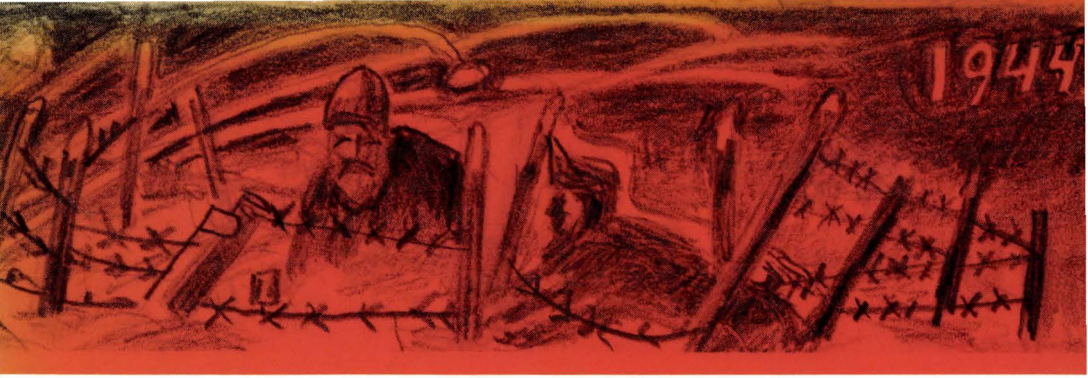


EXODUS FROM HUNGARY

by M. D. Weinstock



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FOREWARD

The Holocaust has become a subject of great interest to many. Much study and research is being done to fathom the depths of man's inhumanity to his fellow man. However, unless one has personally undergone the persecution himself, he cannot even begin to really comprehend the horror of the Holocaust.

I have personally been extremely interested in this traumatic period in Jewish history. I was born following the turmoil and lost most of my family to these human beasts. My parents, remnants of the glorious period of Polish Jewry, spent several years in Siberia and later in German D.P. camps. Nothing can erase those scars from their lives as well as mine.

In this book, Mr. Weinstock, a remnant of the glorious period of Hungarian Jewry, provides us with a glimpse into the Labor camps, the Russians and the Germans, and eventually escapes to Austria, all because of his firm faith in G-d and commitment to Torah.

The author is already well known for his previous work "Light in the Darkness," selected stories of the Holocaust. He is a man of many talents, being well versed in both Torah and secular knowledge. He was a journalist for many years. He is possessed with artistic abilities which he uses to portray the history and feelings of his people. It is my hope that this book will prove beneficial to school children as well as older students of history and will be a catalyst for more works in this field as well as show the majesty of Torah which enables one to overcome all. The beautiful personality of the author despite the many tribulations he faced in life, certainly inspires many he comes in contact with, and I am confident his writings will do the same.

Rabbi Avraham Fishelis
Principal/Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem

CHAPTER I

A young woman, who I knew while I was growing up in the village of Vamostelek, saw my father "put in the line to the left"; the line of Jews that was led into the gas chamber at Auschwitz. This was told to me when I returned to my home after escaping from a forced labor battalion at the end of the war.

For the past forty years since it happened I have wanted to write down what I saw and heard during that time when the heart of humanity suffered through its harshest Winter. We were all naive. Even though we were forced to endure the bigotry and hatred of the anti-Semitic factions in authority, no one believed that such a diseased philosophy could lead to the genocide of millions of people. After all, part of being a Jew in Europe during the era leading to the outbreak of World War II was living with continued condescending assaults against the Jewish character.

Some young Jews turned away from the traditions that had been passed down to us for more than four thousand years. The burden of persecution carries with it; self-doubt and self-loathing a struggle very difficult to bear. For myself, I embraced the traditions of my father, and my grandfather, and the teachings of the Torah more fervently. I have named this period my time of "rebirth". I took solace and security in my studies at the Yeshiva in Telekes.

It is the Jewish tradition that life is a continuous cycle of beginnings and endings; endings and beginnings. That is how I have lived and witnessed the years of my life.

For two and a half years I lived within the protected environment of the Yeshiva. The war in Europe raged for four years before I was drawn into the center of the horror. We, the students at the Yeshiva in Telekes, drew upon one another for our strength. Each day was lived with the Talmud. It was good being a Jew among Jews. Every morning we gathered to study; every evening we gathered to pray. Then, my period of grace as a Talmud student came to a close.

It was in April, 1943. I remember that it was a balmy Spring morning. It was a beautiful day caressed by warm breezes. Telekes was a Trans-Danubian town make up of rows of charming houses with gardens filled with bright colored flowers. I stopped for a moment by the park next to the high school, where the huge gymnasium had been turned into a recruiting station. My eyes danced lovingly over the deep green grass and neatly trimmed shrubs; the sight was delightful.

In spite of the talk by my fellow students at the Yeshiva about draft evasion I reported to the Telekes draft board as instructed. I must have inherited my father's respect for authority. My father served four years in the front lines in the Royal Hungarian Army during World War I. Throughout my boyhood, during the years between two World Wars, my father instilled in me a feeling of loyalty to Hungary. The paradox was that I was assailed by the malicious allegations of the anti-Semite writers, like Bosnyak Zoltan, who stated that my "race", the Jews, were destructive to the social and economic structure of the Hungarian Empire. I knew that I was certainly not involved in subversive activities aimed at overthrowing the state; which was a prime accusation leveled against anything that was Jewish. For my part, I desired freedom and equality for Jews throughout Hungary. If that thinking put me into the category of being "destructive" then, I could not disclaim such accusations.

While I waited for the recruiting station to open my heart was beating in my throat. I was afraid. I could no longer avoid induction into the labor service. I was twenty-one years old, tall, and athletic. When I attended college, prior to my Yeshiva days, I had won medals in weight lifting, and for the javelin. Of course, being a Jew, no medals were awarded to me at graduation. But, there was little reason for the draft board to declare me unfit for labor service.

For my own part in the folly that took place at the recruiting

station, in a circus atmosphere of ignorance and fear, I admit to falling into the trap of pseudo-intellectualism. I tried to view the situation objectively. I asked myself: Who can blame these young gentiles for absorbing these poisonous ideas? How could they protect themselves against the virus of anti-Semitism? If hatred could be created in a test tube, and spread deliberately until everyone caught it what defense is there against such illness? Before choosing the road of the Torah, I had read the books of the racial anthropologists, Chamberlain and Bosnyak. These "scientists" firmly upheld the view that Jews are dishonest, lazy, and inferior. Raised on such readings, more than a few secularly educated Jewish boys had learned to hate themselves. What can be expected from these gentiles?

This is the defense I created to shield my emotional stress for the hours I spent in the high school gymnasium.

There we stood, all the boys born in 1922, fidgeting nervously, bare to the waist and clad only in shorts. I was in the group of fifty students from the famous rabbinical school of Telekes, and scores of other Jewish boys from the district. We were in the separate line for Jews, and treated like lepers or carriers of some other contagious disease. We, in the line of Jews, were not being recruited for the Royal Hungarian Army. We were there to fill the needs of the labor battalions. We were considered enemies of the state. Hitler had branded us "parasites" an inferior race to be annihilated. We were segregated from the other draftees.

On the opposite side of the gymnasium stood the long line of "glorious" sons of the "pure blood". In truth, those who were selected to represent the finest qualities of Hungarian manhood were former shop assistants, unemployed working class boys, illiterate peasant boys, and in general, the dregs of society. They looked down on us with an arrogance allotted to those who momentarily wield power. For the most part; they were superficial, insolent, and opportunistic.

As the hours passed they became more restless, and more abusive to the boys standing in the Jewish line.

"Look at those weedy kikes in their long drawers!" A brawny boy, who looked like a butcher's assistant, kept pulling himself up on the bar that secured the wall between us. "A stalwart race, are they not?" he asked the gentiles in a sarcastic tone.

Another boy hollered out, "Never fear, they'll be properly

M.D.W.
PANIC!

trained in the labor battalions. They'll soon find out what it means to work!"

The insults continued throughout the morning. "It's high time they stopped cheating us Hungarians. That's what they mumble about in their blasted synagogues. That's what they pray for with the black things on their heads; how to cheat Hungary."

"The Arrow Cross teaches what they are: the shortest and most chicken hearted white people on earth," a slender boy called out. "But now, they'll get what's coming to them! In Poland they have already begun exterminating them. To hell with their crooked-nosed, blood-sucking race! Hitler, who is smarter than all of us, knows how to handle those kikes! We, thick-headed Hungarians, have not got the brains our German cousins have," the Hungarian Nazi went on. "We are too damned soft-hearted. We allow them to befoul our beautiful country and to pollute our air with the smell of their onions. We'll never be rid of them until we exterminate them like vermin! And I'm not talking about taking away their livelihood or by hitting them on the head once in a while. We need to catch them all; drive them to an isolated place; machine gun them into an open grave. That's what the soldiers on the Russian front told us it's being done there."

The butcher's assistant had to be the center of attention. He ran around, bent in two, pretending to wind an nonexistent ear lock around his finger. The butcher's assistant was applauded by his friends for the mockery. This was how the revolting "Talmud-jude" looked, according to the Stuermer, and its Hungarian counter part.

With cries of, "Do it again," and back slapping, the butcher's assistant was encouraged to continue his verbal assault. The uproar started to get out of hand. We could be grateful for army discipline for not being attacked by the gentiles at that moment. The din reached such proportions that the sergeant came out to see what was going on.

"Silence!" The sergeant's shout was so intimidating that the blood froze in everyone's veins.

The line snaked slowly forward. My name being Michael Weintraub, I began passing the hours by observing my fallow students. Involuntarily, I recalled the "scientific" opinion of Chamberlain: "Jews are a backward race physically." I knew it was an anti-Semitic lie. I had won two first prizes at the sports competition at school. Kabos and Karpathy, the Olympic

champions, had brought glory to the land of their birth.

Each time a colleague from the Yeshiva came out from behind the screen all the others would ply him with questions about the proceedings. It became clear that Dr. Magosi was declaring rabbinical students fit for service under the compelling presence of the Lieutenant Colonel. There was deep concern among the pious students. I was afraid their noise and commotion would provoke another series of threats from the other side of the gymnasium. The tension around me was building to an unbearable level.

Our attention was diverted from our problems by a bizarre incident that took place a little after noon time. Oscar Jungherz, a former roommate, burst into the waiting room accompanied by a friend. Oscar howled and fought like a lunatic. His friend did everything to calm him down, with no success. In my state of nervousness I did not understand what was happening. Jungherz broke through the curtain like a mad man, and rushed up to the draft board president and the Lieutenant Colonel. He raved, spat, and screamed at them. "Assassins! Murderers of G-d's chosen people!" Before anyone realized what Jungherz was doing, he swept all the papers from the table and began grinding them under the heel of his shoe.

The members of the draft board sat still, with stunned expressions upon their faces. Jungherz' behavior was so unbelievable that no one stepped forward to do anything about it.

"Hold this insane animal! Tie him down!" It was the Lieutenant Colonel who finally raised his trumpeting voice. Oscar Jungherz resisted heroically. But when he was finally subdued, he broke into heart-rending sobs, crying for his mother.

"Who brought this maniac in here?" The Lieutenant Colonel wanted to know what was going on.

"He was suppose to report today, sir. He is one of those who was deferred last year." It was the young aide-de-camp who supplied the information.

"Unfit for duty! I don't want to see this person ever again!" The Lieutenant Colonel screamed out the order.

I saw in Jungherz' actions something quite marvelous. Jungherz, in his anger and his rage, said: "No." He refused to serve untrue masters. Jungherz' words: "Murderers of G-d's chosen people!" hung like a dark cloud over everyone in the gymnasium. Perhaps, they could see the invisible inscription on the wall, like

Belsacar, which told them that they had been counted and found wanting. The smiles on the faces of the gentiles froze to stiffness. They conversed in low voices. They avoided looking over at the Jews.

When my turn came I walked through the proceedings as if in a dream. A physician ordered me to walk, to turn around, and asked that I reveal myself from every angle.

"Fit for service!"

Endings; beginnings...

CHAPTER II

Yankel Seiden was already in our shared quarters when I returned from the draft board. He looked very ill to me; almost like a ghost except for his ferverish black eyes. Yankel had taken some powder given to him by a friend. The doctors from the draft board had diagnosed an "acute kidney infection." The symptoms of the inflammation had not disappeared. Still, there was the shining look of triumph in his eyes when he caught sight of me entering our room.

"Three months auxiliary service," Yankel boasted. "What do you say to that, Moshe Menachem! I am suffering because of it. I hurt all over. Oh, these cramps; they're driving me mad." Yankel paused a moment from his agony to ask me about my fate.

"Just as I expected," I told him. "Fit for labor service. I report in August.

"What else can you expect with that athletic body of yours?"

"An athletic among the crippled. I wish I was as athletic with my Talmud studies." — I retorted.

Yankel began to moan woefully. He asked that I go across to the Ohlbaum's. "They have been boiling water on the stove for my tea. I have to drink and drink. That's the only medication I have. Oh, these cramps; they'll kill me."

As soon as I opened the door I was hit in the face with the stink of slaughtered fowl. It was awful. After the elegance of my previous quarters with the Rosenbaum family I had to make do with the ninety pengoes I received from home. A goodly sum of money when you consider that my father had been deprived of his trade license for two years as a result of the Jewish Laws. I recalled the words of my maternal Aunt Magdus as I walked across the tiny hall: "Your father walks on a knife edge to earn enough for

the family to survive. Your Talmud studies are a luxury he can't really afford."

After three months I still recoiled from the stench that permeated the hallway. I was repulsed by the fat cats waiting in the passageway for the intestines to be thrown to them. I had to kick the cats aside to enter the huge, stone floored kitchen of the Ohlbaum family. They were our landlords.

Mrs. Ohlbaum's facial expression was one of utter exhaustion. All the work in the kitchen had to be done by the women since the head of the household was away at a labor camp. The entire room was filled with ritually salted meat on thick wooden trays. The kitchen was a factory for kosher food preparation.

"Two birds have to be taken back to the Rabbi, Chani," Mrs. Ohlbaum told her sister. The two women were known for their reliability in preparing perfectly kosher fowl.

An old, yet ageless woman entered the room while I waited by the door. "How does Yankel feel?" the old lady inquired while she busied herself preparing the tea.

"He is still in pain," I said.

"Mother, please take some aspirins from the cupboard. They will calm the poor boy's cramps." Mrs. Ohlbaum bent over the salted meat. She began the ritual process of draining the meat. "Give Yankel a pill with his tea," Mrs. Ohlbaum said.

"What fine people," I said to Yankel when I returned to our room. "How they care; how they worry for you."

Yankel sat up on his bed to take the tea I handed to him.

I had often spoken with Yankel about the spiritual, and deeply ethical character of the religious population in Telekes. It contrasted greatly to the cursing, dirty jokes, and malicious gossip constantly heard in Vamostelek, where Yankel and I were born. "Everything I learn at the Yeshiva I experience here in everyday life," I said.

Yankel perked up. He reminded me of the "swamp letters" I wrote to my father at home in the "Vamostelek swamp". "You described the Yeshiva, and the life of the Jews here as a veritable Heavenly Jerusalem." Yankel recalled. "Of course, your father was proud of you, and showed your letters to everyone."

"You know, Yankel, my turning religious must have been a great shock to my father."

"I'm sure it was," Yankel agreed. "Especially if we take into

consideration that it was he who paved the way for your alienation from Judaism. The gap that had developed between your grandfather and your father was much wider than between your father and you. Your grandfather was a respected Rabbi, a Talmud scholar; he was known throughout the country." Yankel shook his head. "Your grandfather must have turned in his grave when your father could barely wait for the thirty day mourning period to pass so he could marry the daughter of the Weiszmans."

I was shaken by my friend's impertinence. "What have you against the Weiszmans?" I asked Yankel. "True, he has very little knowledge of the Torah if we measure by Yeshiva standards. Yet, Grandfather Weiszman sticks religiously to the moderate rituals he has known at home. He rises at five in the morning to recite his daily portion of the psalm; and never misses Temple in the morning or the afternoon. He always closed his shop, before his trade license was revoked, well before the entry of the Sabbath. He would chase customers from his shop.

"I take it back, Moshe Menachem," Yankel said. "It was not my intention to hurt your feelings. You are right. Your maternal grandfather was, in his own way, a good Jew." Yankel shook his head once again. "What I ask you is: how did your grandmother with her uncovered gray head, and her modern ideas towards education, compare to the Weintraubs and the holy person of the Talmud, a scholar, your grandfather?"

