said Rabbi Gasser, "We have always hoped that we would live to see you marry once again. It would be our greatest pleasure to see you happily settled while you are still young enough to raise a family."

"So would I," Sholom replied, startled by his father's directness. "And I hope to do just that within the next year."

"Thank G-d," his mother cried joyously, and Sholem realized that she had taken his wish for a promise.

"So then we can look forward to a wedding in a year's time. Thank G-d." Rabbi Gasser, too, had mistaken his son's willingness for his word.

When Sholem was about to leave, it occured to the old rabbi that the promise was too much to hold Sholem to, particularly

since he was going to the battle lines. But before the father could find words to express his thoughts, Sholem had torn himself from the old couple's last embrace and was off to the station to catch the train which was to take him far into Russia. His father could only sob out the parental blessing after him as Sholem disappeared from sight.

At the front Sholem met a Jewish Lieutenant Raish, whom he found to be a man of character and convictions similar to his own. They soon became inseparable friends. Time rushed on and before Sholom knew it, the year within which he had uunwittingly promised his father to marry was drawing to a close. Anxiously, Sholem saw the time passing without any hope for an early furlough during which he could have done something about his promise, and he was greatly disturbed.

Many an evening as the two friends lay in a meadow, watching the setting sun spread a purple-violet glow over the hills, they mulled over Sholem's problem.

"I don't see how you can get out of it without hurting your parents," the lieutenant said.

"Neither do I," Sholem replied. "But how will I ever find a bride out here?"

"Even if you could get leave, you'd never have enough time to find yourself a wife. But you could write your parents, couldn't you and explain the situation?"

"I could. But it would take a lot of explaining. And I haven't the heart to disappoint them."

"Well, I'll be going on furlough next week. I may pass through Vamia, so at least I'll be able to give them greetings from you."

"In that case, explain the situation to them, if you can, and make them understand that it may take a little longer than I thought."

"Fine. I'll try," the lieutenant promised.

One clear night Sholem lay in his tent unable to sleep and looked out at the stars in the sky outside. He did not attempt to count them. He was, instead, counting the days still left to complete the year in which he had promised his father to marry. Too

restless to lie still, he went out to stroll in the fresh air and found his friend, Lieutenant Raish, sitting on a tree stump. Sholem squatted on the ground facing him and gazed across the campfire around which a group of soldiers were warming their hands, as the fire lit their faces with its flickering shine alternately highlighting their prominent noses and their short pipes while they sang mournful folk tunes.

Not a word passed betwen the two friends. Each was deep in his own thoughts. They both stared at the fire, but neither really noticed it until it had served its purpose and was slowly dying out. Sholem felt chilly, threw a glance at the sky, and sadly rose to return to his tent, where before going to sleep he studied his usual portion of 'g'mara'. Then, still perplexed and dejected, he began to undress. Acting on a sudden inspiration, he reached for the Bible which he always had at hand. He recalled having heard that the first verse on the page to which one opened the Bible for the purpose of study could bear an important message if only it was properly interpreted.

As he opened his Bible now, he came upon the message which relates how patriarch Abraham sent his steward Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac, providing him with the necessary powers of attorney to act as Isaac's agent and take the woman in marriage on his behalf, if need be. This report gave Sholem an idea. He slept fitfully, hardly able to wait for the morning to come. As soon as he awoke, he confided his idea to Lieutenant Raish. "We have been comrades now for almost a full year," Sholem told him and I have had many occasions to convince myself of your devotion and loyalty. You've proven a good friend more than once. And so, I do not hesitate to place my fate in your hands. To come to the point, now that you are going on an extended furlough, I am asking you to act as my emissary, find a wife for me, and then stand in for me at a marriage by proxy."

The lieutenant looked at Sholem in amazement. But Sholem continued calmly:

"Fortunately, your journey will take you through a section of Russia where you will find large congregations in practically every

city with famous rabbis at their head. You know well that the first thing I require in a wife is that she be pious, preferably the daughter of a rabbi. Of course, you know too that I would like her to be pretty and have intelligence. Never mind money-for all I care, she can be poor as long as she has the other qualities I seek. I have no doubt that, in that great reservoir of learning with the help of G-d, you will succeed in finding the right woman for me."

He then drew a bundle of documents from his pocket, motioned to two Jewish soldiers to come to him, handed the papers to the lieutenant, and remarked: "Now, in the presence of two witnesses, I give you full power-of-attorney to find a wife for me and to stand in for me at a marriage by proxy. Take this golden ring to use at the ceremony in my behalf and may G-d be with you! Incidentally marriages by proxy between a soldier at the front and his fiances at home, are also recognized by the civil authorities now. So, it's all entirely legal."

Little did Sholem know how this event was to change the rest of his life. The lieutenant, fully aware of the extraordinary importance of his mission, had a foreboding that made him ill at ease. But, not wanting his friend to notice, he replied, "I'll do it."

The next day, as the two friends embraced in parting, the lieutenant assured Sholem once again that he would do his best. But now he had mustered sufficient courage to tell him frankly that he was most uneasy about the matter. Sholem was unable to speak, but the tears in his eyes told the lieutenant that Sholem was no less worried. And so Raish marched off smartly as Sholem sadly watched him go.

During the next few days the lieutenant stopped over at several cities. He realized that he had set out on a none-too-easy mission. He tried his best to satisfy his friend's wishes, but being a very conscientious man, he found it hard to decide on what would be a proper wife for Sholem. If the girl seemed right, her parents would be reluctant to accept so strange a proposal. He continued his journey, wandering from town to town without success. Undecided one day as to which side of a fork in the road

to follow, he opened his Bible and chose the town whose initial he later found in the first verse of the page at which he opened the book.

Having arrived there, he asked the first Jew he met, "Where does the rabbi live?"

"Our rabbi died a short time ago, and we haven't chosen a new one yet. Could anyone else help you?"

Since it was usually the rabbis' wives who had been most helpful in the towns he had previously visited, the lieutenant said, "Perhaps the rabbi's widow will be able to help. Can you tell me how to get to the house?"

"Of course."

The elderly widow was pleased to have a visitor whom she could provide with a warm meal. After he had finished eating and had recited Grace, he told her, "I am looking for a bride for my friend. Perhaps you can suggest a suitable lady."

"Who is your friend?"

"Rabbi Sholem, the son of Rabbi Shlomo Gasser of Vamia."

"I have heard of his father. My late husband would sometimes write to him about problems of religious law. But tell me about the son."

"Sholem is a very learned and unassuming young man," he began, and told her all he knew, as he had already done almost two dozen times over in place after place.

"May I know where he is now?"

"I left him back at the front, and I do not think he will be free to come here as long as the war's going on."

"Oh! Then why does he want you to find him a bride when he can't come himself?"

"The lieutenant explained about the promise Sholem had unwittingly made to his parents.

"It is very fine of him, to take that so seriously." She thought a while, then said, "Sir, I can think of a girl who would be suited to one so learned and noble, but what guarantee can you offer that Chaplain Gasser will really want her?"

"He told me that he would rely on my judgment in the matter."

"Yes, but what guarantee can you offer the young lady that he will really keep his word and marry her?"

"He authorized me in the presence of witnesses to stand in for him at a proxy ceremony."

The 'rebetzin' gasped.

"Can you please tell me the name of the young lady you recommend, so that I can call on the family tonight?"

"You are already calling on the family."

"What...?"

"Excuse me a moment."

In a few minutes, the 'rebetzin' returned with a young lady. "I would like you to meet my daughter. She was at a neighbor's, and we'll have to start all over from the beginning. I hope you won't mind."

The only daughter of the late rabbi made a good impression on the lieutenant from the start, and to his delight she readily accepted the proxy proposal. The next day, in the presence of two witnesses, this fatherless girl became the wife of a man who at the time was hundreds of miles away and did not even know that he was being married, much less the name of the bride.

The next day, the lieutenant wanted to proceed to his home town, where he planned to spend the rest of his furlough. But that had become almost impossible, for in the meantime the area he was in had become a battle zone. He spent two nights in the open field in a terrible rainstorm and fell sick. With the last of his strength he dragged himself to the nearest hospital. Two Jewish soldiers stationed there as orderlies, recognizing him as a Jew, took turns nursing him around the clock. At first they had not been certain whether or not he was one of theirs. Even the fringes they found under his uniform, was no proof for many Christian soldiers were in the habit of wearing them as a talisman, and even the peasants were known to wear them for protection during epidemics. But the prayerbook and the Bible he had with him and the occasional Hebrew words he mumbled in his delirium convinced them.

The lieutenant seemed unconscious, but the continuous jerking of his hands indicated that even in this semi-conscious state he was profoundly uneasy. He kept tossing on his bed, his chest heaving with the effort. He could not breathe well enough to say whole words, but he managed to utter disconnected syllables. It seemed that the dying patient was carrying some terrible secret with him. The soldier in attendance wiped the perspiration from the lieutenant's brow, then arranged his pillow again and gave him a sip of milk from a cup. Suddenly, the lieutenant grasped the man's hand convulsively and sat up, wide awake. In a hardly audible voice he whispered to the orderly: "I have a message for Chaplain Sholem Gasser, APO 371. Tell him that I have taken a wife for him and acted as his proxy in a Jewish marriage ceremony, with that, he fell back on his pillow,, drew one deep breath, and died.

The next day the soldier left his base, and succeeded in getting the message to Sholem. Sholem was crushed by the news. In addition to having lost his best friend, he found himself in a situation from which there seemed to be no way out. In all legal purposes he was married to someone he had never met; what was even worse was that he had no idea who she was or where he might be able to find her. And since the one person who had known who and where his wife was had died, he was unable to locate her, or marry anyone else.

At last the war was over. Russia, was cut off from the rest of the world. Despite inconceivable searches and inquires, Sholem could find no information that would have led to the whereabouts of the woman his friend had chosen and married in his behalf. Whatever letters his mother-in-law might have written to him never reached him, for in the chaos following the war in Russia, letters had a way of "disappearing" and never even left the country.

And so there was nothing Sholem could do but accept his fate as a decree of Providence and resign himself to being neither bachelor nor widower.

The events of the war made us all old long before our time. In the turmoil and suffering of wartime Vienna, my own family

and that of my old classmate Lavlor became very close, and the fact that we were able to share the suffering and privation made our troubles easier to bear.

Toward the end of the war Lavlor came upon Sholem Gasser, the son of our rabbi, at a refugee hostel. Overjoyed at finding another Vamian in Vienna, he took him home with him as a permanent guest. Rabbi Sholem—we called him "Rabbi" because he was some twenty years our senior and a true scholar of the law, told us the story of his tribulations, filling in the gaps in the history of Reb Elya's children. But as I was to learn in time, the strange tale of Rabbi Sholem's life was far from over.

As we made plans for the future, Lavlor and I concluded that even if we were to be able to make a living for ourselves, postwar Vienna would be no place for our families. Rabbi Sholem agreed, and we dediced to consider going to America. I wrote to Moily and Gabriela in New York and asked them what our prospects could be in the United States.

Moily replied by cable that all the necessary papers were in the way. A short while later I received a letter from Moily with all the papers, for us and for Rabbi Sholem signed by Mrs. Kievski, Gabriela's mother. Moily assured us that he could find a comfortable apartment for us, that Lavlor and I would get good jobs, and that our sons would be able to continue their education in the best of schools.

We sent our sons ahead of us. Soon we had reports that they were making a good adjustment and were doing well in their studies. My wife and I had to wait in Prague until our papers came through. Shortly after we received them, the Lavlors, my wife and I, and Rabbi Sholem left Prague for Switzerland.

* * *

15

ENGELBERG, SWITZERLAND

Engelberg, Switzerland

My dear Moily,

As you already know from my telegram, we are all now in Engelberg at the charming Sonnengold Inn, which certainly has a claim to this name.

It was a beautiful March Friday when we got off the tiny funicular railway at the small, quaint station here. A red-enameled sleigh was waiting for us, providing a pretty contrast to the white snow. It was drawn by a gray horse with harness decorated with little bells and tassels.

The driver, his face red and round like an apple, carefully wrapped leopard patterned blankets around our legs, climbed into his seat, cracked his whip once, and off we were.

John, the porter, who came out to greet us wore a coarse green apron over his livery and on his gold-braided cap, under the name of the hotel, had the three Hebrew letters that showed the place was Kosher. While John unwrapped us, Itshele the Philosopher, the owner of the house, shook hand and welcomed us with a cordial, "'Sholom Alaichem'."