I could not comprehend how bigoted Jews, like Yankel, could accept only a small circle of Jews. Yankel regarded liberal Jews with an all consuming hatred; and he despised those people who lacked Jewish knowledge.

The Orthodox Jews considered the Reformed Jews a more dangerous influence upon the Orthodox children; even over the impact made by members of other religions. Yankel, like the other members of our Yeshiva, regarded himself as an island of purity in a sea of corruption. His aim was to prevent any kind of modification in the structure of his life. After three years at the Yeshiva I completely understood this attitude. In arguments with "outsiders" I would always find myself standing up belligerently in the defense of that system. Yet, I admitted to Yankel that, in my heart, I could not disqualify any Jew.

I felt too depressed by my experience at the draft board to get into one of our usual arguments. I did not share the thoughts on my mind. I remembered the irrational courage of my friend Oscar

Jungherz, who in his frenzied desire to survive, cursed and abused the members of the draft board.

"Jungherz is taking terrible risks," I told Yankel. "They will take him to the military hospital at Szombathely, and submit him to electric shock treatments."

"Yes," Yankel replied as though he were an expert on the subject. "And they don't care how much electricity they use. Especially when it comes to unmasking a Jewish malingerer." Yankel shook his head. "I have often played with the idea of pretending to be insane. Then I observed one of our most brilliant students after he returned from those shock treatments. It almost destroyed him. He seemed truly mad when he came back to the Yeshiva," Yankel mused, completely forgetting his condition.

"Apart from Jungherz risking his own health, there is another angle no one seems to consider," I said to Yankel. "He puts all the others in peril for his personal benefit. His behavior increases the hatred and the fury of the draft board against all Yeshiva students."

"I am surprised by your stupid moral considerations, Moshe Menachem." Yankel's whole body tensed. "Who robbed the Jew of his natural right to life?" Yankel cried excitedly as he sat up in bed. "It wasn't the working class; it wasn't individuals motivated by their insane hatred of Jews. It was the legal Hungarian Government; the Parliament and the House of Lords." Yankel's expression was animated. "Let's look at Jungherz' case, and mine. My father not only approved, but he encouraged me to do everything possible to avoid the labor camp. My brother's rucksack, with his few personal belongings, was returned to my father. There was a short note: KILLED AT VORONYEZH. My poor father keeps repeating: 'If he had only been killed by the enemy!'

"The entire Hungarian Second Army was sent to the front by Hitler as cannon fodder against the advancing Russian Army. They were killed by the Russians.

"However, the sixty thousand Jewish labor servicemen commandeered to the Don had not been issued arms. They were sent to be murdered by their own masters. The Hungarian overseers demanded money for a crust of bread; hundreds of pengoes for a few spoonfuls of marmalade. Then when they had everything the Jewish laborers owned, they drenched them with water, and left them to freeze to death in the cold Russian Winter.

There were few witnesses left to tell of the brutality.

"Since then, my father reiterates that we are in the hands of the Creator; but we are not compelled to entrust our lives to the beasts.

"Tell me, Moshe Menachem, do we have to blindly obey the command of such an immoral state?"

I was so crushed by the weight of the terrible truth that my reply was punctuated with a stammer. "What about poor Kohn and his seven children?" I asked. "He wanted to escape the labor camp badly enough to consume some ammonia. He died in excruciating torment. I can still recall the sobbing widow and her children at the funeral."

We both fell silent. There were no words to describe all of the Jewish suffering.

CHAPTER III

"Rabbi!"

"The MASTER!"

Our teacher entered. He cast an attractive figure; wearing spectacles, his hands characteristically in motion. The sea of Talmud students stood respectfully. Impelled by a desire to be close to him, all the students surged forward. Monitors protected the Master, pushing back the overzealous students, clearing his path.

Such demonstrations of love and devotion were a regular occurrence both in the Temple, and in the Yeshiva. Waiting for the Master made my spine tingle. My ears burned to hear his brilliant words of wisdom.

"The MASTER!"

"Our earthly leader!"

The ranks of monitors and sextons served our Master as ministers and courtiers. This unique court hummed with palace gossip about maneuvers to gain the Master's ear. I longed to become the ideal sexton: to show more understanding, more modesty, than any other. I sought to have the most elevated and polished soul.

Next to the Master walked his first born son. The fifteen year old boy had the privilege to carry his father's heavy Talmud. The weight of the tome bent his fragile body in two.

Every window in the crowded room was open. A loud playing radio penetrated the borders of our isolated realm. The noise from outside symbolized a ring of fire licking at the walls of our fortress. No one knew how long we would be able to hold onto this bastion. Our restless enemies might decide to eliminate us at any time for resisting their will.

I heard the radio announcer report on a successful disengagement at the Russian front.

At that moment our Master began to speak. He explained that the mission of the Jew is to serve G-d by striving for virtue, and refining his character. The Master made it clear that a Jew must consciously accept his mission. It was unimaginable that one could serve the Lord of the Universe, and at the same time live as an immoral person.

Our Master raised his voice. "For an example: think of the repulsive trait of arrogance, or self-importance. This infection is not only an illness of the non-Jewish society, but it has spread into our own houses as well.

"Therefore, our noblest duty is to build our modest self. Let us not offend our fellow men, but rather reply with pacification to even the rudest words."

A ray of afternoon sunlight filtered through the foliage of a tree that stood outside the window. A golden spot of light was painted on the forehead of the Master. This served to enhance the image we cherished of him. The Master held the entire hall under a spell with his gleaming eyes, and with the organ-like warmth of his voice.

At the completion of the Master's oration, we engaged in our usual study of the Talmud: the characteristic Jewish analysis of the ancient laws. It seemed as though our Master had selected a very abstract Mishna to serve as our subject of debate. We had almost reached the end of the Talmudic tractate "Kesuboth"; the reference contained part of the marriage laws.

The closing chapter dealt with the problem between a married couple who did not agree on the choice of the country where they should live. When one partner favored living in Israel, and the other preferred a country of the Diaspora, the one whose rights were to be upheld was the one who chose Israel. Moreover, under Talmudic jurisdiction, the husband is stronger than the wife. Nevertheless, the great principle of the maintenance of the Jewish Homeland possesses such a central value that if it is the


MY MASTER zcl.

wife who chooses Eretz Israel her right prevails.

The lively, enthusiastic Yeshiva debaters threw themselves into the dispute over this relatively abstract subject. Whenever another part of the law was introduced into the question, absolute clarification was required. Debaters threw the statements of ancient intellectuals onto the scales of the argument. The names of the great Babylonians were cited with passionate appraisal, along with intellectual giants from later centuries. The intellectual level of the students at the Yeshiva was much higher than that at the universities.

At the universities knowledge was merely accumulated; at the Yeshiva a student was required to understand truth which was assimilated through hours of ceaseless study. I, the great adventurer, had only joined the Yeshiva three years earlier. I felt out of my depth among the older students with my rudimentary understanding of the Talmud. I had difficulty following the entire debate.

When our Master spoke again we could see that he was filled with the magic of his faith. Through the clarity of his mind the Master solved all our doubts. The brilliance of his answers were obvious. The Master would deal only with questions that dealt strictly to the subject he ignored everything which was irrelevant. To us, he was the ideal ruler of an abstract realm. He was a living representative of the virtues found in the Talmud.

After evening prayers we ran in droves towards our lodgings. Yossie and I often walked together because we lived in the same area.

"Well, my absent-minded friend, come tell me the contents of your latest daydreaming," Yossie said in his silky voice as he took hold of my arm.

"On the surface everything appears to move smoothly;" I admitted the minor crisis to the master Talmudist, Yossie Kuperman. "The routine goes round and round. The cogs of the wheel automatically fall into the next notch. At times it is not zeal which propels me. I maintain myself on the impulse that generated my original resolution."

The moonlight shone on the battered houses of the Telekes ghetto. For the moment, everything felt peaceful under the glittering stars. Yossie Kupferman looked at me kindly as he pulled on his blond beard. I believe that he found more pleasure in

my personal revelations than I found relief by ridding myself of my hazy thoughts. Thus, when I became depressed periodically, I would tell Yossie about my adventures, experiences, and aspirations. Yossie's great psychological skill always helped to erase my doubts.

We would walk briskly until we reached Yossie's lodgings. There we stopped to rest. Then he accompanied me back to my room. At that point I was ready to return with a pure heart unto the service of G-d.

The present crisis was unlike all the others. Summer was passing quickly. The news reaching us from the blood drenched roads of Europe was increasingly more frightening. Even the sunniest days were filled with a strange emptiness. I found little relief in the hours I applied to my Talmud studies. The war crept ominously closer. The day of my departure to the labor camp was approaching, and that added further to my mounting tension. Sometimes I thought that I would just explode from the rising pressure.

I was a dreamer trapped in a nightmarish reality.

I found a focus that distracted me from the encircling doom. One day when I returned to my lodgings Mrs. Ohlbaum was busy slicing a chicken for a customer. The tiny hallway was so narrow that only one parson could pass through it at a time. The customer in the little hall was a young girl. The girl had to walk out the door so that I could pass by. If I had not been so depressed I would have refrained from looking at the girl; which is a discipline of the Yeshiva student.

However, this time I looked the girl straight in the eye. As if that was not enough of a departure from my usual modest etiquette, I found endless excuses to cross through the hall. I went to fetch water for my wash basin. I hung up my towel on the railing to dry. And each time the young girl had to stand against the wall as I murmured a polite, "excuse me." Running back and forth from my room I established that the girl had curly red hair and watchful eyes. After this harmless incident the girl came to Mrs. Ohlbaum's more often; and always at a time when I was home. She would draw out her purchases in such a way that she would pick up the chicken wings, breast, and the neck on separate visits. Each time she enumerated the parts of the chicken in a solemn voice. If she did this to signal her presence; she achieved her aim. Immediately, upon the young girl's arrival, I found a

million things to do outside my room. I crossed, and recrossed the hall repeatedly while she was there. We never exchanged greetings because that was not part of the protocol of observed modesty. When she did not appear at Mrs. Ohlbaum's at the usual time, on the usual day, I would begin to worry. One day when the girl arrived to purchase her chicken parts, she surprised me by wearing black stockings and a long sleeved dress. She must have dressed this way for me, for her family believed in modern ideas, and the weather was extremely hot. This charade continued for about six weeks; the last weeks of my stay in Telekes. We would almost greet one another at times; but we stopped ourselves in time, only passing friendly smiles between us.

(What a sweet little story, the reader might say while laughing, or accusing the writer of these lines with hypocrisy. The question one will ask is: What manner is this for a former man-of-the-world to behave? After sinning with the eyes, why fall into a state of lethargy? Any objections would be justified if, one does not know the apparently freakish rigid customs of Jewish religious life. The bashfulness of the Jewish people was so natural that nobody even talked about it. It is also evident that Jewish abhorrence of violence was shaped by this chaste modesty. The Yeshiva student even carried this protectiveness into his family life. He remains forever like the dove that has only a single mate. The penitent, on the other hand, knew that the lack of modesty in, so-called, civilized European society went hand-in-hand with brutality and violence. The effort to be made was to uproot oneself from the old cultural conditioning.)

Yankel must have noticed that I had become more solitary than usual. First he suggested that I should mix more with the other boys. Then Yankel said, "If you need a change of environment, there will never be a better opportunity then now." A National Conference of Rabbis in the country were to meet to evaluate the perilous situation, and call for repentance. Yankel told me they would proclaim a nationwide fast in order to halt the tragedies threatening our people.

"Why don't you join the group traveling to Budapest?" Yankel asked me. "You may not understand a word of their lofty Torah quotations, but the spirit of holiness radiating from these men would inspire even the most worthless individual." Yankel's face beamed. "I should be particularly pleased if you became acquainted with my Master, the Rabbi of Nederesd, whose power to work

miracles vies with that of the Czadik giants of the Bel Sem Tov days."

Yankel Seiden always burned with enthusiasm whenever he spoke of his Hassidic clique; especially those of Nederesd. I had the opportunity to study quite a few Hassidic documents. This gave me some insight into the history, and spirit of Hassidism. I was familiar with the results achieved by this two hundred years old movement. Yet, I could not accept their exclusive, narrow minded methods. I was convinced that the principle motive for this journey to Budapest was the students irresistible desire to greet their adored Master; whom they wished to reign over the entire Karpathian region.

The trip to Budapest was not as pleasant as we had imagined it would be. At the start the students engaged in their favorite pastime: telling wonderful stories about the Hassidic Rabbis. Our loud student group took up three quarters of the third class carriage. The remainder of the car was filled by a silent minority of farmers and agricultural laborers. The carriage became very hot. Soon the students were sitting in a daze, some wiping their foreheads of doubtful cleanliness, others nodding over sacred books.

Suddenly, the door of the carriage flew open, and a cocky young man in a pilot's uniform entered. He was a dark eyed, pink-cheeked, stocky little guy. When he turned around he was surprised by the sight of black coats and black hats.

"A whole string of kikes!" the pilot exclaimed. When he heard the spontaneous laughter of the gentiles in the carriage, he took on the role of a witty, jolly, amusing fellow. Previously, the gentile travelers had been indifferent to our presence. Now they discovered their inborn superiority.

"What a stink of onions!" The young pilot sniffed the air.

"Mixed with the stink of garlic," an unaccompanied girl replied.

The impertinent pilot grew bolder. "You, Jake! Why do you wear that gaudy red beard?" The pilot continued to play the clown. "I hate kikes. But most of all, I hate red kikes!" The pilot yanked on the flaming red beard of one of our students.

The student wailed and trembled with fear. He tried to free his beard.

"Ay, Ay!" the shameless girl imitated the student's sounds of pain.

The gentiles on the train roared with laughter. They began pushing one another aside to get a better view. Our boys crouched down in their seats like cornered animals. One student called accusingly to another, "You should have listened to me when I suggested that we take the early train! Now we all have to pay for the stupidity of a few."

I was staggered by what I saw. I could not understand the reason for this cowardice. I had once witnessed a drunken parachutist routing three hundred Yeshiva students. I had spoken to Yossie Kupferman about that past display of cowardice. I recalled Yossie's reply: "It is our good fortune that there are few heros like Moshe Menachem among us. If our boys trained their bodies instead of their minds studying the Torah, what would happen to the continuity of the Jewish people? We live in small numbers among other peoples; we must avoid physical clashes with them. If Jews were considered rebels, then even hundreds of sturdy fighters could not save us."

I did not heed the wise words of Yossie Kupferman. During the first two years I lived at my first lodgings in Telekes, I accompanied the fearful students who lodged near the famous parachutist barracks to their doors. I was proud of my role. I was a protector of the weak. I allowed people to believe I had won the boxing championship at college. The truth was I had been forced to participate in cruel fist fights in the streets.

"Who has a pair of scissors?" the pilot asked.

The look of the sweaty, grinning faces of his audience made me angry.

"I have no scissors, but I have a clasp knife," a horse voice called out.

"Give the red kike a dry shave," the perverted girl cried triumphantly.

While I watched the farmer hand the knife to the pilot the words kept repeating In my mind --"Give the red kike a dry shave!" over and over. The frightened murmurs of my fellow students charged me into action. Without thinking, I jumped to my feet and grabbed the pilot by the wrist. I twisted his wrist backward until he dropped the knife to the floor of the carriage. I twisted the pilot's arm up to his shoulder-blade, and forced him to capitulate. I looked the pilot straight in the face after releasing him. "If you still feel like shaving someone, try to shave me," I said.

The pilot left the car with his tail between his legs. I sat down quietly in the corner. The white faced students peered at me strangely. That was their usual reaction to violence. Then they stared at the floor by their feet. Had they looked into my eyes they might have been able to read my thoughts Look here, you little twerps, you are sickeningly gutless! You practically ask for abuse!

Slowly, I calmed myself. Then my friend, Yossie Kupferman, sat down next to me.

"At times you astonish me, Moshe Menachem," Yossie said as he put his arm around my shoulders. The gesture served to ease the weight of his words. I know he did not respect me for my bold behavior.

"I feel that I really don't know you.

Once again I complained to Yossie about my inconsistent actions.

"I am afraid you are living in a dream World, Moshe. You refuse to see what is happening around you. You still believe in sportsmanship and fairness in our conflict with the Hungarians. You strike a blow; they strike a blow when it is over the two fighters shake hands." Yossie grasped my shoulders more firmly. "Well, there is no such thing as an honest murder, except in the self-congratulatory chronicles of the Karpathians. Attila the Hun was an honest murderer." Yossie patted my shoulder. "The Hungarian Jaws don't believe in that.