The night of our arrival, I saw a beautiful sight – a glorious sunset, with the glaciers aglow from the magnificent reflection of the sun, and the sky dyed purple and violet. It was an unforgettable combination of matchless beauty and majesty, a real miracle of colors that held me spellbound. Meanwhile, the Sabbath was about to come in.

The crystal candelabrum in the large, rosewood paneled dining room had been lit in honor of Shabas and spread a brilliant light all over the hall. There was also a six-branched oil lamp, an old Shabas-lamp, but that was just there as a nice decoration. The tables were set with fine damask cloths, English bone china, and elegant silverware. Snowbells, and white and colored crocus had been carefully arranged in vases, but the magnificent centerpiece was a bouquet of large, bell-shaped gentian.

Next to each setting were two glistering 'chalos', which had been baked by women guests eager to fulfill the 'mitzva' of separating 'chala' from the dough.

I shall never forget the idyllic scene, I was there privileged to observe. A sweet little boy, just eight years old, came in to pronounce the 'kidush' over a child's cup filled with sparkling red wine. He did it without faltering once and with such understanding that everyone present was charmed and moved. His grandmother, still wearing her 'licht-bench' apron, looked at him with pride and happiness, her mouth open in rapture while, superstitiously holding her thumb into her fist to keep away envy and the evil eye. The boy's little brother, two sisters, and two little girl cousins – the little girls with blue velvet bows in their braids – formed a circle of scrubbed and combed admirers around him. The two older cousins, charming Ditta and graceful Terra, beautiful in their white Sabbath dresses adorned with red corals to ward off the evil eye, looked on with pride. The little three-year-old was especially charming in his blue sailor's suit with a lace collar. I introduced myself, and was told that the name of the family was 'Gepner.' Our two families took to each other right away and we became fast friends.

Next Sholem asked for his turn to make 'kidush.' Ever since

he was a child, he's been eating only one frugal meal on Friday in order to have the proper appetite to do justice to the Shabbas meal. By this time his appetite was keen, and he was anxious to proceed.

Before pronouncing 'kidush', Rabbi Sholem reminded the proud mother of the eight-year-old to listen carefully to his 'kidush,' or else to pronounce it for herself and the children, despite her son's charming rendition of the prayer, a 'kidush' recited by a child does not fulfill the requirement of Jewish law.

During the meal we were so absorbed by conversation that no one noticed a burning chip of wood falling from the chimney onto one lady's light 'lace dress. Soon her whole dress was afire, and everyone was in a state of panic, for the woman looked like a pillar of fire. One of the guests, who fancied himself a scholar, said "Fire! Fire!" in a deep voice but he sounded calm and actually disinterested. While most of the people were screaming or stood petrified, Sholem grabbed a rug and wrapped it around the woman, smothering the flames and saving her from sure death. Soon a doctor came to attend to her burns, and everyone crowded around Rabbi Sholem, praising his courage and presence of mind.

The next day, the pseudo-scholar approached the rabbi during dinner praising him for his courage of the night before, in an obvious attempt to make friends with him. "I admire your presence of mind," he began. "But permit me one question: Why did you, a rabbi, have to violate the 'Shabas'. True, anyone may desecrate the Sabbath to save a life, but couldn't you just as easily have told one of the less observant people what to do? They could have done it just as well."

"You have the idea all wrong," Rabbi Sholem replied. The fact is that, according to Jewish Law my act was mandatory. Just as an act may be forbidden on Sabbath, so it is commanded if a life must be saved. So you need not be surprised that I was glad to perform what actually is a commandment. The 'Maharil' wrote in his Codes "If a house is burning on 'Shabas' and there is a chance that—directly or indirectly, a human life may be en-

dangered – Jews must rush to put it out and not wait for Gentiles to do it. Whoever does not do it is nothing but a pious fool. It's as if someone would refuse to rescue a drowning woman out of fear that he may touch her in an improper manner, or as if a man saw someone drowning while reciting prayers, and wasted precious time by taking off his plytacteries before going in after the victim." All our pseudo-scholar could reply was a long, drawn out, "Oooh!" He did not attempt to discuss the matter any further."

* * *

Despite the beauty of Switzerland and the comforts of the Sonnengold Inn, our enforced vacation in Engelberg, waiting for our visas to enter the United States, was beginning to fall on us, and we yearned for the day when we would be released from our golden cage.

Our prayers did not go unanswered, for one glorious day the mail brought us our five long-awaited American immigration visas. A second letter from Moily – informed us that he had booked passage for us on a steamer out of Lisbon one week from that day. We had no time to lose, nor the wish to lose any.

On the way to the station I felt happy and sad at the same time, for I was starting out on the first leg of a journey into the unknown. Now, in a way, I was sorry to leave the little town with which I had fallen in love and where I had spent so many happy days. My heart was filled with gratitude for all the good people who had accepted us so kindly, and who had made this period of waiting so pleasant for us.

It was a beautiful summer day. The steep, rocky sides of Mount Titlis seemed to touch the sky, while the silvery luster of its glaciers projected its shine down onto the steep slopes of the flower-dotted Alpine meadows of the mountain valley. Engelberg's neat little station house was squeezed into the steep valley, bathed in sunshine, and bedded in green. It looked stretched out, tired

after a strenuous mountain climb, the whitewashed, open porch of the small station standing out smiling in the warm morning sun.

A glance at the clock built into the tall tower atop the station house showed me that there was still plenty of time until train departure. To make the best of the waiting time, we stepped onto the sun-drenched terrace. It was surrounded by rose hedges, glistening ivy, and wisteria. Before leaving, we took in once more the charm and the unique panorama of this mountain resort. I looked for my favorite bench on the Schwandweg, hidden by green creepers, where I often sat early in the morning, listening to the purling of Schumettlen Creek. My thoughts wandered from there across the shining, dark-red tile roofs of the town, and I took my last, lingering look at the gables of the Sonnengold Inn.

16

FAREWELL ENGELBERG

A happy crowd now came streaming into the station, as if it had just left a feast. These were our fellow guests at Sonnengold Inn who had come to see us off. Seeing someone off was always a ceremonious affair in this town. The Gepner family (the two sets of cousins and their mothers) had also joined the crowd. All these good and kind people had come, partly as a courtesy, partly out of their desire to take leave of us.