"I am just a Jew from the 'reannexed' Southern regions." Yossie spoke of his home. "The Ujvidek Jews were massacred; and that is a documented fact. The Hungarian Royal Police assembled the Ujvidek Jews in an open air bath. Every five minutes they ordered four Jews to climb into the trampoline the gendarmes had set up by the large holes that had been cut in the ice on the Danube. The naked victims were shot in the neck -- their bodies were carried downstream by the river.

"A beautiful young girl, the next victim in line, shrieked in terror and tried to tear herself free from her executioners. This beautiful, healthy girl fought for her right to live. She struggled in vain. The gendarmes beat her to the ground. 'Sergeant, please, please, don't kill me,' she begged of them. 'I am so young! I never

harmed anyone!'

"The sergeant yelled at her to, 'shut up,' while he kicked her in the head and stomach. The commotion attracted Zoldi, the leader and highest ranking officer. Zoldi walked over to the young girl, and drew his pistol from its holster.

"The poor girl grabbed his boots. She pleaded with desperation in her voice. 'Please, please...

"She could not finish her sentence. Zoldi, officer of Horthy's army, emptied his gun into her head. That innocent, young soul, who wanted so desperately to live was dead."

Yossie Kupferman's face changed color. His hands began to shake until, with great effort, he closed them into fists. "That lovely young girl who was murdered was the daughter of my mother's sister. She was my cousin.

I realized I had endangered my fellow students. There was a volcano erupting inside of me. I wanted to erase the memory of my childish behavior. "I could not help myself, Yossie. I couldn't bear to see a student at the mercy of that scum!"

CHAPTER IV

Budapest was a scene of busy streets and streaming crowds. In this atmosphere I tried to follow the Rabbinical events with an open mind. I attended public meetings, and listened to the wailing speeches of the more famous Rabbis who spoke on the issue of Israel's desperate plight. Most of the speakers at the conference preached for the urgent need to repent. It was stated that our plight was the Almighty's punishment for our lack of devotion. For my first four days in the city, I collected experiences like an art lover collects paintings. I had a wonderful Sabbath. I fought for a foot hold at the table of four renown Rabbis. And, I cannot deny that I enjoyed the privileged treatment that I received. There was always an Old Student from Telekes among the inner circle who would notice ma, and pass me the "srajim" (the food left by the Master). According to the Hassidic sects, this "srajim" contained a thousand varieties of Help and Salvation.

I had not seen Yankel for four days until I spotted him walking along in front of me on Kiraly Street. He was so busy discussing the anti-Zionist views of the Nekeresd Rabbi that he, and his company, did not notice they were walking in the middle of the road, nor the cursing of the wagon drivers. It was Summer of

1943, and the tide of the war had turned. The news was more optimistic, and these students, Yankel and his friends, were bloated with triumph. They were certain that the Allies were going to win the war for no other reason than to acclaim the inherent truths of their leader, the Chief Rabbi of Nekeresd.

Yankel saw me; and chided me about being the "lost sheep." His main interest was the same. "You promised me that you would go to hear the Rabbi of Nederesd speak," Yankel said.

"I saw him Sabbath afternoon," I replied spreading my arms wide. "I am not surprised that he should have so many enthusiastic followers from our Yeshiva. He certainly has the power of speech. The students sat and stood in groups; some on desk tops, others in window recesses there was a totally charming lack of discipline."

"You speak as though you weren't use to that kind of behavior," Yankel said.

"I'm not pronouncing judgment," I replied. "That Sabbath afternoon affected me, too. There was a solemn atmosphere. It was an unusual experience."

"I am pleased," Yankel said. His face beamed with a smile. In his boundless enthusiasm, Yankel explained for the one thousandth time, that his Master was the greatest man of our age. Things would be different all over the world, if, the people of the world would only consult with the Chief Rabbi of Nekeresd. "He never lays down in a soft bed during the week. He is the great champion of the anti-Zionist camp; for which I admire and follow him.

"You mean he is admired for fighting against the creation of a Palestinian Homeland?" I said.

Yankel looked at me with a suspicious glance.

"Don't take this personally," I told Yankel. "But, I believe it would be better if your saintly Master rested more often instead of encouraging his disciples, who follow him blindly, to remain in this loathsome country."

Yankel's face flushed as if I were disparaging his father. "Perhaps this journey came too soon for you, he said. "Perhaps you should have remained in Telekes."

"On Sunday, I had the opportunity to see the Slovakian Rabbi. You should have been there, Yankel, if for no other reason than to see current events in a different light. The public, all Orthodox, were astonished by the multitude of Talmud and

Torah quotations with which he supported his thesis. The Palestinian settlement is not reprehensible as others have stated. You should have experienced the silence; and the tears which accompanied his words."

After I had finished speaking, Yankel repeated his long list of the Nederesd's rebuttals to a Palestinian Homeland.

I could no longer listen to Yankel's arguments. All I could feel was a deepening depression. I did not understand how Yankel could possibly ignore the clear, reasonable ideas of the enlightened Slovakian Rabbi. Yet he continued to build a protective wall about his Master's philosophy with bricks of irrationality.

As I had promised my mother, I went to see my grandparents, who were living in Budapest. It was my grandfather who suggested that my Uncle Benno might know how to help me gain a deferment from the draft board.

I had a valid excuse to visit my Uncle Benno. But, the excitement that caused me to spring up three flights of stairs to the apartment was generated from the knowledge that I would see their daughter, Pannika. I always felt a foundness for the tall, beautiful, intelligent Pannika; my unattainable dream girl, my cousin. Climbing the stairs I recalled her cream complexion, her posture, her slender figure, her winning manners.

I could not have found the mother and her daughter in a more charming situation. Aunt Paula was singing an operatic aria. Pannika's beautiful hands carressed the piano keys with the melancholy demanded by the melody. I found it difficult to believe that this sweet sadness came from the heart. True, I understood little about classical music; though I did enjoy my cousin's selection and interpretation of the complicated piece she was playing. When they completed their music, I applauded enthusiastically to show my appreciation for their effort. At that moment, I realized, with an aching heart, that my Yeshiva life had turned hazy with distance. This modern home was a totally different world.

"How many lumps of sugar do you want with your tea?" Aunt Paula asked me with a smile, and a wink.

Aunt Paula was well schooled in the social graces, and she had a manner that made everyone believe that he was particularly important to her. This increased the embarrassment I felt when I could not reply to her kind hospitality. "Please, Aunt Paula, don't bother with tea," I said. I could not state in words that it was

impossible for me to even accept a cup of tea in a house where they did not keep a kosher kitchen.

My response provoked Aunt Paula's anti-Orthodox sentiments. "Ah, my hypocritical, kosher friend; in the past you did not mind eating cakes in my house," Aunt Paula exclaimed with a wink, as if she were trying to take the edge off her malice. The truth is, her wink only sharpened her words. "Let me bring you some fruit," Aunt Paula said with irony in her voice. "I don't want you to tell your parents that you starved in my house."

Pannika and I stood by the window looking down on Berlin Square. Blue and red neon lights shone on the facade of the Western Railway Station. We talked about the experiences we shared in our youth. We had known one another since we were four and five years old, respectively. Pannika being the younger. She wished to speak about the events occurring in the city; I tried to steer the conversation to the times we passed as children.

Now Pannika was twenty years old, tall and more lovely than an official beauty queen. Pannika's long tresses touched my face while I stood beside her. I could smell the perfume of her hair, which was the same as it was fifteen years earlier. I had no idea what to say to Pannika in this situation. I had gone as far as I dared to when I told her that at the age of six, I saw her as a Princess. What I did not relate to Pannika was that Uncle Rezso had noticed my adoration. Uncle Rezso once asked me, "Is it true what people are saying, Mike? Will you marry Pannika when you grow up?" I ran away blushing because I knew that no matter how attracted I was to that charming little girl, she was part of an alien world. At home, my father spoke with contempt for the reform Jews. It pained me that our relatives sat at the table without a hat, and because they did not wash their hands before breaking bread. I could not help but pity them.

Still, one could not ignore the fact that our relatives were wealthy, well-balanced people, who seemed to live rather well without the benefit of religion. The wife of silver-haired Uncle Rezso, a dignified lady, always spoke kindly to everyone. The discipline with which Pannika was raised was far superior to my own childhood. She are decorously, sat demurely at the table, and before going to bed, she joined her hands in the reform manner to pray in Hungarian.

Aunt Paula returned with fruit. She stood by my chair and caressed my face while winking at Pannika. "See what an attractive boy this Misi is. Even that beard cannot spoil it." Aunt

Paula sat down opposite me. "Tell me, Misi, why are you wasting your time in the Yeshiva? I heard that you have a beautiful singing voice, like your father. He had been invited to America as a cantor. Had he gone, you would be observing our situation from the outside. Would it be such a sin if you took singing lessons? You could train as a cantor if you don't want to be a singer.

"Why don't you answer me, Misi?"

"Aunt Paula, I have no ambitions to become a singer," I stated. "True, I have a nice voice; but I do not have a good ear for music." I turned our conversation to a more serious note. I told Aunt Paula that I came to ask Uncle Benno's advice, as he was an attorney. I explained that I had been drafted into the labor service.

"Wait for him," Aunt Paula told me. "Your Uncle Benno is attending a late conference at the Aid Society." Aunt Paula returned to the subject of music. "It is a great pity. I had hoped that one day we would celebrate having two famous singers in the Weintraub family."

I asked about my cousin, Misu Weintraub.

"The greatest voice I have ever heard in my life!" Aunt Paula stated her enthusiasm. "At the Academy of Music he is the only Jewish singer. He moves across the stage like a heroic tenor when he reaches that high C."

Pannika interrupted excitedly. "Let me tell you a very interesting story. We were in the company of musicians when one of my friends drew me aside. 'Pannika, I want to present you to a Voice, a talent which is born only once in every fifty years. His name is Michael Weintraub.'

"'Catch me or I'll faint!' I cried out. I could have sworn that my friend was speaking about you. Everyone in the family knows you have an excellent voice." Pannika smiled. "It was not you, but your cousin."

"Does my cousin come to see you?" I asked.

"He comes here at least three times a weeK.

In this temple of music, I searched the labyrinth of my mind to see how much of my Yeshiva training had been stripped away. I should have spoken up, but instead I wondered whether the relationship between my two cousins, Misu and Pannika, would grow into love. I was compelled to analyze my own feelings for Pannika. I knew that our common childhood memories were insignificant when compared to my cousin, the all-important tenor. I realized that it was ridiculous for me to think of Pannika as

my possible future mate.

I had always envisioned a girl for myself whose thinking would be in accord with mine. My dream girl could not be alienated from everything connected with Jews. Pannika was certainly as aware of these facts as I was. Therefore, I pleased Pannika by telling her stories about my talented cousin.

I hardly noticed when the door opened, and Uncle Benno entered the room. What surprised me was his snow white hair. I knew that he was only in his late forties. As Grandmother had told me, his hair had turned gray early.

"Hello, Misi," Uncle Benno said surprised to see me. "What are you doing in Budapest?" he spoke quietly.

"We have come up to attend the National Conference of Orthodox Rabbis," I replied. I knew that he was not sympathetic to my philosophical principles.

"I'm certain your Rabbis have great training in debate," Uncle Benno commented. "Yet, to do something constructive is beyond them. Almost all the contributions to the Jewish Aid organizations come from Reform Jews."

I did not want to argue with Uncle Benno. Perhaps the idea of going into long explanations seemed unattractive because of my years at the Yeshiva. I observed the inner strife among Hungarian Jews, as if through a double prism. I could identify with both extremes; I had lived in both environments. I could view the Orthodox sects with a degree of objectivity. This was not the case with the group of assimilated Reform Jews.

I was reluctant to waste time on arguments. I came to the point of my visit, and asked Uncle Benno for advice concerning my induction into the labor service. "Is there a possibility to postpone my induction into the labor battalion on the grounds that I am a Rabbinical student?" I asked.

"Rabbinical student?" Uncle Benno met my question with a puzzled smile. "Don't be ashamed," he told me. "Call yourself what you really are: a Yeshiva student." Uncle Benno stared at me. "Does your school have the status of a Rabbinical Seminary like the Budapest College, named after Franz Joseph? It is difficult to make the pro-German,-Hungarians accept even that college as an excuse from service. Uncle Benno scratched his gray hair. "However, in this country, everything is possible. This is what you should do: go to the camp, and once there, send in.your

petition to continue your studies. If you're very lucky; you might even get a deferment."

"What would happen if I simply didn't go, Uncle Benno?"

"Don't even think of that!" Uncle Benno exclaimed. "You would be branded a deserter. Then, what would happen to your parents?"

CHAPTER V

In early August I received a letter from my mother requesting that I spend a few weeks at home before reporting to the labor battalion. I said goodbye to my Master, and to my friends at the Yeshiva in Telekes. Regretfully, I shaved off my beard before walking to the station to board the train for Vamostelek. Beards were prohibited at the labor camp; and I knew that having the face whiskers might be a cause of trouble while I was traveling.

There was no one waiting for me at the train station at Vamostelek. I had no way to tell my parents exactly when I would arrive home. I stepped down from the train, and looked southward over the wheat fields that seemed to stretch beyond the horizon. I know that my grandfather must have seen the good in this land when he came here with a cartful of hungry children many years ago. Yet, this land has always been faithless to us (more than to anyone else). There was little hope that this place would ever give up its richness to us; but still, it touched my eyes with the beauty and passion of its eternal sadness.

I only knew my grandfather from the stories that my grandmother told about him. He had died one year before I was born.

The spirit of his age, and the people, radiated a different world view. There was little support for the spirit of Judaism. My grandfather's main problem laid in the fact that he attempted to impose burdensome laws and customs upon a small Jewish community that was striving for freedom. Grandmother Zlate would tell us how grandfather would rise at dawn, brew tea for himself, smoke his huge pipe, and loudly recite the text of the Babylonian Talmud until it was time for morning prayer. Grandfather was a solitary man who navigated on the sea of the Talmud as if Vamostelek did not exist. The Vamostelek Jews

concentrated more on commercial enterprise; selling goose feathers and animal skins, and opening taverns for the peasants who could not live without their alcoholic beverages.

My grandfather did not fit into this new environment. He wore a long beard and a severe face, a grotesques reproduction of a medieval preacher. He was a stubborn man who used harsh words, and sometimes the violence in his fists, to press his ideals on his flock. Jews would murmur among themselves when he approached, "Here comes Uncle Messiach." They feared him, and respected him. But they stood apart from him.

This is the reason the Jews in the community refused to give my grandfather sufficient financial support. Those, who had never studied the lines of the Talmud, could not comprehend that living according to the ritual was the path to eternal happiness.

I walked along the road to my parents house. I thought about my grandfather walking this very same path in years gone by. Was it a mistake for him to settle here? It must have been clear in his mind that there was no compromise between the two opposing branches of Hungarian Jewry. He believed the Tzadik of Szanz, and his successor, carried the Torch of Exile. My grandfather's loyalty to them was absolute. They were the leaders in the Sacred War against the fence-upsetters of religion.

My father and I were born in Vamostelek. The blind hatred I had endured throughout my youth had matured into a hellish nightmare. My grandfather attempted to introduce good habits into the community; but what could he possibly hope to achieve with his fulmination if Jewish villagers refused to send their children to the Yeshiva? In our materialistic, dusty village this privilege was reserved only for the cantor.

Walking to my parent's house, I could not help but notice that this country had its own soul. Horses neighed in the yards of the white-washed houses. The pig-man came down the road towards me herding the swine with his horn. Even the dogs seemed to bark in Hungarian. The wind, the air, the peculiar costumes worn by the people cast a spell. Even those whose fathers had never learned to speak the language, had been transformed into wildly patriotic Hungarians.

Impassioned by my historical retrospective, I understood why my grandfather had failed. "Jewish youth is innocent," I called out to my deceased grandfather. "Remember how this heavy, sleepy atmosphere would sometimes erupt in frenzied

revelry; Gypsy music with an accompaniment of drunken singing villagers, the Craftsmen's Guild invited groups of actors to perform light operetta, the shop assistants enamored with scintillant clad primadonnas. There were dances around the Maypole in the grove. Ignorant Jewish boys flirted with Gentile women. You must admit, grandfather, there were irresistible pressures placed upon Jewish youth.