The high spirits of the well-wishers were the result of a bas mitzva party that had been held at the inn the night before in honor of Ditta Gepner. In a manner of speaking, it had also been a mutual introduction party, although we guests at the inn had lived together for weeks, our contacts until then had been rather superficial, and somewhat aloof. No one had gone beyond the essential courtesies, and even that night it took some time for the right mood to develop. Lavlor, at the piano, had played the song 'Yidel mit der Fiedel' in an attempt to liven things up. But conversation progressed only with difficulty. Everybody was putting out feelers, as it were, sipping tea, and munching pastries, forcing himself to discuss sober, everyday matters. Gradually points of

common interest were discovered, and the discovery that most had a great number of friends in common brought us closer to each other. It was long past midnight when the people finally shed their reserve and the gathering turned into a merry little party.

In a way, Ditta Gepner's birthday party was a farewell. No one at the inn really knew where Providence would lead him in the course of the next few years, and after toasting each other with 'l'chayims' and similar good wishes, all those present promised to remain faithful friends, and to help each other wherever they could.

The conversation at the station became quite animated. The ice had been broken, and the people were still their own selves. People were talking gaily, outdoing one another in good humor. Jokes went back and forth, and there were Yiddish songs. I told the children some short stories, and they would not let me stop until I had promised them to send them a few short stories from our next stop, Lugano.

One resourceful and artistically-inclined gentleman had spent the hours since the end of the birthday party designing and painting small souvenir buttons, which he gave out to each of the friends now at the station.

Soon, our train rolled in, and we quickly climbed the high steps of the coach. As we got aboard the train, we heard a chorus of "'L'chayim u'l'sholom'," "'Bon Voyage'," and the Swiss "'Uf wiederluge'." Then the coach doors were shut and the first signal for train departure was given. I went quickly to the opened window in the train-compartment to call a gay farewell wish to my new friends. But I was so moved by their show of affection that I could not utter one word. I only waved my handkerchief, which drew a general waving of handkerchiefs on the platform. Then the stationmaster with his red, gold-braided official cap, appeared and swinging his signal rod like a scepter, put an end to the commotion.

After a short stopover in Lugano we boarded the express train for Lisbon, where we met our boat and left old Europe for the new world beyond the sea.

17

KIEVSKY'S WAR MEGILEH

Soon after our arrival in America, Lavlor and I took over the management of Hotel Vienna, one of Moily's large hotels in New York. It was so efficient an operation that it practically ran itself, and I thus had plenty of time to indulge in my literary pursuits. Moily's other big hotel near the railroad station remained under the personal management of Gabriela and Moily, assisted by her mother, Mrs. Kievski. Rabbi Sholem was at that hotel also, devoting all his time to study and to work on a book in which he set himself the task of tracing and explaining the origins of times honored Jewish customs. He was Moily's spiritual guide and also his father-in-law, having married Gabriela's mother, Sonya Kievski.

The events leading to this, his third marriage were not devoid of an element of romance.

It had all begun in the course of a small, intimate Hanuka celebration at the Lavlors'. The Lavlors had invited Mrs. Kievski, Gabriela and Moily, and my wife and me. Rabbi Sholem was then still living with the Lavlors and had been automatically invited to the party. At first the situation was rather uncomfortable, as Sonya

Kievsky, Gabriella's mother, was the sister of Katya, Rabbi Sholem's first wife. But both quickly overcame their uneasiness, for Sonya soon felt sympathy, respect, and even admiration for the lonely man.

The celebration opened with a spirited and witty talk by Rabbi Sholem about Hanuka. Rabbi Sholem soon shed his embarrassment and grew involved in a lively conversation with Sonya on Hanuka customs. Nostalgically, Sonya told of the beautiful Hanuka celebrations of old in her home country, and she mentioned that her late husband had composed chronicles of his own in honor of Hanuka in which he had recorded numerous unusual events he had witnessed or heard told in his own life time. He had made it a practice to read the chronicle on Hanuka, and Sonya had continued the tradition after his death, adding wonders she had heard from guests over a period of twenty years in the hotel business.

Having been a chaplain in the First World War, Rabbi Sholem had an understandable interest for such episodes, and he asked if he might see the chronicle. Sonya agreed to show it to him the next day, saying that one of the episodes related there was so moving that it almost sounded like a legend. The words had hardly left the mouth when, like a flash, it came to her that her late husband's chronicle might hold the answer to the mystery at the root of Rabbi Sholom's tragedy. As soon as she could, she called Moily aside and told him her suspicion.

At Moily's request, I went to Mrs. Kievski's home the next day to call for a small notebook, written in Hebrew, which bore the title: 'War Memoirs'. I scrutinized this chronicle carefully, in order not to miss the one entry, that might change a man's whole life. Finally I found what I was looking for. It was a fairly fresh entry by a hotel guest who signed himself as Yakov ben Ashair Hakohen, and who had served in the Russian army in the First World War.

"Once, during a skirmish," the man had written, "I received a so-called 'thousand-guilder shot." This was the sort of painful but harmless wound which carried with it an indemnity of a

thousand guilders and which gave a man the chance to rest for two or three weeks in a field hospital. Despite his discomfort, the victim is the object of general envy, if for no other reason than that he gets a bed of his own to sleep in.

"Unfortunately though, I was not allowed to lie in bed undisturbed. In the ward with me there lay an unconscious Jewish lieutenant who was dying of pneumonia. Every now and then he regained consciousness, but never for more than a few minutes at a time. From the sounds he muttered in his delirium, it became evident that he was deeply troubled by some thought that he could not express. I kept watch at his bedside, alternating with the two Jewish orderlies on duty.

One afternoon, after one of the orderlies had left for the day and before his teammate arrived, I took my turn at the bedside. I moved my chair close to the dying soldier's bed arranged the covers, moved the patient into a more comfortable position, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Suddenly, the man woke up and quickly, with his feverish hand, he grasped mine. "Yehudi?" he croaked.

When I nodded, he whispered, "Fellow-Jew, I'm about to put the fate of two human beings in your hand. I acted as proxy in a marriage between the only daughter of the rabbi's widow in the town of Novyukh, and a Chaplain named Sholem ben Shlomo... Then he lapsed into a coma and that I never learned more about this strange story, for the next day I was declared recovered and discharged from the hospital."