"When they outgrew the revelry and horse-play, there was the Rosenberg Restaurant, Hungarian playing cards with pictures of Swiss freedom fighters attracted part of the Jewish community. They escaped into the card games as a defense against the cruel anti-Semitism that grew during the period between the World Wars. The 'golden age' had come to an end. The so-called 'Awakening Hungarians', the Turul-boys, were already beginning to discipline the Jews. You, grandfather, probably understood the cause and the meaning behind the blows you received you accepted them with resignation. But you did not consider the Jews, who were alienated from their religion, and forced to bear the yoke of the 'Chosen People'. They could not understand their exile from both the Jewish and the non-Jewish world."

I differ from my grandfather in attitude. I regard all Jews as innocent victims unable to avoid the trap of idolatry. The Jewish character is intellectual by nature That character needs to be tied spiritually to the Talmud and the Torah, otherwise, it withers and dies.

From the moment I approached my parent's house, my memory of those three weeks in Vamostelek is analogous to a painter's broad brush strokes. There were white, red, and pink roses blooming in the garden. I caught sight of the old blue-gray dog house. Our old buff colored watch dog came running towards me barking and wagging his tail.

I threw open the door and called for my father and mother. My mother rose from the table, where she was busy cutting up string beans with my sister, Agika. My mother's gentle voice was soothing. "I have prepared your favorite dish, jam dumplings," she whispered in my ear, kissing me and smoothing my hair. My younger brother, Ocsike, grabbed hold of me, and would not release me for a moment. My father sat smiling at me, looking gray, and older than I had remembered him to be.

I asked my father about my eldest brother, Laci.

"Laci is at Miskolc, learning the locksmith trade," my father

told me. "It is something you can do anywhere. After the war there will be no life for Jews in this country."

The news was not good. My father related how the police had routed every Jewish house in the village looking for spies. "They broke in on us in the middle of the night," my father told me. "The police stood us against the wall and threatened us with bayonets. They ransacked our closets, and stabbed the mattresses with bayonets in search of the traitors they hoped to find here. They searched the cellar, and then the loft, looking for a hidden radio transmitter."

"What madness!" I cried out. "Didn't they know that you served on the front lines in the First World War?"

"Those mindless peasants just repeated endlessly that all the measures taken against us were provoked by Jewish hostility. The police did not disguise the fact that they viewed us as the enemy."

My mother was able to distract our attention from the troubles surrounding us, momentarily, by filling our plates with her delicious cooking.

"Super dumplings," my little brother exclaimed while licking his fingers.

"Mummy made them especially for Misi," my thirteen year old sister, Agika, said smiling at me with her brilliant black eyes.

I sat at the table in a bath of love.

Then it was my father, the gourmet and severe critic, who spoke. "They are very good, very good indeed," he said. "They can be made with goose fat although that is not the real thing. Dumplings should be doused in a special chicken fat. That's the proper way to make them."

My mother usually ignored such criticism. Apparently, inspired by my presence, she found the will to break her silence. "Sush. There are too many Jews today who would be all too happy to eat dumplings made with, G-d forbid, goose fat."

Reminded of the all too prevalent Jewish suffering, my father fell silent.

I began to observe him. It was evident that his old pugnacity had almost disappeared. The times and his illness had subdued him. I was filled with gratitude for this man who made my Yeshiva education possible, and allowed me to go to Telekes with joy. But, I also remembered the lack of intimacy between us in the past his sharp criticism of my actions; and my rejection of those barbs. There was still a trace of uneasiness between us; a painful lack of

communication whenever we were alone.

My father had always been a vital man. He was the tenth son from a family of eleven children. Therefore, at an early age, he learned to rely upon himself. Fortunately, he was extraordinarily shrewd, and possessed a strong talent for business. At the age of fifteen, he left the Yeshiva and began to trade in all sorts of goods. If he could not sell his merchandise locally, he would travel to other regions where such goods were in demand.

Eventually, my father wanted to marry. My grandfather was passionately opposed to the match. The girl was Ituka, daughter of the Weiszman family. My paternal grandmother's arguments for my father's choice of a bride were useless: "You should not have settled at Vamostelek then, Moshe Menachem. This is no place to produce Hassid grandchildren. For that, you should have moved to Szanz. Here, all that your sons can learn from their friends is how to dance the 'csardas'. Be happy that one of them has chosen such a gentle kindhearted girl." Grandfather, the stubborn moralist went on shouting: "Over my dead body!"

My parents had a long wait. After two years of military service, my father was not demobilized in 1914. He was sent straight to the Russian front. He did not return home until 1918. Then my father and mother had to wait another three years before they could marry. They were only free to do so after my grandfather's death.

This was a time when my father grew richer and richer. Eventually, his good luck turned to bad. With age, he returned once more to the stricter religious life of his youth. He was elected as chairman in the religious community. He harassed others to practice their religion with greater devotion. He became a veritable preacher of morality himself. I, of course, became the object of my father's religious zealousness.

Now my poor father was on the defensive. I had become his "moral superior". I wore the "messiah" shoes of my late grandfather.

My father did not attend Temple regularly because of his ailing health. But, on my first night home he picked up his walking stick and accompanied me to the small synagogue. As I entered many old familiar faces turned towards me. Warm eyes welcomed me. The Rabbi greeted me, grasping my hand with both of his hands. Many of my friends and acquaintances were absent; young men sent to labor camps. Many others, we knew without speaking

the words, would never return. The chanting by the men sitting on the old brown benches was a sad sound; not cheerful as in the past.

After prayers were over, I spoke with Meir Seiden, Yankel's older brother. Meir, the single strongest influence in my life, was responsible for my return to Judaism. Meir had convinced me that without a return to the Homeland, and to the Torah, we would never be able to insure our continuity as a people.

"How come you are not at the labor camp?" I asked Meir.

"I am on leave, between two draft calls," Meir explained. After reminiscing about the past, Meir said to me, "It is a pity you will have to interrupt your studies when you join the labor battalion."

"There will be no interruption," I stated passionately. "I intend to study the Torah no matter how hostile my new environment might be. I have made the decision to eat only kosher food even at the labor camp."

"May the Creator help you," Meir said. "There is a chance that He will." Meir nodded to me knowingly. "I was able to keep the secret that I was not eating regular rations for a while. Inevitably, it became known. The company commander raved like a madman when he found out what I was doing. He screamed that, 'This Jew is sabotaging the army by deliberately weakening himself.' I tried to explain that it was what our religious laws prescribed. That made him even angrier. At lunchtime he made me stand in front of the entire company while two soldiers forced meat down my throat.

"As you see, I have a great deal of experience in these matters. One must not underestimate the strength inherent in a stubborn obedience to the commands of the Torah. It will determine your circle of friends. If you are reckless in the enjoyment of prohibited foods, it will loosen your ties to the other commands of the Torah as well. Even if your error is forced on you against your own will, it will be difficult to reforge the broken links."

"I am not surprised that so many students prefer the dangers of desertion," I replied. "I think your brother, Yankel, is planning to join the invisible brigade. And to tell you the truth, that is what I would do if I could convince my frightened parents to agree."

"That is up to you," Meir replied.

As we wandered along in silence, I tried to analyze what ties I might still have to Vamostelek. The place had not changed at all.

The shade trees, colonized by thousands of birds, rustled in the breeze. The warmth of the air was enhanced by the perfume of many flowers the same fragrances as in past years.

In a farm yard I could see the silhouette of a young man feeding the horses. A hurricane lamp caused light to dance above his head as he filled the trough. I heard the neighing of invisible foals. The thudding sound of threshers in the distance reawakened old memories confusions, complex emotions woven from a multitude of subconscious impressions. I still held an idyllic picture of my birthplace; the land had its poetry. Words are too clumsy to express those fleeting, fuzzy thoughts, or the directions they ran.

Our stroll brought us near the Deutsch tavern. I do not know what force guided us to the place. It certainly was not my friend, Meir.

Deep inside, I realized what brought me here after three years at my Torah studies. That knowledge almost drove me into a panic. I was there because I wanted to see Lili Deutsch again. I thought I had forgotten her, and achieved a feeling of indifference to her charms. It had been a calf-love, which had nothing to do with reality. Nevertheless, I felt nervous when we reached the tavern. It seemed completely deserted. At the back door, which opened onto a crooked street, two dogs were fighting over some bones.

The windows of the tavern were covered. I did not catch a glimpse of that faithless, dark Carmen.

There is no chronological order in our lives when fate brings up back to the scene of past desires. The part of me that had loved Lili Deutsch so passionately had a spark of life. My friend, Meir, seemed to have read my thoughts.

"That girl did not deserve you writing letters to your imaginary rivals with the signature of the 'Blackhand'." Meir laughed. "Nor did she deserve you challenging men ten years older than you to duels, like some romantic hero."

"Why didn't she deserve it?" I asked Meir. Meir shook his head. "The Jewish Laws deprived Lili's grandmother of a license to serve alcoholic beverages," Meir related. "Gyuri Sotet, that boy who went to the Agricultural College, the one who was always after Lili; he offered to have the license transferred to his name, thereby putting his claim on Lili's hand. Since then, he has been her protector." "But it is against the law for a Gentile to marry a Jew," I

declared. "It is Gyuri Sotet who proudly wears the Arrow Cross armband. I cannot understand the psychology of that Arrow Cross boy who in spite of his hatred for our race, wants to marry this Rose of Carmel. And why is Lili's grandmother so blind? After all, Gyuri Sotet is a dangerous Nazi."

"You, who are well-versed in matters of love, surely must know the old saying: 'Love is a tar pit, G-d save me from falling into it'." Meir nodded his head knowingly. "Apparently, this applies to the Jew-baiter, Gyuri Sotet as well, Old Mrs. Deutsch boasts that a well-to-do farmer wants to marry her grandchild. To her this means social advancement, and she is pleased to give her blessings to it. While there are obstacles to a legal marriage, the two young people sweeten the waiting by making 'down payments' on their future."

"The apple hasn't fallen far from the tree," I said wryly to hide my bitter disappointment. I was still filled with tenderness for this 'cheap slut'. I attempted to touch the roots of my upheaval. I was divided by crude jealousy toward the Arrow Cross bridegroom, and a genuine sense of protest against the violence done to another Jewish woman's honor.

I tried to conceal my resentment from Meir by resorting to stating quotations from the Talmud.

"Wasn't this the tavern where Lili had to serve drunken peasants from her earliest youth?" I said excitedly. "Our far-seeing sages have forbidden Jews from eating non-Jewish bread. Because after the bread is served, he will also taste the wine. If he drinks and revels with the Gentile, the Jew will forget his heritage, marry an alien, and undo his ties with the people of Israel."

"You are right," Meir said. "It was unavoidable that Lili Deutsch should break away from us; but her story began thirty years ago. Lili's mother was a dark haired sensual beauty who made all the gallants in the region lose their heads. I have often been told by old rakes that this woman had cast an irresistible spell on the men. Finally she fell into trouble. The shame was too much for her: she drank sulphur. The child was raised by the grandparents."

Meir and I walked along old paths we had traveled many times before. Our conversation helped bolster my spirits. I knew that I would not have Meir's counsel after I left Vamostelek.

On my last evening at home, I returned to the house and saw my father retiring for the night. he removed his watch from his

vest pocket; the gold watch his father-in-law had given him when he married my mother. The simple habit of his, that had been the close of so many monotonous, uneventful days during my childhood now held an endearing quality for me. I felt a longing in my heart to be able to always witness this scene; my father winding his watch to close each peaceful day.

Chapter VI

At the Miskolc Railway Station I saw a large group of Jewish labor servicemen waiting for the train to Putnok. They, as I, were going to the induction center in Zebegeny. Obeying regulations, they had shaved their heads, and their caps fell down over their ears. I waved to them from the train window to express my fellowship with them. They waved back, smiling. None of the boys I saw rode in my carriage, and I did not see any of the Jewish labor service recruits until we changed trains at the Putnok Station. I had no particular desire for company during the train ride; I was too busy with my own thoughts.

My three days as a deserter had come to an end, as quickly as they had begun. During the weeks I had spent in Vamostelek with my parents, I had discussed the idea with my father of joining the „underground" army instead of reporting to the labor camp. Apparently, my three years at the Yeshiva had elevated my strength of character in my father's eyes. On the morning I was preparing to leave Vamostelek, I was finally able to convince my father that I should not report to the labor camp as ordered by the draft board. My mother overheard this conversation. She responded by weeping. No one accompanied me to the Vamostelek station. I did not want my parents to share in my crime.

I was a grown man. I was running away of my own free will. I attempted to create an even greater separation between myself and my family by writing a letter worthy of a renowned novelist. I contrived a story about my "proposal of marriage" to a "lower class girl" that my father did not approve of thereby, breaking all ties to my parents. It was a complete masterpiece; a forerunner to my later literary successes.

My first stop was in the little town on the River Szamos, where my father's younger brother lived. My uncle had been working in America for the last fifteen years; supporting his

family from there. He did not want his family to immigrate to the United States. Uncle Grajnemes was a fanatically religious Jew, an adoring disciple of the Rabbi of Nekeresd. He did not want to see his family in "pagan Amerika", where, "even the streets were paved with unhallow stones". Always true to his master, the Rabbi of Nekeresd, my uncle would not allow worldly knowledge to touch his wife and children.

I noted that my cousins did not excel in their Talmud studies. One of my cousins, a giant baby over six feet tall, would visit us sometimes wearing a long black kaftan and a round velvet hat. I always sensed that if I had tapped that round bowler, an empty echo would resound.

My letter of disenfranchisement from my family did not match the image I had created of a "reborn" Moshe Menachem Weintraub, who had completed three years of study at the Yeshiva. My relatives were suspicious about my present situation, but they merely hinted with broad comments that I might have cracked under the strain of the draft and my difficult studies.

My aunt, Magdus, was the only one who stated her concerns openly. "Misi, your letter affected me like the touch of an icy hand." She admitted to me that she still could not visualize me as a mild, gentle Yeshiva bocher. Aunt Magdus expected me to revert to my former self at any moment.

I had to laugh at her. "How could a Jewish boy, drafted into the labor service, plan to get married these days?" I asked Aunt Magdus. Of course, I did not mean that a man could not think about marriage.

It was through the breath-taking flower, the tall and irresistibly charming Miriam, that I came to like my Uncle Grajneme's entire family. Those few days, including the Sabbath, were a most agreeable exile. I wooed Miriam with Sabbath hymns, sung in my deep baritone voice. But I would have tempted providence to openly compliment a girl with such a strict Hassidic education. Besides, my newly acquired "good reputation" was already at risk due to the letter I had written concerning an imaginary marriage proposal. And Aunt Chanas' daughters had related their recent experience with our cousin, Joska Weintraub, the brother of Pannika's favorite tenor.

Joska Weintraub must have fallen for Miriam as well. He extended an invitation to Miriam to walk with him along the promenade. It is certain that Joska would have been flattered to

have a girl, beautiful of face and figure, walked by his side.

When Miriam refused Joska, he pretended to be offended. "Really, you should not be so bigoted," Joska said to Miriam. "After all, we are cousins."

"Yes, but those who see us will say, Miriam Weintraub went walking with a soldier." The girl related she had blushingly defended her refusal.

"With a soldier?" Joska had scoffed with his crude sense of humor. "I would feel like a Colonel if you walked by my side," he replied forcing his compliment upon her.

My ailing Aunt Chana was looked after by her daughters. I was moved by the love and respect my three cousins displayed for their ill mother. I was enchanted by their gay laughter, and humbled by their deep expression of faith. And the more I gazed into the eyes of my most beautiful cousin, Miriam; the more spellbound I became. It was my fate which tore me away from this infatuation.

My eldest brother, Laci, caught up to me at our uncle's house. Laci brought me a message from my father. He told me that my mother and father could not bear the tension of my being a deserter. They feared what would happen to me if I were captured. I was told to report to the labor camp immediately.

So, I was on the train going to Zebegeny to become a laborer for the German-Hungarian army. At first I only sensed feelings of anxiety. Later this developed into fear. I kept asking myself am I doing right by reporting for the draft; or should I share the fate of those in hiding? At Miskolc, where I had spent the night, I had met a legion of students in hiding. Yankel was there with eight others from the Telekes Talmud school. Yankel mocked me when I told him what I was doing. "You are not the only one joining the army," he laughed. "But, I have joined the underground army. The coming months will prove which one of us has made the right decision."

I have never felt so utterly lost in my life as when I stepped onto the train headed for the labor camp. I had the feeling that the train was carrying me farther and farther into the unknown. We moved along the rails under a narrow sky. The cliffs of the Bukk mountains gave only a glimpse of the clouds that hung over us. The carriage I rode in seemed like the guiding hand of fate; leading me into a world that would change everything I had left behind.

The confused voices of recruits echoed through the small

mountain station of Zebegeny. The new Jewish labor servicemen all wore short winter coats, high necked sweaters, and strong boots, which gave the impression of having just been purchased. Our lack of uniforms made us look like a group of hunters ready for an outing.

But, this picnic atmosphere disappeared quickly. The Hungarian soldiers, Nazi henchmen, herded us together. We were ordered to line up in rows of four. Our guards introduced themselves by shouting and swearing at the top of their lungs.

"Close your traps," a lightly built corporal yelled. He was one of those semi-educated fellows who turned out to be the most dangerous. Some of the men thought that he was joking. He sensed their ridicule and started to rave like a fanatic. "You kikes aren't going to Temple or a cafe to discuss how to destroy Hungry. You have come to a place where we'll teach you respect."

We walked through the muddy streets of the small mountain village. Six peasant lads were guarding us; making certain we marched in rhythm. The loud swearing by the guards became more vicious and obscene by the minute. That corporal cursed a blue streak.

"What awaits us here," somebody behind me sighed. The people around me were petrified. There we stood at the gate to the Zebegeny barracks. Everyone was fidgeting nervously. Two little boys peered at us with their round eyes bulging out of their dirty faces. "Jews!" they declared, pointing at us, as if they were speaking about the presence of some undesirable insect.

When the corporal reported that he had brought one hundred forty-six Jews to the barracks, the sergeant-major hollered, "Send them to peel potatoes!"

We were herded along like frightened sheep to a mountain of potatoes in a corner of the huge barracks yard. A peeling knife was put in my hand; and I peeled and peeled and peeled the potatoes into a huge cauldron. One guard picked me out, and called me away from the cauldron to fill mattresses with straw; another guard snatched me away to do another job. I was interrupted again and again to participate in some senseless drill, or to learn lessons in discipline. I wished I could find a hole in the ground where I could disappear. I heard one of the boys comment: "This is not anti-Semitism; it's boot camp training every recruit goes through." I could not share his optimistic evaluation of the situation. In every corner of the barracks yard guards were

working to break down our spirit of individuality.

At times, among the unfamiliar faces that dashed about hectically, I spotted someone I had seen before. I remembered a boy I saw at Miskolc; there was another who was at school with me in Telekes. I thought to myself: So you too, my friend, are in this terrible mess.

There was one face I would rather have not seen in this place. It was my old friend from Vamostelek, Geza Rosenberg better known as the "Baron". There he stood before me, deprived of his thick, wavy hair; but still with a wry smile upon his lips. The Baron brought me the good news that bravado was the practical stance to take in this place. "You, saintly one, and the others like you, will pull in your necks like turtles; but we tough ones will act bravely regardless of the consequences." he laughed at me in a triumphant tone.

I shook my head in disagreement. "You should know better after the education you have received," I told him. "Don't make yourself conspicuous. If you do, they'll keep an eye on you you'll be a marked man."

"Forget your involved Talmudic logic, saintly one," the Baron replied. "Believe me, we 'smart alecks' will prevail in this world. You just have to know how to handle these peasant lads."

Before the Baron could finish his monologue of arrogance, voices cried out throughout the barracks yard, "The machine! The machine!" The recruits were being run through their drills. I heard a sharp, threatening voice behind us. "You, the fat one with the big nose. Come with me to fill straw mattresses."

The Baron realized that the guard was speaking to him. He pretended he did not understand. The Baron looked around to see who "the fat one with the big nose" might be.

The sharp voice barked, "I mean you, fatty." The guard pointed a threatening finger at the Baron.

"Watch me rid myself of this rat," the Baron hissed to me between his teeth.

"Fellow," the Baron addressed the soldier, "get off my back. If you need someone to haul those mattresses, call your dear aunty."

I realized that the Baron was about to play a most dangerous game. I was smart enough to get away from him as quickly as possible. I ran for the latrine, almost falling head over heels, to get far from the Baron's vicinity. The latrine was filled with new recruits. No one seemed to mind the sickening stench; preferring

that to the inhuman machine in the barracks yard. Those in the latrine were taking advantage of the first day's confusion knowing they were nameless and faceless to the guards on the barracks field.

When I finally returned to the drill field, everyone was standing to witness the treatment dealt to recruits for disobeying orders. The victim, of course, was the Baron. I could not help but feel sorry for the arrogant Baron. He had fifty pounds of marching equipment on his back. He was forced to run round and round the muddy drill field to the point of exhaustion. Finally, after each of the guards had taken a turn at torturing him, the Baron collapsed. The zealous corporal, who played the leading role in wearing the Baron down, consulted his fellow guards. "There is no justification for this labor serviceman to collapse."

"You couldn't be more right," another harsh voice replied.

"In that case, he is suspected of malingering," the corporal stated. "Why did you fall down?" the corporal hollered at the Baron, yanking him to his feet.

"I couldn't breathe," the Baron replied, panting heavily.

"Labor serviceman, when you speak to a superior officer: never move your body. You report. You report humbly. You say, 'Corporal sir, I humbly beg to report that I could not breathe.'"

The Baron stood staring at the corporal.

"Now, you will report twenty times in succession. Begin."

The torment continued, but the Baron did not surrender. He was made to somersault forwards, and backwards, again and again on the muddy ground. The Baron collapsed a second time.

The Jewish chief instructor, Lambert, appeared on the drill field. This bold, self-assured rogue held the favor of Lieutenant Colonel Rezes. We had heard legends about him from the moment we arrived at the camp. It was said that behind Lambert's cold exterior, there was a heart of gold and a sense of humor. Lambert was also considered a good soldier, who knew how to maintain discipline. And that is why the battalion commander entrusted Lambert to lead the company. The guards drew back when Lambert walked over to the Baron, who was sprawled out in the mud.

Lambert turned to the four guards who had become quite excited by their activities. "You can see that this man has collapsed artistically. I have studied drama under the great teachers of our time. I speak from experience: this gifted man has given a perfect

performance. He showed how one can perish without effort without hurting even a little finger by putting his hands in front of him while he fell."

The guards broke into uninhibited laughter. Lambert had saved the situation with humor. The watchful camp inmates followed Lambert through his polished performance. The guards fell under the spell of Lambert's golden tongue. "Observe, how convincingly he quivers," Lambert said pointing to the prostrate Baron. "Therefore, the time has come to take our artist behind the scene where he may recover." Chief instructor, Lambert, called for servicemen from the mass of spectators. "Take him to the sick room," Lambert whispered conspiratorially. The Baron was carried off in a military manner.

From this scene I established in my mind that in this circus atmosphere, all the values of normal civilian life had been inverted.

CHAPTER VII

"Fall in line!"

"Lambert, my boy, create some order among your kinsmen," Lieutenant Colonel Rezes ordered. Immediately, Lambert, the "circus barker", turned into a raving maniac.

It began to rain in torrents. I was immersed in a sea of yellow armbands; like a wrecked ship tossed from wave to wave in a storm of confusion. There was a mood of panic among the labor servicemen. Platoons were being formed; and everyone wanted to be close to their friends.

"There's no more room in the first platoon," a labor serviceman stated.

"Boys from Szabolcs, come here!" a tall fellow shouted. He let the lads from his area know they would have the best platoon; and he would make certain of it.

I was awash in a wave carrying me in the opposite direction. I pushed passed the third platoon which was comprised of loners, and "leftovers"; a poor attempt to form regional ties established by the boys in the first and second platoons. Suddenly, I was overcome by a sense of inferiority when I realized that the "dregs" of society would be my mates in the fourth platoon. The only satisfaction I felt at that moment was: I would not have to suffer the Baron as a companion. I had yearned for independence; and it

looked as though the fourth platoon would guarantee that for me.

I felt someone touch me lightly on the arm. "Which Yeshiva did you come from?"

"From the Telekes Yeshiva," I replied as we shook hands. "My name is Moshe Menachem Weintraub."

"Mine is Meilech Stern," he said gently with a faint smile on his face.

In the middle of the drill field there was no time to become better acquainted. The guards yelled for everyone to be silent. The Lieutenant Colonel held everyone's attention.

"From this moment on, you are members of the Auxiliary Labor Service of the Royal Hungarian Army. You will act like good, disciplined soldiers. The Lieutenant Colonel's words echoed clearly in the driving rain. "If you behave like an unruly mob; we will deal with you as traitors." He made a cutting motion across his throat. He did not need to say anymore.

The confusion in the barracks yard was accented with a call for occupational qualifications. "Craftsmen, bakers, cooks; step forward. Shoemakers, tailors, locksmiths; step forward." The company would function by the skills of apprentice in their specialties.

The recruits began to whisper, and talk among themselves.

"Silence," Chief Instructor Lambert called out. "Otherwise, I'll have the lot of you crawling on all fours in the mud." A hush fell over the drill field. "Those who are sick, or applying for exemption; step forward."

I recalled my Uncle Benno's advice to ask for exemption to finish my Rabbinical studies. I stepped forward, and handed my petition to the sergeant.

"A Rabbinical student," the Sergeant said slowly. He turned to his comrades. "A Rabbinical student!" the sergeant shouted again to make certain everyone had heard him. He laughed at me. "We shall do our best to beat it out of you," the sergeant stated. His words were greeted by laughter among the guards.

That is all I achieved with my feeble attempt to gain a deferment. I am certain my petition was never forwarded. My own brand of "bravado" only served to draw attention to myself amidst the sea of gray faced new recruits. From that point on, I was stuck with the nickname "Rabbi". There was little left for me to do except win respect for my title.

Considering the environment, things turned out well. Meilech Stern was assigned the bed next to mine in the dormitory.

"This is an excellent location," Meilech stated. We both had a lower bunk on the three-level planked contraption designated as sleeping quarters. "We can say our morning prayers here because the guards will not catch us when they first enter the barracks," he calculated. We were situated in a corner farthest from the door. "Among the second year recruits, there is a man who observes the Sabbath. He has permission to go into Zebegeny, and eat with the local grocer. He offered to bring us some food."

In the presence of Meilech Stern I realized how unprepared I was to maintain the discipline of Judaism. Meilech, on the other hand, was Judaism come to life. He perched on the edge of his bunk, always with a sacred book in his hands. Nothing broke his concentration from the prayer or passage he was reading. Meilech hummed and swayed like a little boat in perpetual motion.

He was always oblivious to neighboring quarrels, card games, and off tune singers. Meilech taught me the secret of absolute concentration. That is one of the reasons he was called by the title, "melamed"; which means teacher. His friendship affected me more because I had always been a loner. I had always regarded advice from others as a burden I had to carry. But with Meilech, I accepted a friend, and acquired a spiritual brother. In his company the study of the Talmud never ceased.

We climbed every mountain around Zebegeny. We marched through forest and fields. We crawled along the ground. We dived into ditches whenever an Allied plane flew overhead. Yet, the most exhausting element of our training was the endless psychological harassment to break us down. The guards took a special delight in tearing away any sign of individuality. The many hours of training left no time for private thinking. There are no words to describe how slowly the months passed. More than once I imagined that I had been in the situation for decades. Everyone was treated harshly; we were at the mercy of ever increasing violence. The same cruel tricks were played on all.

Meilech managed to set himself apart from the general mood of anxiety. He did not attempt to rationalize or justify what we were put through. When we returned to the barracks he would just sit there on his bunk, his body swaying, studying his daily portion of the Talmud. Some nights I would be so dizzy from exhaustion I had to slip beneath my blanket. On evenings I lacked

the strength to join Meilech; I just watched him, filled with envy for his ability to separate himself from any physical reality.

Still, each morning began early for the boys in the "kosher corner". It was not easy to tear away from half a nights dreaming; but my body would always know it was time. A minyan of fifteen to twenty lads assembled daily for the morning service, even as we continued our training.

I was surprised when Lambert, the "Terrible", appeared in the dormitory and extended his hand to me in friendship. Only three days earlier Lambert had attempted to focus attention on me as an object of ridicule. We had taken a strenuous march through the mountains around the town in the morning. The afternoon was reserved for marching, forward and back, in .the barracks yard, in a crouched position, in the November mud. Two recruits were selected to sing for their masters in a most comical manner. That is when I was picked to enter the arena. Lambert walked around behind me. He turned, and walked in front of me. I could feel the cold perspiration flowing down my back. Lambert faced the off-key singers, and ordered them to sing while dancing on one leg.

"Our dear Rabbi has always shown us he is the good shepherd of his flock," Lambert stated sarcastically. "But he has never had the opportunity to fulfill his mission publicly. We all know that he would do so gladly." Lambart leered at me gleefully. "The suffering flock is in great need of a blessing from our esteemed Rabbi." Lambert pointed forward, and called for the two one-legged singers to make room for me between them.

My legs carried me to the front of the formation involuntarily. There I stood between the two sorry "soloists". I looked at Lambert. I wondered why he wanted to shame me, and disparage my (our) religion.

"Well, Rabbi, you heard me," Lambert hollered. "Start blessing your people!" It was an order.

I heard Lambert's voice, and my mind went totally blank.

"Spread your sacred arms, and bless your people!" Lambert commanded.

As I held out my hands I realized that I could not take this blessing lightly. I was called upon to bless my people. And I did!

My stand at the pillory caused a great deal of talk* I stood petrified in the undesired limelight. For some mysterious reason not one person laughed at me. For the next couple of days I was the primary subject of camp gossip. I was overwhelmed by a veritable

wave of sympathy and solidarity.

Lambert stood at the corner of my bunk looking down at me. "I'd like you to know, Rabbi, that I fought for, and received a Saturday exemption from service for you." There was a kindly expression upon Lambert's face. "You see, I really am a good friend of yours."

It was Friday, and moved against my better judgment, I invited Lambert to participate in our Sabbath gathering. I offered him a piece of apple pie; a part of our weekly parcels from home. "You can see Instructor, sir, that the menu of the 'kosher soldiers' does not consist merely of jam and ear wax."

"I am over-fed," Lambert commented. Still, he sat down with us.

We, in the "kosher corner" went on chanting Sabbath hymns. In the state of mind I was in, I conjured up the festive glow I used to experience in my Yeshiva days at Telekes. Emotions I thought had been lost, resurfaced again. Our celebration of the Sabbath held a quality of inspiration.

"You are creating an island of joy around us here," Lambert said to me. "But we must come close to you to be part of it."

"There is a secret corner in the heart of every Jew that speaks the sanctity of the soul," I noted.

"It is not so simple," Lambert stated. "I don't think that there is an iota of religious feeling in me. Nevertheless, honor, or perhaps a feeling of responsibility, tells me to help where I can.

"I understand," I said, inspired by flattery rather than true conviction. Momentarily, I convinced myself that we cannot be sufficiently objective to judge other people's apparently irregular behavior. In Lambert's case there was a basis for doubt. But, I did not want to cut the man off with the attention of the entire area concentrated on the "kosher corner". I must admit to feeling overwhelmed by the pleasant turn in Lambert's change of character.

"It is clear to my superiors that the war is lost." Lambert stated. "There is panic in government circles. Now, that the knife is at their throats, they pretend that they are not at war at all. They believe that if the newspapers print articles proclaiming this idea, the Allies will respect Hungary's 'neutrality'. Even the treatment of labor servicemen has changed for the better.

"Is there any chance that we'll be sent to the Ukraine?" someone asked.

"The Ukraine is finished," Lambert replied; proud of being so well informed. "No labor servicemen will be sent outside the borders of our country. They want to improve the treatment of the labor servicemen. In short, they are passing the buck to the Germans." Lambert let us know that the rumors we had heard were correct. "We are going to Ruthenia," he stated. We will be restructured into two large platoons to do important war work."

"When?" someone asked.

"The Lieutenant Colonel told me confidentially that we are leaving in January. Before you go, everyone will be issued a five day leave. You will be issued passes in groups." Lambert turned to me. "I want to show you that you are dealing with a gentleman, Rabbi. My friend, you will be the first to return home."

Lambert's word was sacred.

CHAPTER VIII

The Vamostelek railway station was covered with snow when I arrived. The police patrolled the station hall with bayonets at the ready. Officials glanced at their watches, and then at the clock on the wall, and again at their watches. There was little else for them to do with everyone hiding in their homes from the cold winter weather.