I read the document once again. There was no doubt whatsoever that it referred to the case of Rabbi Sholem. I therefore took the document with me and carefully prepared Rabbi Sholem for what he was about to learn. Rabbi Sholem turned deadly pale as he slowly read through the pages that might clear up the mystery that had blighted his life all these years. After, carefully comparing the names and the date, Sholem, too, felt no doubt as to the authenticity of the information. Still, he believed that he had to learn more about the matter.

He decided to put an advertisement in a number of newspapers

requesting Mrs. Yakovtzin of Novyukh, the widow of the rabbi, or relatives or friends of hers to contact him. Weeks passed, and Rabbi Sholem's advertisements met with no response, until one day someone timidly knocked at his door. He answered with a loud, "Come in!" When the door opened, a little old woman stood there with wrinkled cheeks, and sunken eyes, her face framed by a black lace kerchief. Rabbi Sholem bade her be seated and asked what he could do for her.

With trembling lips she introduced herself as the widow of the rabbi of Novyukh. She was visiting with relatives in New York who had seen his advertisement. She informed Sholem that the girl whom Lieutenant Raisch had taken in marriage on his behalf during the war had been her daughter. Silently she drew the yellowed betrothal contract from her handbag and handed it to him. As he read it in silence, tears welled up in her eyes and coursed down her wrinkled face. Rabbi Sholem looked up, speechless, his eyelids aquiver as he waited for her to tell him more.

Calm, despite her tears, the old woman told him that her daughter had died soon afterwards of a malignant disease. Rabbi Sholem could not say a word, he only nodded his head. It was a sudden shock to him when the old lady stood up and told him: "Now sit down and observe your hour of mourning." Sholem took off his shoes, and sat down on the floor to mourn. An hour was all the law required in view of the years that had passed between the time the woman had died and the time the husband who had never known her received the news. The mother pulled out a chair for herself and sat down again. In the brief talk that ensued he offered to provide for her in her old age, since after all, she was his mother-in-law. But she declined his offer, and calmly intoning the traditional words of consolation, "May the Omnipresent console you with all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," she left the room with short, dragging steps. The next day Sholem presented the statement of Yakov ben Asher Hakohen to a court of religious law. On the basis of the document and the 'rebbetzin's' testimony, the court declared him a widower and free to remarry. Shortly thereafter, he and Sonya Kievsky were married.

18

JEWISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

The years flew by, and before we knew it, we were able to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of our arrival in New York. It was early spring and Lavlor's hotel was in the midst of preparations for a convention of the World Congress of Jewish Women which was to open there on March 27. Lavlor had himself done all the preliminary work, including all the necessary correspondence. In writing to places all over Europe he re-established pleasant contacts with many old acquaintances.

One day the mail brought a gilt-edged envelope with raised blue monograms from the Misses Gepner in London. The letter inside announced that Ditta and Terra Gepner were interested in coming to New York to attend the convention, but first wanted some idea of how much the accommodations would cost. Lavlor read the letter rapidly. Then he read it again, this time more slowly and with interest. Deep in thought he leaned backward in his wide armchair, gazing at the bluish smoke of his cigar as his thoughts traveled to long-forgotten scenes of bygone days.

The arrival of these two young women seemed to him a hint from Providence. It had always been Lavlor's fondest desire to see

his two sons happily married. He had dreamed of finding for them wives who were truly devout, well versed in Jewish knowledge, and of good family. His sons shared their father's views in this respect. However, they were well-to-do, and were determined not to fall for girls who were out solely for their money, but to consider only those who would marry them for their personal qualities, without a thought of their wealth.

All this ran through Lavlor's mind as he sat down to answer the letter from London with an offer of special rates.

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Lavlor sent the hotel car to meet the Gepner girls at the dock instructing the chauffeur to inform them that the car would be at their disposal for the duration of their stay.

Lavlor stood behind the reception desk watching the two trim and elegant young women pass through the gleaming revolving door. Their white overcoats, tailored suits of beige and brown tweed, matching handbags, and beige felt hats trimmed with brown were smart and in good taste. Lavlor lost no time in introducing his two sons to them. As they registered, they greeted him cordially. However, he did not tell them that these tall young men were his sons, the little boys they had met at the Sonnengold Inn years ago. He merely introduced them by their first names as the guides assigned to escort them throughout their stay in New York City. Tired from their trip, they smiled gracefully and followed the bellboy up to their room.

Their room had been equipped with every convenience Lavlor could provide. In the middle of the mirror was a 'Shalom Alaichem' sign, surrounded by a wreath of wild flowers. They remembered now that long ago in Engelberg they also had received Lavlor with similar decorations.

Shortly, both Ditta and Terra came down to avail themselves of the services of their guides who took them on a tour around Manhattan, and impressed them as clean-cut intelligent young men.

Lavlor and his sons, for their part, were impressed with the unaffected charm of both girls, and also by their pleasant appearance. This favorable impression was further strengthened by the papers on Jewish topics which the two read to the Congress, and which showed a broad and thorough Jewish background.

As the week passed, the young men were completely taken in by the charm and the natural grace of these two girls. They had a frank talk with their father who listened and said nothing except to caution them against making hasty decisions.

Lavlor invited Ditta and Terra to eat the Shabas meals at his own home, a few blocks from the hotel. His wife, Tzirel, very much wanted to meet the two young ladies she had been hearing so much about all week. They in turn were eager to spend some time with the kindly lady they remembered from Engelberg and who might be able to offer them the maternal counsel they both felt they needed at this point, they therefore gladly accepted the invitation.

* * *

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AN ESHES CHAIL

Tzirel's soft, delicate hands slid slowly from her tear dimmed eyes which she had covered while she recited the blessing over the Sabbath candles.

The luster of the candles gave the room a festive yet cozy and homelike appearance.

Tzirel's features grew grave as if lost in a dream. She moved slowly to the lace-covered armchair and sat down silently with a sad sigh. Like every week, so now, too, the Sabbath light had revived memories of things long past.

She saw again that happy time when the four flames she had kindled symbolized her four children, all healthy and strong. Then that tragic Friday had come, when her grief-stricken husband struggling for her sake to maintain his composure, broke the terrible news to her with a quotation, from the Talmud: "'Akiva nichamtanu, Akiva nichamtanu'." Their own unforgettable, noble Akiva, too had been their comfort. And now, tragically, Akiva was gone.