Rushing in the revolving door to the third-class waiting room, I bumped into Ensign Maixner — the former bank director, now station commander. "Excuse me," I said politely. He yelled at me at the top of his voice. He stared at the yellow armband on my winter coat with hate-filled eyes. He knew exactly who I was, and he remembered the good coal we used to deliver to his house when we still had our trading license. I simply turned away from him, and hurried for the exit.

I called from the gate when I reached my parents house. In a moment, the porch was crowded. Everyone ran through the snow to greet me.

"Is that really my son, Misi?" my mother cried. In the next second she had her arms around me. We embraced, wavering between laughter and tears.

"Come in, and take off your coat," my father said. In the three months since my departure his worry wrinkles had multiplied a hundred fold.

"Tell me, son, do they treat you very badly?" My mother was worried. She looked at me tenderly, and I could see my reflection

in her brown eyes.

"We have a chief instructor, a Jewish boy from Budapest, who alleges we are in a resort in comparison to other units." I did not want my parents to be fearful.

My mother hastened into the kitchen where she spent the next five days. I ate to my heart's content. She was convinced that I was starving in the labor camp. My mother aired her doubts about depriving myself of regular hot meals. I had written about my friends in the "kosher corner".

Each evening we talked late into the night. The family was together again, except for my sister, Agika. She was staying with our grandparents, and attending an Orthodox secondary school in Budapest. My eldest brother, Laci, was home because my parents had written to him about my arrival. He had become a most level-headed and poised individual. Laci was responsible for collecting the money given to the Jewish Help Organization. Poverty was on the increase: the families of labor camp inmates needed help. Laci did his part to ease the struggle of families without basic resources for survival.

I told all the stories about my months in the labor camp. I stated the benefits of maintaining the kosher discipline. I elaborated how I came to know Meilech Stern; and how I gained strength from his presence. I explained the circumstances that surrounded my given nickname: "the Rabbi". And why I was exempted from labor servicemen training on Saturdays.

For the first time in many years the entire house radiated with hope and confidence.

The morning after I arrived home I walked to the train station to buy a newspaper. Magda Dobay greeted me with a business-like smile. "You are home on leave, Misi?" I bought a newspaper. Neutral and anti-regime papers had been banned long ago. I read the Arrow Cross newspaper, Uj Magyarsag. One article stated that "cursed Jewish blood" overwhelmed the dominant and healthy Hungarian genes at any time there was inter-marriage between the races. Another brilliant article stated Jews signaled enemy planes, and used secret radio transmissions to aid the enemy. Another article elaborated on the way Jews disrupted the transportation network in Hungary: Bizarre Jews occupied the entrances to carriages, while expanding their bodies to several times their volume. This prevented people from exiting and entering the train cars. "Grave difficulties are caused by Jews

traveling unnecessarily, but purposely, during the peak rush hours."

While I stood reading this trash, an elegant couple appeared at the kiosk dressed in fine fur coats. Following the usual enthusiastic greetings, the beautiful wife told Magda Dobay about her exciting meeting with the Arrow Cross deputy, Zoltan Mesko. The two women giggled together as if they were discussing a handsome man, in the secret language known only to their sex.

I thought for a moment that the scene was like passing an open window. Inside that window I saw my bitterest enemy smiling with his wife at his side. Even a murderer has his private life. I was foolishly surprised by the conversation between the two women: something akin to finding stolen property and dead bodies in a decent house. I realized that I no longer had a part in this gentile Hungarian country. I quickly left the kiosk with a cold nod.

My exile was complete.

To fulfill a promise I had made to the Baron, I made my way to the largest restaurant on the railway square. It was owned by the Baron's father. Mr. Rosenberg, a highly decorated hero in the First World War, had been exempted from the second, and most of the severe Jewish Laws. One had to be an extraordinary Jew to be granted a license to dispense alcohol; even though the most notorious criminal Gentiles had a legal right to do so.

The large dining room was almost empty. At a round table near the entrance, the Baron's mother was playing cards with the chimney sweep. They were both peering toward the private room, which was the source of harsh singing to a violin accompaniment. They seemed pensive.

The Baron's father came out from behind the counter to greet me. For a moment, his worn indifferent face lit up as if touched by the sun. "I'm happy to see you, Misi," He warned me without taking a breath between sentences that the son of a rich farmer had been drinking and singing alone in the private room for the last three days. Mr. Rosenberg fired a string of questions at me. "How is my promising son, Geza? What is he doing? When will he be home on leave?"

"Next week, or the week after," I replied. "Certainly within the month." I explained what I knew to be fact. "Afterwards, we are off to the Ruthenia."

Mr. Rosenberg took my arm and led me over to his wife. "Look, Etelka." He pointed to me. "It is Misi Weintraub. He is home on leave from Zebegeny. He has brought us greetings from Geza."

The woman wiped her hands on her flower patterned apron before guiding me towards the counter. She whispered in my ear so the chimney sweep could not hear her. "Will you be sent to work in the Carpathians?"

"That's what they say," I replied reticently.

"Let's hope it won't be the Ukraine," Mr. Rosenberg said.

"I hardly think so," Mrs. Rosenberg said to reassure herself. "By the time the company arrives there, the Russians will have reached the Carpathians."

"You may be right," Mr. Rosenberg said with a nod. "Ever since Nagybaconi became Chief of the General Staff, new winds are blowing. Labor servicemen are not being taken to the Ukraine anymore."

"How is Geza getting on?" Mrs. Rosenberg inquired. "I heard he had a barrel of trouble at the beginning."

"Thanks to his bravado and arrogance," Mr. Rosenberg added.

"You can stop worrying about Geza," I replied. "He has become accustomed to the situation. He is the favorite of the battalion commander. Everyone envies Geza for the good deal he has going for himself."

"Yes, he is the official swine herder," Mr. Rosenberg, hero in the First World War, nodded. "He watches the Lieutenant's private pigs from morning to night. My son told me about his good fortune in a letter," he said bitterly.

"That's why he became a graduate, to walk in swill all day long?" Mrs. Rosenberg wailed.

Mrs. Rosenberg fell silent with the sharp noise of breaking glass from the private room.

"That's how good Hungarians make merry," Mr. Rosenberg said to me.

The door to the private room flew open. The gentleman, a thick-set young man, made his appearance. "Landlord. More glasses." His face was sweaty, his eyes were bloodshot, and he forgot to say "thank you" when he was handed a tray of long-stemmed glasses. It was fashionable to regard Jews as non-humans.

Mr. Rosenberg added the price of the broken glasses to the



bill without batting an eye.

The door to the private room remained opened. Everyone could see the drunken farmer sprawled in his chair, singing the same old song he had been grinding out for three days at the top of his lungs. He raised his hand towards the violinist. "Acsi! Asci!"

The dark-shinned gypsy broke into a smile; receiving orders was the greatest pleasure in his life.

As I left the restaurant, I thought cynically --What would those snobbish Budapest Jewish doctors and lawyers give if they could live as heedlessly as this common drunk? They would gladly change places with the gypsy musician!

The five days passed quickly, and I had to return to the labor camp. Three weeks later, in January of 1944, I met my parents at the Ozd freight station. It was the last time I would ever see them.

Our platoon was being shipped off to Ruthenia. The boys in our unit stood by a siding, and said goodbye to sad, and fearful relatives.

My father leaned against a wood piling. All proper words of farewell had been spoken. The remaining sentiments were spoken only with the eyes. My mother stated her fear with tears, for all things that could not be spoken aloud. All the parental anxiety, love, and scolding of over two decades was summed up by my father in one clumsy comment: "Take good care of yourself, son. Don't step on a mine!"

My father, who found food for us in the dead of winter, even if he had to dig under the ice; my father, who fought on the Russian front in the First World War, and knew better than anyone how useless his warning was my father uttered these childish words.

The Guards put on a performance for the sake of the families. Their swearing was more vulgar than usual. The shouting and yelling would convince the families we were being treated cruelly.

I tried to reassure myself that everything had been bearable up to date. I hoped that this was not the final scene of our "golden days" at Zebegeny. The train moved slowly out of the station. From the small barred window of the locked wagon, I caught a last glimpse of my mother and father standing together.

CHAPTER IX

The train rattled along. Around noon, we pulled into the station of a small town. When the train stopped, the company kitchen was set up on the platform. The kitchen staff brought water from a peasant's well. The order had come down from the commander that no labor serviceman was to move about alone. We were guarded at all times.

Dinner was boiling in the huge, black cauldron. I could smell the fried onions and beef as I fetched the dry food, peas, noodles, marmalade and coffee cubes for our kosher mess.

Osterman, a new member of our kosher circle, turned out to be the hero of the day. A Jewish girl from the town had handed him the parcel made up by the local Jews for the poor, starving "kosher boys".

"How did she get to the platform, when the soldiers won't allow anybody near us?" Meilech asked.

"She came from around the back, across the rails," Osterman replied. "She assured me that the meat had been submitted to the strictest ritual treatment. The local Jews know we refuse to eat army food because of our religious discipline.

With childlike joy we inspected the kosher salami, the smoke cured ribs-of-beef, and the wondrous cakes.

"They must have sons, fathers and husbands in labor camps," I noted.

We climbed back into the train wagons, and were off to other stations where the population stared at us as though we were aliens from Mars. The children were encouraged to shout dirty words at us. At the sight of yellow armbands their humanity was forgotten.

Our train was pulled onto a side line for the night. The darkness was filled with ghosts: pillars, a fence, the sky shone with greenish-yellow light on the horizon. The lights went out in the peasants' houses; faint noises; the sound of somebody sobbing softly we waited for morning locked up in the train wagon.

We arrived in Tarnaszeles late the following afternoon. It was dusk when the guards led us to the center of this fair sized Ruthenian township. A dense milky fog rolled down from the mountain as we stumbled forward on the snow covered road. We were given temporary quarters in the schoolhouse.

A new man, Topis, had assumed command of the company.

In spite of prohibitions against moving about unguarded, the boys roamed the streets freely. We used our time to become acquainted with the local Jewish inhabitants. It was impossible for the company to enforce prohibitions during the first week. We had been billeted in Jewish homes after the company kitchen had been erected in the school building in the Main Square. With two hundred and eighty men walking back and forth between their private quarters and the kitchen so much traffic was created that the guards simply could not keep an eye on every individual. Our "kosher group" accepted numerous invitations to lunch and dinner from the members of the Jewish community.

Four members of our "kosher group" were billeted in the house of an old Jew, who seemed less than happy about our presence. Silently he offered us snuff which he kept in a carved wooden box this act used up his stock of courtesy. If he had not thrown us a rare word or two, we would have believed him to be deaf and dumb.

After several days we discovered the reason behind the sad old man's silence. The unhappy old Jew had a married daughter. She lived with him, and had the honor of the best room. According to stories that circulated in the township, the woman's husband perished with his labor battalion on the Russian front. Malicious Jews in the township denied this fact, claiming the woman had invented her husband's death herself. It was also claimed that she was having an affair with a middle-aged Hungarian forest ranger.

Chickens scratched for food under the snow, the ice flows in the Tarac River groaned; these Winter sounds seemed to accent the old man's melancholia. Still, our host was a decent man. On the Sabbath he allowed Meilech to read from his own Torah scroll. I was pleased that the old man's face lost some of its sorrow as I led the prayers. His Sabbath kaftan had turned green with the years. It was probably a gift from his father-in-law at his wedding; or perhaps he had inherited it from his own poor father.

The ticking of the cuckoo clock marked the long minutes of that Sabbath. The old man sighed. But he only broke his silence once with words of bitterness. "Life was different here when we were ruled by the Czechs," he said. "I wish the Hungarians would go to blazes. May G-d smite them with ten plagues, as He did in Egypt."

Then he fell silent once again. Perhaps he recalled the Hungarian forest ranger, the most powerful curse on his own house.

The door flew open. A buxom, white-skinned young woman appeared at the threshold. She wore a short fur-lined coat, and red cloth boots. She walked past us, and disappeared behind the curtain that led to the back room. Soon we heard low singing from inside. the old man reached for his spectacles with trembling hands. He too, disappeared behind the drawn curtain.

The relaxed Sabbath mood was gone. We knew that the old man would not dare to say anything to his daughter. We maintained a silent vigil as dusk settled on the village. The fog from the mountains merged with the smoke coming from the chimneys. I wondered why I recalled Lili Deutsch and her Arrow Cross fiance just then.

We were finally assigned to work in Kiralymezo, which was twelve kilometers from our headquarters. February of 1944, was particularly bone-chilling in the Carpathians. However, after that first week, the harsh winter weather rarely prevented us from marching out to dig ditches for mines. The stone hard ground yielded slowly to our pickaxes. The mountain rock under the road needed to be blasted with explosions. Jumbor, the demolition expert, descended into the deepening ditches we would dig by a rope ladder to place his explosives. We immediately pulled him up from the ditch; then we all ran for our lives. There was the explosion, followed by white smoke. Sometimes the explosive would not go off. Then, Jumbor would have to begin his procedure all over again; always hoping that his work would not blow up in his face.

There was one occasion, after Jumbor had set the explosive and we had run for cover, when we returned to see that the entire ditch had collapsed from the impact. We had to take picks and shovels and begin the work all over again. On other occasions, when rain water filled a ditch, we had to bail the hole dry so Jumbor could do his job. These ditches were to become the Hungarian "Maginot line".

Kiralymezo consisted of a single street, five kilometers long. Usually, a strong wind blew along it, carrying needle sharp splinters of ice. The endless row of houses wavered before our eyes in the terrible cold like scenery from a nightmare. During the six weeks we worked in Kiralymezo, we walked that long street twice a day. I felt like a wanderer in a prehistoric land. I

almost believed that I was cut off from my past forever. The people around me detracted nothing from this dream-like atmosphere.

Even our quarters, a narrow room in an evacuated schoolhouse, accented the surrealism of the environment.

The arrangements were simple: a wall-to-wall blanket was laid over straw along the back of the room. The other three "kosher boys" in our group separated me from the more secular comrades. Jambor and Gummy-eyes, the guard assigned to our unit, rested on the far side of the purring wood stove.

Gummy-eyes also served as the company cook. He remained in the village all day preparing dinner for the frozen, hungry labor servicemen, and for the superiors. The four of us in the kosher corner did not eat the hot food the cook provided. We ate from the food parcels that arrived from home. The kosher detachment made do with bread and marmalade, and hot tea or coffee. At the completion of our simple meal, we reached for our prayer books. We carried on with our systematic Torah studies.

Week after week, our cage closed tighter around us. Even Sergeant Jambor became curious about "the kosher boys". He questioned one of the other labor serviceman about us: "Why do some Jews take their religion so seriously? Among us Christians, only the priests and some old women are so saintly." Jambor pointed in our direction. "Still, they are not as steadfast as the kosher group. The moment these boys get back from work they begin to chant and sway as though they had missed something."

The room was small. Sergeant Jambor spoke very loudly. It would have been a lack of courtesy not to answer the decent man.

Meilech motioned to me to remain silent. "What would you tell him? Will you explain to him that the Almighty expects the Jews to become a Holy Nation? Try to tell these people, steeped in materialism, that our commitment means the Jewish spirit has no end." Meilech shook his head. "He cannot understand."

"Can you explain to me," Jambor asked Eckstein, "why these unfortunate kosher boys stick to their poor diet. Why do they starve themselves?" Jambor's expression held concern. He never treated us inhumanely while he was with us.

"There are those among the Jews who are considered holy

because of their strict discipline to the Jewish traditions," Eckstein stated. He explained to Sergeant Jambor that he should forget about the fanatics. "They represent a minority of the open-minded modern Jewish population."

The six weeks I spent in Kiralymezo hold the only pleasant memories I have of my labor service. It was a joyous experience just to stand around the squat iron stove and rid myself of wet boots and clothing. It did not matter that snow was falling outside the window, nor that hungry wolves loped through the woods between the road and the Tarac River. The warmth of the fire was heavenly; I had the kosher boys to share my prayers with.

Finally the orders came down for us to return to headquarters, where we would be assigned a new task. There was a surprise waiting for us: the cadre had been moved to Gyergyoc, a village near the mouth of the Tarac River.

CHAPTER X

At Gyergyoc we rejoined the main contingent of the company. Rumors of corruption were on everyone's lips. The Jewish craftsmen were forced into servitude by their masters. The shoemakers were kept busy day and night crafting fine leather boots for the Ensign, and fine leather boots for the Lieutenant. The tailors made dress uniforms for all the officers, including the Sergeant.