A haze of tears dimmed her eyes. She seemed to see shadowy face before her, as the smoke of the flame that had been snuffed

out before its time rose in a high column straight toward heaven, re-united there with the eternal light from which it had come.

Once again the Sabbath lights shone brightly–a beam of hope, it now seemed to her. She resolved to accept without a murmur the blow that G-d had seen fit to strike them, submitting humbly to his will. Her face began to brighten again. Her features radiated quiet happiness as the Sabbath angel made its entry into her home.

When Akiva had died, she had decided to dedicate herself with special devotion to the care of the sick so that her good works might be credited to the soul of her son in Heaven. In this way she felt she would be bound up with him forever.

Tzirel rose. She did not want to desecrate the Sabbath with sad thoughts. The happy, peaceful Sabbath had come to drive her grief away. As an old saying put it, "The Sabbath lamp is put in place, grief and sorrow leave with grace."

Tzirel thumbed through the open mail on the side-table. The better part were communications from societies, requests for help, and letters of recommendation. One long letter was from the Unity Soup Kitchen Society of which she was president. One letter from Switzerland gave her special pleasure: It came from her children and contained a special note from her granddaughter Edith. Akiva, the little grandson, too young to write, sent his regards by means of a charming photograph. A wave of warmth suffused her, features and her eyes misted over, this time with gladness. "'Akiva nichamtanu'," she whispered as she held the little boy's picture in her hands. "You have consoled me for my own Akiva, whose name you bear."

She recited the Sabbath prayers, the bliss of the Sabbath in her eyes. Waiting for her husband and their guests to return from 'shul,' she stood there like a Sabbath queen herself, in festive garments, with regal posture, holding her prayer book in her slender right hand, her index finger still caught in the gilt edge. She always had a little smile or a few friendly words for everyone. Even during the short time she had been in the United States, she had conquered all hearts as she had at home, with her generosity and motherly kindness. She had a need to create joy around her



MRS. CECELIA SCHREIBER

1958

GOLDEN WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

and to make people happy, and everyone loved and admired her for it. Her life was filled with concern for her husband and her children to whom she was both helper and guide. Now her heart began to fill with joy, and a cheerful smile spread over her countenance. Perhaps the day would soon come when she might greet Ditta and Terra as her daughters-in-law.

She gave the room a last-minute inspection, her eyes coming to rest on the festively set table with its white linen and sparkling silver. Long before the beginning of the Sabbath, she had set the long table for twenty-four persons and decorated it with loving care in honor of the Sabbath queen. In the center of the table stood two lovely bouquets of flowers to recall the two myrtle branches placed on the Sabbath tables of old. Each commemorating one of the two Sabbath commandments. 'Shomor' (Keep) and 'Zochor' (Remember).

The Sevres china lay magnificent on the shimmering tablecloth, surrounded by heavy silverware. A red plush cover with a gilt edge could be seen peeking out from beyond the cloth. On the Sabbath, Tzirel's table had two covers so that it might never be bare, even while the tablecloth was being changed.

Beautiful, antique silver 'kidush' cups were provided for the men. Pretty, twisted 'chalos', sprinkled with poppy seeds, protruded from beneath fine, white, hand-embroided covers, which bore the Hebrew phrase "Remember the Sabbath Day." Exquisite vases of blue and white fayence with bronze-yellow and golden chrysanthemums added to the festive appearance of the table. Red-morocco-bound prayer-books with gilt edges and silver-mounted corners lay ready on the table. There were other prayer books, too, which, to judge by their age, must have been keepsakes placed on the table to recall dear ones long gone. One was completely silver-mounted, another was bound in light blue velvet, and a third-with a cedar cover—was a souvenir from a journey to the Holy Land. Carafes in silver bottle-stands bore little silver plaques suspended on chains and engraved "'lichvod Shabas'" (In Honor of the Sabbath). Heavy, fragrant, ruby-red wine from 'Eretz

Yisrael' and fiery Tokay, the king of wines, stood ready for 'kidush'.

She heard a tap on the door. At her "Come in," Terra and Ditta entered the room quietly. Tzirel bent toward the two girls, kissed them warmly, and whispered, "Be happy, that will be my finest reward."

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LAVLOR'S PRAYER FULFILLED

Soon they heard louder knocking. The newcomers pushed the heavy door curtains aside with their left hands as they passed through the wide entrance. With their right hands, they respectfully touched the gold-adorned silver mezuzah capsule nailed diagonally across the right doorpost. Then they pressed their hands to their lips.

The new arrivals were the master of the house himself and his sons, accompanied by Rabbi Sholem, other relatives, and guests. All were dressed in their Sabbath best and in a good mood. In accordance with the traditional teaching of our sages, the master of the house entered first, and guests following him.

The new guests were introduced to those they had not met before and, again, Lavlor's sons were introduced only by their first names with no indications that they were anything else but guests at the house. The celebration of the Sabbath eve begun with the hymn song "'Shalom Alaichem'," welcoming the angels of peace. The master of the house paced up and down in time to the tune as he trilled the song in his strong but pleasant voice, greeting

the angels who had joined him as invisible guests when he had left the synagogue.

Next Lavlor recited with great feeling the passage "'Aishess Chayil'," King Solomon's praise of the woman of valor, the truly good wife. As he chanted the words from the Book of Proverbs, Lavlor looked tenderly at his wife, with a smile on his lips and a nod to indicate that King Solomon had composed it especially for Tzirel. The guests listened attentively and approvingly as the lady of the house blushed.

They politely declined more than a sip of the 'kidush' wine offered them.

"Are you teetotallers?" Lavlor asked.

"No, Mr. Lavlor," Terra replied, "we enjoy good wines at home but we never drink any when we are away from home."

Ditta added, "I believe there is a statement in the Talmud that a woman should not drink in a house not her own."

Many topics were discussed during the meal, and Ditta and Terra listened attentively. Lavlor was increasingly convinced that Heaven had heeded his prayer, particularly when he saw his sons showering the two girls with attention even as they kept teasing them with harmless jokes.

The conversation lagged for a while. Following the spirited and lively talk, this sudden quiet was embarrassing, and the master of the house broke the silence, "Won't someone bring up a topic from the Talmud and offer it for discussion. It's a good Jewish custom. Perhaps one of you young ladies would accept this honor?"