I was witness to the corrupt manipulations of the Arrow Cross sergeant, Bagosi. During the four days we waited for our new assignment, the local tavern owner put in a claim for two labor servicemen to cut wood.

"You'd better make sure not to bring shame on me," Bagosi shouted at us with his drunken breath.

After we cut the wood, we were told to stack it neatly beside the kitchen stove. As we entered the tavern Bagosi greeted us with anti-Semitic abuse. The cashier Bagosi was out to impress, stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to keep from exploding with laughter. There was nothing more humorous in those days than calling a Jew, "Jew!" The fat landlady and the patriotic cashier, whose skirt was hemmed with the national colors, split their sides laughing at Bagosi's "funny jokes". A drunken colleague, another sergeant, rolled a cigarette from a tin box.

"Are you soused already, buddy?" the sergeant from the

border guards asked Bagosi. "It's only ten o'clock in the morning."

The over-endowed landlady shook from head to foot with merriment. The patriotic girl rewarded the drunken member of the Royal Hungarian Army with flirtatious smiles.

The drunken sergeant was a regular visitor at the tavern, and he attracted other gangster-type soldiers to his table. The next day when we were on duty again at the tavern, Bagosi outdid himself.

"The country will soon be ruled by Szalasi, you'll see," Bagosi hollered out. "Hitler is finished, but Szalasi will fix things for us!"

Back at headquarters, I turned to Vili Lambert for protection. "Help me," I said. "Get me assigned to Dubavar.

The winter months blurred together as we marched from place to place. The landscape of snow covered mountains looked the same from town to town. Tedium became as great an enemy as the elements. Then, as though we had emerged from a world frozen in time, we moved into Dubavar. This small town situated south of the Carpathian mountains breathed with warm breezes.

The work was easy. No explosives were needed to blast into the ground. The soft clay earth parted like butter under our pickaxes and shovels. On the way back to our quarters in the evening, we sang enthusiastically, breathing in the soft springtime breezes. The sergeant who commanded our unit, we learned by way of rumor, was a confirmed socialist. He demanded a strict work discipline, but he did not prevent the boys from making friends with the Jewish families in the village.

Around the synagogue Meilech and I became renowned because we were familiar with the Yiddish language, the mother tongue of the Dubabar Jews.

The "Dubavar wedding" became a major topic of conversation among the boys. Both Meilech and I participated in the honoring of the Seven Blessings under the wedding canopy. We were plied with the local brandy. The black bearded, pirate-faced tavern keeper was marrying off his old maid daughter; and so, he was more than generous with the "petroleum testing" liquor that was served. Later, for the sake of the invited labor servicemen the musicians sang in Hungarian the song of the tzaddik of Kallo

The local Jews recovered their prestige with their well known regional songs. In the small community of Dubavar, where mud froze to your boots on cold March nights, these songs drifted melodically on the air from behind closed windows. The two Jewish musicians had the skill to make their violins laugh and cry. The wedding guests sang songs from Mizsnitz.

The groom wished to recite from the Torah because it was the custom. He was not a great Torah student. The bride smiled sadly, smoothing down her skirt like an impoverished princess, covering her face with her veil, and pressing her hand to her heart. The hairy bridegroom carried her off to the next village.

We returned to the schoolhouse in a happy mood. Meilech and I were still laughing. The urban boys mocked the Ruthenians because of the way they pronounced Hungarian words. The locals laughed at the urban boys; who had no idea which blessing to use when eating fruit. Everything is relative. We were glad to be alive.

Someone, unknown, spoke in the darkness: "That fellow must be a great optimist to get married on March 6, 1944."

Our good mood evaporated. Thoughts turned to the future the young couple had to face.

A few days later we were in the tiny village of Neresznice, which was located a few kilometers south of the Carpathians. Our group was crowded into the "good room" of a peasant's house, where the bunks lined up against the wall touched one another. We had to tolerate the cramped quarters, and the continuous swearing of our roommates. While immersed in our Talmud studies we were attacked from every side by foul language.

I thought it was strange that Zoltai, a white armbanded Catholic convert, sensed our mute revulsion to the unnecessary outbreaks of rudeness. Zoltai seemed to be a straightforward, intelligent man.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves to speak like that in front of the Rabbis?" he rebuked the swearing boys. He might have been trying to demonstrate to us that he was a good Catholic. He never missed an opportunity to go to Mass with the guards on Sunday. He rattled his Catholicism much the same as young cadets rattle their sabers. Our rootless urban boys aped his gestures as well as the tone of his Voice.

Szekacs, Zoltai's buddy and former classmate, was constantly miserable because he was in.the wrong environment. He used phases he learned from the Hungarian gentry whenever he could.

His speech was stilted. But his complaints about carrying the Jewish "yoke" were clear enough to understand. In our little room there were at least fifteen other boys who shared Szekacs opinion that: "being a Jew was an inherited disease, and a curse one should do his best to cure."

Of course, the Baron was one of the most foul in the group. We had a drama student called Ligeti, a true Bohemian, who danced like a primadonna and boasted about his literary knowledge. He never spoke in properly structured sentences. It seemed natural that Ligeti wanted to regale us with stories about his noble female "conquests". He did not mind spitting on his own people by declaring: "To tell the truth, I accept only the humanist culture, I admire only a single culture, the universal European one."

While we were in Neresznice, the blond haired Friedbauer, the eminent student from Nyiregyhaza, began courting the daughter of the local schoolmaster.

The balmy Spring air was ripe with temptation. Restless clouds dotted the sky, then disappeared behind the mountains, reappeared, separated, formed long translucent ribbons; sometimes sitting like funny white hats on the heads of the mountains. At times the wind brought a whiff of snow down from the Carpathians. Everything was in constant motion. The Jews of the village prepared for the Passover holiday. They baked unleavened bread; the women cleaned their houses from top to bottom.

During this period our arguments with Friedbauer and the boys from Kassa began to upset me. The debates seemed endless. They held their own culture and people in utter contempt. They glorified only that which was foreign.

Friedbauer, a confirmed Zionist and socialist, debated with me. "I think we agree, Rabbi, that we must rid ourselves of the fate of being a minority," the blond boy said respectfully. "We must build our own Homeland." He had his point to make. "Do you think we can successfully carry out the re-conquest of our Homeland with the obsolete ideas of the Orthodox Jews?"

"Judaism is neither an economic nor technological . system; and thus, it cannot become obsolete," I replied. "Judaism strives to make mankind achieve a higher level of humanity with the help of the Yoke of the Law. Thus, if the oppression resulting from our situation as a persecuted minority ceased, the Jewish soul would

create, in the Homeland, a healthy state based on the codex of Jewish Laws."

"The whole country will pray and study the Talmud all day long," Ali cried out. He was the most outspoken of the Kassa boys. "Who will work?" The Arab slaves?"

"Everybody will work," I answered. "Work is a privilege, not slavery. If history reaches a point where we can establish our Homeland, that land must live exactly according to Jewish Law."

It was of little use to tell them not to misunderstand Judaism, not to destroy their own spiritual heritage, not to become intellectual gypsies. They escaped into mockery and heckling. They roared like lions. They could not envision a Holy Nation in a Holy Land.

"All right, but what's going to happen with the Arabs?" Someone wanted to keep the debate going.

"We'll get along with them somehow," one of the Kassa boys yelled out. "Especially if we adopt their Harem system. I imagine that will make the Baron happy."

Everyone broke into laughter and looked towards the bunk of our hawk-nosed friend.

Ali, the bloody socialist, thought that the Baron was a parasite. "All the women will work for the Baron," Ali said. "He will pocket all their money."

All discipline was gone.

The debate, which had begun as a seminar, ended in cacophony. Without rhyme or reason, Ligeti, the actor, decided to lecture us on the beauty of classical music. With rainbow-colored words, Ligeti depicted the uselessness of arguments on such sterile topics as politics and ideology. To prove his point, he began to sing the "Letter Aria" from Tosca.

Ligeti sang so badly that the other boys would not allow him to finish. "Shut up, Ligeti," everyone shouted.

Our freedom of movement was basically limited to the narrow street where we had set up our crowded barracks. The good hearted Jews of the village brought the "kosher boys" hot meals. Every evening when we finished cleaning our tools after work, they would signal that dinner was waiting.

The Jurovic's dwelling where we took our meals, was more modest than our own quarters. Meilech and I would sit down at the table with the widow, Mrs. Jurovic, and her two daughters. As a Rabbi, I was not supposed to speak to the girls, and the two

young ladies respected this. As the days passed, the unknown faces became familiar. I began to sense that Leah, the older daughter who walked with a limp, was always staring at me. I turned my head to assure myself that I was not mistaken, but she lowered her eyes, and hid herself from me by brushing a strand of hair that was always falling across her face with her hand. I never spoke a word directly to Leah during my stay in Neresznice.

Somehow it became Leah's privilege to serve my dinner. When she was absent, her sister or mother assured me loudly that, "Leah will be back in a minute." Without my having encouraged it, they made certain that I was served by Leah. Meilech was an unwilling witness to this conspiracy against me. There was Leah every night, wafting a cloud of cheap perfume through the room, as she placed the food in front of me.

The Germans invaded Hungary!

We discussed the situation excitedly. Dome Sztojai, Hungarian Ambassador to Berlin, had been made Prime Minister. The newspaper reported the increasing number of anti-Jewish decrees. We had heard threatening rumors before. We were accustomed to Nazi papers writing about us as if we were lepers; we no longer paid attention to the slanderous remarks. We were used to the most malicious Jewish caricatures; we merely shrugged our shoulders.

I recall Friebauer said: "It is not good when a disease invades the body without causing pain. Pain gives the alarm; the impulse makes the organism defend itself."

We reacted as though our bodies had received an electric shock. For the first time we came face to face with the German Army as they occupied Hungary on March 19th. A detachment of a few hundred German soldiers moved into Neresznice. "Typical German toughness," someone whispered. "Only four days have gone by since the occupation, and they are already in this region." We were so shocked by what we saw that no one replied to the hushed comment. We had seen pictures of German military units, but here they were in the flesh. I tried to observe my comrades to analyze why this affected us so strongly.

German soldiers, wearing the greenish-gray uniform of the Wehrmacht, walked by us without uttering a single word. Indifference was the manner they displayed towards those of us wearing the yellow armband.

That night, before entering our dormitory, Meilech stopped

at the door. The blackout was complete in the village; only the Heavenly lamp gave some light. I could not see my friend's face clearly. I could only make out his silhouette, and the sadness in his voice.

"I know that there are great changes ahead of us," Meilech said. "It will be Passover this week, and it is the feast of liberation."

There are Friday nights when a new brilliance is born, and each memory is filled with jets of rich color. There are moments of grace when we feel lifted, when our singing rises on the wings of harmony. With my eyes closed, I sang the Sabbath songs.

Our souls were overflowing that night.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Reb Mendel said. "That is a beautiful melody. Where did you learn it?"

Reb Mendel, the old woman's son, had come over from his house next door. He was not taking any risks. He had shaved off his beard in the first hour of the German occupation.

"At the Telekes Yeshiva," I related. "My Master use to sing it. The Master would sing the song for his grandfather at least that is what the tradition holds."

"Tradition." Leah's brother mused the word repeatedly.

Tradition is a magic word that embraces all of devout Jewish life. Reb Mendel dazzled us with his detailed knowledge of the family trees of all the well known Rabbinical dynasties. This is a favorite subject around the festive Jewish table. Meilech forgot his usual taciturnity and happily participated in the conversation. I remained silent, nodding wisely. I dared not risk speaking because of my rudimentary knowledge of Yiddish. If I attempted long sentences or stories everyone would laugh at me. I had only begun studying Yiddish when I entered the Yeshiva. My mother understood little Yiddish even though it was her father's native tongue. I relaxed knowing the conversation was in good hands. It made it possible to forget the wild rumors that were circulating in the village. We acted like people in a death cell waiting for a reprieve.

Inevitably, the conversation centered on the painful paradox: We were still ruled by our tradition We had fallen victims to an ugly fate.

"I think I know the answer," Reb Mendel said. "Internal strife! We know that non-Jews are prejudiced against Jews because we live according to our own laws and traditions. At least Jews should be able to love and live in peace with one another. This is what our

Hasid Masters, the Rabbis of Mizsnitz, have taught us. We should seek out what we have in common, not what divides us. There exists no stronger ties than those that bind Jews together. Our enemies see no difference between the followers of one Rabbi or another. They persecute all Jews as one entity. It would have been better if the warring Jewish factions had sought escape while there was still time."

Silence descended upon our little group, we could sense the impending danger.

Meilech made his accusation with feigned irony. "Be careful the Hasids of Nekeresd or Stinkacs don't hear you."

We were not accustomed to the beardless face of Reb Mendel. He seemed insignificant, less dignified, than before. I missed the dark forest that used to grow on his chin.

"Palestine or Amerika!" Reb Mendel cried out. "Any corner of the world! Away from the Germans and all the Jew haters! As far as I'm concerned, I should have preferred Palestine, which has been the view of the Mizsnitz dynasty. Let's not speak about the tyrannical few who have cursed the builders of the Homeland, or those who sympathize with them. If they had true insight into Heavenly plans, they would have advised their faithful followers to run away, to escape over the sea. If Palestine is prohibited, why were there not plans to escape to Amerika or Australia?"

The trouble was that the ignorant had attributed supernatural powers to their leaders who were richer in human frailties than in divine guidance. Then they expected solutions and salvation from their haughty demigods. The misguided, self-effacing Rabbis, who had played at being a Pope, had irresponsibly hypnotized their devout, but stupid followers. Jews fighting for survival spent their time and energy terrorizing and denouncing those Jews who were opposed to their philosophy. They did so with great passion, as though it were the most godly activity in Jewish life. The ground shook beneath them, the volcano was about to erupt, spewing rivers of lava; yet, these vain men simply ignored their duty to help the naive Jews who had fallen under their spell.

The Friday candle had almost burned down. The self-accusatory words still hung in the air. It was an open secret in those days that the appearance of the Germans signified the obligation to wear the yellow star; and the order to hand in all jewelry would bring with it the establishment of ghettos and

deportation.

No miracles came to save us. In the towns, the Germans marked out the areas where Jews were allowed to live in overcrowded rooms. The two devils, Baky and Endre Laszlo, implemented the Jewish Laws with inhuman ruthlessness. Sometimes a newspaper was smuggled into the area. The anti-Jewish decrees followed each other with such speed that the Hungarians were left no time to assimilate the fact that they were set on the path to genocide. The newspapers contained no information at all only malicious lies about the Jewish people.

Strange as it may sound, we did not recognize the early warning signals. We knew we were painfully disappointed with our fellow men. We felt humiliated and offended. Our defense systems prevented us from realizing our true situation.

The letters from home told us that hard blows were falling everywhere. I learned that my brother, Laci, had been taken away from the Seder table by the police. All the Vamostelek Jews had been assembled and taken to Bagolyuk. Yet, my dear mother tried to assure me that I should not worry. She related that they were allowed to take their cows along, and that the children were playing happily.

One evening Leah's younger sister called me aside for a moment after dinner. "Would you be good enough to return to our house after ten o'clock?" she asked me. "There is something important we would like to discuss with you."

I was filled with curiousity.

When I returned later, it was the younger girl who spoke to me. "We want to bury our trousseaux. The things are worth a lot of money, and it would be a pity to lose them. Because this is to be a secret, we couldn't think of anyone else to help us but you."

The old woman and the two girls led me to a corner of the kitchen, which was merely a floor of pounded earth. They had a shovel there, and next to it an iron hooped trunk containing the "valuable trousseaux". While I dug a hole in the earth, the old woman unpacked and repacked the trunk like a shopkeeper trying to dazzle a prospective customer. She smiled at me over her spectacles, and continually praised the various articles: "The finest batiste. Beautiful silk. We didn't mind paying for it." Young Leah blushed as if her mother ware praising her rather than her clothes. I did not feel happy in the role of a potential bridegroom. Silently, I kept on digging.

"There is much chance that we will come back here after the war," the old woman said. Rumors were rampant that Jews were to be exiled abroad, maybe as far away as Africa; never to return. "If we do come back, we'll have something with which to start life again."

On the seventh day of Passover, without previous warning, our cadre entrained us. The explanation was that our company would assemble in Aknaszlatina.