General approval was voiced immediately. Only Ditta and Terra seemed to be somewhat surprised at that suggestion. Lavlor therefore asked them, "I should like to know how you, as daughters of Orthodox Jews, should have such extensive Talmudic knowledge. As far as I can tell, it is not usual for women in our circles to occupy themselves with Talmudic studies."

Terra, the more spirited of the two, looked up and asked archly, "Before we can answer your question, Mr. Lavlor, I should like to know who has told you that we have any Talmudic knowledge."

Lavlor answered, "You are overly modest if you refer to your information as 'some knowledge'. But why are you surprised that I should know about that? Ditta's remark earlier this evening, and the papers you have read at the Congress give ample evidence of it, I did not hear them personally, but I read them in the minutes. You got quite a bit of publicity in the Jewish press, and enthusiastic reviews. Your article "Marriages are Made in Heaven" in the 'The Jewish Women's Weekly' is no less worthy of admiration."

Terra raised her eyebrows and replied in a gentler voice. "Yes, the papers were very obliging in their reviews." Then she continued vivaciously, "It is quite a mistake to assume that a woman's studying Torah is not in accordance with Orthodox tradition. As far as I know, there were outstanding female scholars even before the Talmud was put together. Why, there was Berurya wife of Rabbi Meir, who lived in the second century before the Common Era. She is supposed to have taken an active part in discussions on Jewish law. Her name has found its way even into non-Jewish literature. She's supposed to have studied three hundred new rabbinic decisions every day. Even the great scholars quoted her opinions in difficult problems, and two of her pronouncements on difficult parts of the laws of purity were actually accepted by the 'tana'im'.

"The 'Mahari Milon' even decided that women are obliged to learn the meaning of all the laws which they are obligated to observe. As a matter of fact, there is nothing in the Torah that would prevent women from performing 'sh'chita'. It's just that they have not been practicing it for reasons of modesty so as not to mingle with men."

"Aren't there many laws that women may observe, though they are not obliged to do so?" Ditta joined in. "The same holds true for studying Torah. Although women are not obliged to put on prayer shawls and Phylacteries, our sages still say they should not be kept from doing so if they are able to meet the requirements involved. According to one opinion they may even pronounce the blessing over the prayer-shawl. We read in the Talmud that King Saul's daughter Michal, put on Phylacteries and the sages agreed

that she had done no wrong. The Talmud also mentions other pious women who put on Phylacteries. It is known that the daughter and the sister of Rashi both taught women how to perform any number of mitzvos. Women can even say the Grace after meals aloud with a quorum of three, just as men do when they 'bench bi-mezuman.

"A granddaughter of Rashi, a sister of Rabenu Tam, was such a great scholar that she was called Chana Melumedet – Learned Chana."

"Going back even further," said Terra. "To the first and second centruries, Ima Shalom, the daughter of the Patriarch Raban Simeon ben Gamaliel, the sister of Raban Gamaliel II of Yavneh, who was the wife of the great 'tana' Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, was also learned in Talmudic law. The Talmud even reports that she engaged in lively debates with Rabbi Eliezer, and that she participated in discussions on the interpretation of oral traditions.

"Her young niece, the daughter of Raban Gamaliel, also took part in one recorded disputation. She once gave a witty answer to a heathen which is recorded in the Talmud. He had declared to Raban Gamaliel: 'Your G-d is a thief, because he took a rib from Adam while he was asleep.' When Gamaliel's daughter heard these words, she asked her father for permission to reply, then said 'If indeed our G-d is a thief, He is like one who has borrowed a silver jug and returned a golden one!'

"Then there are Choma (daughter of Dosi ben Yitzchak) Abbayas wife, and Yalta, Rav Nachman's wife. Both were well-learned and had an extensive Jewish education. Ben Azai considered it obligatory to give women instruction in Jewish law, and the Jerusalem Talmud interprets the term 'am kadosh' (a holy nation) to refer to men and women alike."

"The Mohammedans relegate the wife to the harem," Ditta resumed, "but not so the Jews. The Torah commands expressly, ''Koh Somar l'vaiss Yakov'' (Tell (the law) to the house of Jacob) and Rashi explains, 'The house of Jacob – these are the women.'

"In the year 1800, there lived in Russia, Chana Rachel, the

Maid of Vladimir. She had a good knowledge of Aggadic sources, prayed with prayer-shawl and Phylacteries, and studied Torah all day long. And in the 18th century there was a woman 'Rebbe' in Tshernobil, called Chana-Chaya. She was considered a holy woman, and many Hasidim came to pay their respects to her. Adel, the daughter of the 'ba'al Shem Tov', was similarly honored.

"There are many opinions that the exclusion of women from Jewish scholarship only pertains to the Talmud proper and to the teaching of mysticism."

Lavlor had listened to Terra's and Ditta's arguments with sincere admiration. But finally he answered with an expression of regret, "By referring to Berurya and Ima Shalom, among others, you have unwittingly provided me with a counter-argument. It is certainly not my intention to obscure the brilliant picture of these great women in your minds. Yet I must tell you some additional facts that may modify your first impression. Berurya's father did not deliberately instruct her in Talmudic subjects. She acquired her knowledge by listening when he taught his pupils. After her marriage to Rabbi Meir she could listen to her husband's lectures in the academy. In this way she gathered enormous knowledge, though neither her father nor her husband had taught her directly.

"As to Ima Shalom, we are told in the Talmud that her husband, Rabbi Eliezer, was firmly opposed to women studying Torah. His saying, 'A woman's wisdom is the distaff' is widely known. And it is no less common knowledge that he said, 'Whoever teaches his daughter Torah is as if he were teaching her disorderly conduct.' On occasion he would become so enraged at the thought of women studying Torah that he went so far as to say, "It would be better for the Torah to burn than to be studied by women!"

"To the superficial observer such an extreme attitude would imply the assumption that women were unstable. But this is not the real motive at all. The real reason for it is that if the men, for whom study is obligatory, should be studying in the company of women, they might be distracted from their studies. Rabbi Eliezer himself held his wife in great esteem and respected her profound scholarship.

"Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah likewise felt great respect for his wife. When the question arose as to whether or not he should succeed Raban Gamaliel president of the Academy. He finally decided to accept the post against her advice, and she was proven right in the end, for he did not remain in that office very long.

"Now for the other point you brought up, the wearing of prayer shawl and Phylacteries by women. You nearly omitted the second half of the passage you quoted. There it says expressly that women should not be allowed to put on Phylacteries, as their physical constitution does not permit them to observe the pertinent regulations meticulously. And according to 'Targum Jônathan' the prohibition against women putting on men's attire would even include the prayer shawl and Phylacteries. Some of the scholars who disapproved of women's wearing the fringes note that every passage starting in the Hebrew with ''Dabair el b'nay Yisra'ail'...(speak to the 'Sons' of Israel)', as does the passage that commands the wearing of fringes is addressed to men exclusively. Rabbi Hiya taught, 'Women are created for beauty and decoration only. Their duty is to bear children.'"

The lady of the house terminated the discussion, so that they could all do ample justice to the delicious Sabbath meal she had prepared.

Later the master of the house continued his conversation with the two girls, and revealed to them by an incidental remark that he himself was the editor of 'The Jewish Women's Weekly', where his own articles there were signed "L." They asked him now whether they might have copies of the issues they remembered had carried his articles on the Three Festival and he promised to look for them after the Sabbath.

The Sabbath lunch at Lavlor's turned into a joyous banquet. All enjoyed what the table had to offer, and the men sang 'z'miros' with real gusto. When they had finished, Lavlor chanted the 'Shir Hama'alos' to the tune they had once sung together in Engelberg. A highly stimulating discussion about the delivery of Grace after meals ensued. They also sang the concluding verses, "'na'ar hayeesee'," in a melody the girls remembered from Engelberg.

They finished late, and the men constituted their own 'minyan' for the afternoon service.

The ladies also took part in the third Sabbath meal, the 's'uda shleeshiss'. This practice, which commemorates the miracle of the 'man' (manna) in the wilderness, must be observed by men and women alike.

Slowly, the Sabbath drew to a close. The ladies then chanted the old Judeo-German hymn "G-tt von Avraham, Yitzchak, und Ya'akov..." (G-d of Avraham..). Then the men sang the psalm "'L'david baruch'..," to escort the Sabbath Bride back to her home in the popular traditional tune, said to have been taken from patriotic marches popular in Spain during the Inquisition. The Marranos had used this melody for the psalm in order to conceal their underground services from the suspicious Gentiles.

The evening prayer was followed by 'havdala'. A cup of wine was placed on a special 'havdala'-plate on which the words "'Gut Voch, Gut Yahr'" (Good week, Good year) were inscribed. Lavlor filled the cup to overflowing and some wine spilled over onto the plate to demonstrate his love for the 'mitzva' by performing it generously. Terra, as the youngest present, held the 'havdala' candle high in a beautiful filigree holder.

Lavlor's 'havdala' candle was a magnificent work of art which he had received as a 'Simchas Torah' gift from an organization in which he had been active. It was beautifully plaited from several candles of various colors and while it looked like one single flame, the several colors and converging individual flames were clearly discernable in accordance with the blessing in the plural which praised G-d for having quoted "the 'lights' of fire."

After 'havdala', the guests all joined in singing "'Hamavdil'" and "'Eliyahu Hanavi'" and the rest of the 'M'laveh Malka' songs. Later, Tzirel had some light refreshments brought in by way of a final farewell tendered to the Sabbath Queen.

Immediately after the chanting of 'hamavdil', Lavlor excused himself and went to another room to look over the mail that had arrived on the Sabbath. When he returned the girls asked him, "Does Sabbath ever affect your business adversely?"

"No," he quickly replied. Then he added, "Your question reminds me of what my father-in-law used to say. He owned a big department store in Vienna with two hundred employees. Whenever he was asked whether Sabbath observance caused him any losses, he would say, "In a large business Sabbath observance is no sacrifice at all. Thank G-d, I earn many times what I need for a living. It is a sacrifice only for a small shopkeeper who barely earns enough to keep himself and his family alive.'"

When Ditta and Terra rose to leave, Lavlor saw them to the door. Tzirel had hinted to him that the girls were interested in the two young men whom they still thought to be merely guides employed to escort them. Lavlor therefore told them in parting, "Please come to my office tomorrow afternoon at five o'clock. My wife mentioned to me that you discussed a matter of some importance with her, and I should like to talk with you about it further."

"Thank you," Ditta said, "we'll be there. 'Gut Voch'."

At five o'clock the next day Tzirel opened the door to Lavlor's office letting in the two girls. Lavlor broke the ice. "What can we do for you?" he asked.

"We'd like to know more about our guides. We have spent almost all our spare time with them you know," Ditta said.

"They are obviously well-mannered, educated and religious young men," Terra continued, "but we cannot encourage their attentions in any way, nor can we allow ourselves to continue enjoying their company without knowing who they are."

"I assure you they are honorable gentlemen of respectable family," said Lavlor, "I would never assign you guides who were not suitable companions. However, there is another matter that I wished to discuss with you. Tzirel, perhaps you can introduce the subject better."

Tzirel began, "Mr. Lavlor and I have two sons. You know us, their family, and I can assure you that they are financially well-off..."

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. Lavlor," Ditta hesitated, "but it is obvious that you want us to meet your sons..."

"That's exactly it," Tzirel replied.

"Under any other circumstances, we should be glad to do that," Ditta almost choked on the words, but she felt she had to say them, "We both find our feelings for our guides are deeper than we would normally care to admit. We admire them greatly and we would not be interested in meeting other possible suitors until we were certain that these two gentleman did not reciprocate our interest."

"But what amazes me, Mrs. Lavlor" pugnacious Terra could not restrain herself, "is that you could even mention that your sons are well-off in the hope of influencing us. Oh, how could you?"

On that point the two young men quietly entered the room, and, strode up to their parents.

"We would like you to meet your two daughters-in-law," the bolder of the two announced, extending his hand to Terra.

"Haven't we better ask for Father's approval first," the other interposed, a little awkwardly. Ditta gave him an encouraging smile.

Lavlor chuckled happily and said, "Thank you G-d Almighty; you have answered our most fervent prayers. You have showed us again that marriages are truly made in heaven: ' 'Bass Ploni Le Ploni !"

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(THE END)