The Jews of Neresznice saw us off as if we were their own sons. The people filled the entire railway station. The Jurovic family had donned their best clothes, if not for us, then for the celebration of the Pesach.

Friedbauer would not free his beloved's hand, even though such behavior was considered more than scandalous; according to local etiquette. No one protested. They were engaged, and Heaven knew when they would see each other again.

Young Leah appeared limping hurriedly towards the train. She turned her head right and left as if she were seeking someone.

"Don't be so cruel, Moshe, wave to her," Meilech said to me. Someone passed me the apple pie Leah had brought wrapped in a napkin from their festive table. I looked at the gift. How heavy and soggy was that unleavened dough. I obeyed Meilech, the "malamed"; and waved my hand vigorously to thank the girl who was standing on the platform.

This bizarre little show would have been almost comical, except that history's wheel of fate was about to spin again. We had no way of knowing that within a few short months the majority of our Jewish friends at Neresznice would rise toward the sky in the form of soot and smoke belching forth from the crematoria at Auschwitz.

The train puffed out of the station. Our waving friends grew smaller.

The figure of that girl waving to me is engraved in my memory.

CHAPTER XI

I wanted to escape into a world of daydreams. But the fear created by the German occupation permeated every corner of the cattle wagon. My comrades were concerned with the concept of the resettlement of Jews abroad.



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I could hear Adler's voice behind me. "By resettlement, they mean exile. The Germans conceal their dark plans behind diplomatic words."

"Let them all go to hell," Goldstein stammered.

"Exile! Expulsion!" someone cried out nervously. "This is the Twentieth Century, not the darkest days of the Middle Ages."

"Stop!" Weber pleaded. "Enough! You tear at our nerves with these pessimistic commentaries. What good does that do? Be quiet! What point is there in frightening one another with the unknown? We will learn our fate soon enough."

That evening we arrived at Aknaszlatina. Our sinking morale turned to depression because of what we witnessed there. The gendarmes had ruthlessly routed the Jews form their homes. Thousands of frightened Jews were forced to assemble in the main square. The reality of the situation shook us to the core. Our souls were crushed. Until now, deportation was just a word a little frightening, but always distant.

The famous old Rabbi of the town stood bent over as if he were carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders. "Shalom," Meilech said in greeting. The old man pressed Meilech's hand, but did not utter a word.

The main square was in chaos. Jews searched for their loved ones in a frenzy of desperation. Each family had its own troubles. The faces of the helpless expressed shock and confusion. An old woman pulled at her hair. The sick limped and staggered. Those, who were chased out of the ghetto, pushed hand carts carrying their possessions. An overloaded cart was drawn by horses. A woman, in advanced pregnancy, sat on the driver's seat. Her ageless face was pale. A ragged little boy with long ear-locks screamed in fear.

G-d must have sent down the white cloud that encircled my mind. I viewed the wretchedness before my eyes as if through a protective veil. Only the most insignificant details of the tragedy penetrated the mist. I observed that items of necessity, for a presumably long journey, were lacking among the belongings carried by the Jews. At the moment of departure the assembled deportees clung to what was most dear. One man carried his cat. A young woman embraced a photograph of her dead parents in its gilded frame. An old man continually fingered the contents of a brown sack he was holding onto. I was amazed by the assortment of articles the people valued and cherished above necessities for

survival.

Our old guards marched to the green lawn by the freight station with most of the company in step behind them. We embraced old friends, and searched for those who had still not arrived. The optimistic tone of our conversations seemed out of context when viewing the reality of the situation surrounding us. Our comrades marched off again after the brief encounter.

Our platoon was called to formation. We were ordered to stand at attention. Lieutenant Vaci, the new company commander, seemed to sway before my eyes. The mist that had descended around my mind fogged my thoughts. I could not comprehend what the Commander was saying had to do with me. Fortunately, the others in the formation were more attentive. I was certain that I would not fall into trouble if I imitated their movements.

Ensign Honti, the Commander's deputy, was a dangerous fellow, a fanatical disciplinarian. The lanky Ensigh introduced himself by making ten of our boys throw somersaults, and jump to his every command. "We are at the threshold of great events!" he accented with a meaningful tone.

The blood froze in my veins.

Our guards had gone insane. Even old Gummy-eyes, who was always so shy around us, hit, kicked, and shouted abuses in our faces. The former swineherd, Sergeant Bodor, was now given the power to assault the Jews.

I had to ask myself, what had.happened? Our "secure" labor service world was crumbling.

This was the atmosphere that enveloped us as we were herded into a cattle car destined for the Rumanian Carpathians.

At our next stop there was another train, made up of freight wagons, carrying deportees. Our unit had to remain in the freight car. The deportees were kept locked up in the line of freight wagons of the train on the railroad tracks parallel to us. We were not permitted to exchange words.

The rays of the setting sun illuminated a corner of the decrepit station building. It was dusk. I lifted myself up to look through the bars on the small window located near the roof of the car. I saw a bearded old man peering through the barred window across from me. I heard his trumpeting voice hailing the heavenly forces above. I envisioned him to be the likeness of an old prophet.

"Why is there no thunder? No lightening? Why doesn't the sky mourn our expulsion? G-d, who had elected us, G-d, who had created the world for our sake, why do you allow nature to blossom? Why doesn't the earth tremble? Your first born children are herded like cattle to an unknown destination. Do you approve of our humiliation? Our extermination."

The gendarmes patrolled the station. Night fell. The lamps of the railwaymen flashed in the darkness. The air filled with the sound of rolling drums. The wagons shunted. The rails droned a sound of eternal despair for all who suffered. Our little world within the cattle car hummed and vibrated, creating a numbing sensation. I felt like I was under the effect of a strange narcotic. I wanted to sleep. The night screamed with uncontrollable terror and rage. The yell I heard brought me back to full consciousness. All sounds merged with the chugging of the two engines as the trains pulled out in different directions each towards its own destiny.

My mind began to play tricks on me. The memory of the train, and the old prophet seemed like a dim recollection from decades past. I began to wonder whether it was real, or something made up by my imagination. This condition should have shaken me. Then, I realized what I was feeling in my chest. Arctic ice had replaced the heart within my breast. It would be my defense against all suffering for all time.

The only thing that made the days bearable was the constant change of environment. My attention was diverted outward. The moving train became a permanent home. During those days, I suspected that my parents had to leave the shelter of their ghetto. I pictured them on another train moving towards an unknown destination. I knew that the German decree did not recognize regional differences. I wondered if the window in my parents' cramped world was barred. Did they, too, beg for a swallow of water?

Sometimes, I felt a weakness in my body caused by a shapeless, naked fear, which was unrelated to any concrete physical danger. After a time, the sensation became so permanent that I did not even notice it anymore.

We were unloaded from the train in a nameless Rumanian village. The guards led us through the town, and ordered us to tear down the wire fences separating the peasants gardens. As we worked, we exchanged ideas concerning the use of the stolen wire.

We did not know if the work was meant to keep us occupied, or if the wire would be used to bar windows of freight wagons carrying deportees. Of course, the farmers in the village did not speculate over why we destroyed their fences. They shook their fists in threatening gestures. They must have imagined we were working for the personal gains we would reap from the stolen wire. We shrugged our shoulders, and ignored their curses. The guards kept the irate villagers at bay with threats that anyone who interfered would be brought before a military court.

Meilech and I came upon an abandoned Jewish home. all the rooms were empty, and the window frames had been removed. In one room we found a few Hebrew books that had been tossed into a corner. The owners name was written on the first page: Lazar Chaimovits. We did not speculate about where the poor man might be. We each selected two books and left. As we emerged from the desolated house, we encountered an old woman. We did not speak her language, but through gestures and mournful expressions she let us know the sorrow she felt for her deported Jewish neighbors. She brought us a large jug of milk, and refused to accept our offers of payment.

It was not until we reached a large Rumanian community named Leordina, that the company was assembled together in one unit. The gymnasium of the local school was used to house the two-hundred and fifty labor servicemen. We embraced Osterman and Wohlberg in a warm greeting when their unit arrived from Oroszko. We made a place for them next to us in the dormitory. We were glad that the "kosher korner" was complete again. Our common bonds developed into a deep friendship. We helped each other rise above the depressing situation of that cursed summer. We rarely remained in one place for more than two weeks. From Leordina, we moved to Petrova, and then down into the Babcsuk Valley.

In the Babcsuk Valley, we worked from dawn 'til dusk clearing the forest. Our guards behaved as though our effort was the most important war work in the world. Whenever they caught us resting behind a pile of logs, they acted like maniacs. The guards had no qualms about hitting us with their rifle butts. These Nazis had come to regard us as their bitterest enemy. They blamed us for the deaths in Szolnok that were caused by Allied bombing. "The Americans are avenging the Jews," our slave drivers murmured. Our status had deteriorated from "Auxiliary laborers," to "bloody bastards," to "mangy dogs."



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The strongest were selected to fell the trees. The boys from Szabolcs, led by the overambitious Hegyi, outdid everyone in massacring the beautiful forest. The urban boys, who were unaccustomed to handling tools, were given the exhausting job of carrying the huge logs to the clearing. We "kosher boys" were included in this group. We looked for something resembling a path, and then pushed and pulled the logs along with the aid of a rope. Everyone had to work very carefully to keep the logs from slipping out of control. There was always the danger of injuring those who were working below.

We, "the sons of a wise people", speculated about the purpose of our activity. We knew that collecting logs would not save the Royal Hungarian Army from the communists' tanks and artillery. We calculated that destroying the forest was a scheme that was devised to keep us occupied. The faint sound of Russian cannons could be heard from beyond the Carpathians.

Not only did the "kosher boys" have to endure physical abuses form the guards; I found myself under verbal assaults from my companions. The Baron quickly joined in when he heard the other boys making fun of me.

"Holy One!" he shouted through the woods. "Don't you see that G-d is not interested in your sacrifices? G-d doesn't give a fig for you."

I tried to concentrate on hauling a log down to the clearing. I know the hard labor was getting to everyone.

"I've had enough of it," another boy shouted. "If I survive until liberation, I'll immigrate to a part of the world where I won't ever meet another Jew. Not even by chance."

"Don't anyone dare mention G-d within my hearing," somebody stated.

"Enough!" another boy hollered. "We refuse to be the 'chosen people'. Let G-d choose Himself another bunch of suckers."

I talked with Osterman about the situation as we made our way back up into the forest. "What attitude should I take in the argument that has arisen between G-d and His desperate people? I have no explanation for our hardships. No comforting words."

"Moshe Menachem, consider the painful experience we had at Oroszko. We watched as the local Jews were driven from the ghetto. We had become very close to the people. In their poverty, they were upheld only by their faith and ideals. They showed us nothing but kindness.

"Our unit was put up in the Synagogue. The benches were removed to make room for our straw mattresses. Upstairs, in the women's place, the authorities piled bales of the Jews possessions. They made an inventory of sheets, eiderdown, and household articles. They counted every item, whether it was valuable or not.

"We could see from the window that those wearing the yellow star were deprived of everything, except for the most necessary personal effects. They were pushed along by the gendarmes, and forced to take their places on the heavily loaded carts. We looked on as they disappeared into the dust kicked up by the horses. The gentiles were in a festive mood. They enjoyed the treatment the Jews received as though it was a circus performance. Most of the crowd was malicious, yelling abuses at the fearful deportees.

"The whole accursed gentile population agreed that they were the rightful heirs to all Jewish possessions. In the days after the Jews departed, the local population spent every minute trying to get their hands on the plunder that was stored in various public buildings.

"The valuables that were kept in the Synagogue even tempted some of the labor services boys. They dug through the bales for a shirt, and old towel..."

Osterman must have forgotten where he was. "This is not a theft, I thought!" he cried out in shame. "I admit I was one of those who regarded some insignificant item that was left behind as my own."

Two guards noticed our intense conversation. "Hurry up," one of them shouted at us. To give emphasis to the warning, they came up and shoved us along with their rifle butts. We ran for the protection of the woods. All afternoon we carefully avoided those two Neanderthals. At sunset we lined up for the march back to our area. I walked along beside Osterman. I had time to think about his story about the stolen Jewish possessions at Oroszko.

"Where did I leave off? Oh, yes." Osterman's expression was sullen. "We repented a thousand times for touching those poor rags. In doing so, we presented the gendarmes with a ready made excuse to vent their vengeance. They slapped me with such force I thought that Heaven had fallen upon my head. When I protested I was struck with a rifle butt. Then, the representatives of legalized crime lectured us. They made it clear to us that it was the Hungarian people who were martyrs, not the Jews. We were

blamed for everything from high rate of tuberculosis in the country, to the crib deaths of young children. We were told that these things happen because of Jewish crimes."

"What poisoned minds," I said with indignation. "Let them blame their own ignorance. And their religion, which is the bitterest enemy of knowledge. They are afraid to admit that their troubles are the result of the feudal attitude held by the Catholic Church."

"That was not the end of it," Osterman said sadly. "The sergeant of the gendarmes told us that we would be taken to court. He told us that the punishment for stealing state property in wartime would be severe." Osterman wore the expression of a man who had avoided death. "The expropriation of Jewish property is legalized theft."

We were on the move again. Two-hundred and fifty labor servicemen shuffling up and down steep mountain roads, followed by a mobile field kitchen, carts, and wagons. The heat was oppressive. We stopped to rest somewhere between two Rumanian villages. We were able to form a quorum for afternoon prayers before being called back to marching formation. Along the road we passed a farmyard. There was not time to think twice. We dashed to the fence with our milk bottles. We were grateful for the milk the peasant woman gave us. We ran to catch up with the company happy in the fact we would not have to use the store of food we had been gathering. The others in the company took their nourishment from the field kitchen, which met their needs generously. The "kosher boys" were left to their devices. Meilech and I each carried a small bag with cooking pots and mess kits. We were ready for any eventuality.

I no longer listened to the talk around me. I did not know how to respond to the dreadful changes that had taken place. I tried not to think about what the Hungarians' treatment of the Jews would lead to next. My only defense against the unbearable pressure was to maintain an attitude of indifference. I felt that it was not the time for senseless discussions. I was alone, except for Meilech. I was more intent than ever to benefit from Meilech's phenomenal Talmud scholarship. By clinging to traditional Judaism I was able to build an island of sanity in a sea of madness.

"Do you know what troubles me most?" I said to Meilech. "The conflict. Most Jews cannot understand why we have been set apart from the rest of humanity. Can you blame them for thinking

they have been given a miserable fate for a heritage? Everyone asks the same question: is there a purpose behind it all? What can we tell them when they cannot comprehend the medicine of spiritual joy, which calms all physical pain? "We forget our problems when we concentrate on the most personal, the most important. How do we explain and defend our G-d? The greatest value of our religion is that it forms the moral basis of our entire world view. The Creator knows what is good for His creation. How can we explain this guardianship without provoking painful questions? Why must a people, whose only purpose is to open their soul to G-d, have to suffer in this manner?"

"According to our traditional teachings," Meilech explained, "G-d intended for man to be a partner in the creation. This is the reason.the world of men is still imperfect. We must accept the suffering that results from this imperfection for the sake of a perfect future world. This is the moral religious meaning of our trials and our tribulations, and of our suffering. It is the Jewish mission to endure until perfection is realized."

I found comfort in Meilech's words.

My spiritual euphoria ended when we entered the Babchuk Valley. The plateau was hidden among twisted trees and stunted vegetation. It was a perfect setting for a nightmare. Without warning, we were attacked by a platoon of gendarmes. Their severe expressions conjured up ancient times the dawn of mankind invasions, plunder, senseless massacres.

The gendarmes separated us from one another. They made it clear that they wanted whatever they could find: watches, rings, gold chains. We were told we had no right to personal possessions, and that all we carried belonged to the State. We were slapped, beaten, and knocked down by swinging rifle butts. Disappointment turned the gendarmes into raving maniacs. We had little of value for them to steal from us. The gendarmes attributed this fact to Jewish cunning. The truth was, that at our age, we had not gained any personal wealth.

In the semi-silence someone moaned, "this is terrible."

"Bloody Jews, you don't know how terrible it is. Now you'll pay for all your sins: for Communism, for the paper boots in the First World War, for everything. At last the Hungarian people have come to their senses. You will be exterminated!"

CHAPTER XII

Early in August of 1944, our company was forced to line up on a plateau of the Marmaros Carpathians for the officers from the German Todt organization. They walked along each file inspecting us with the savvy of expert cattle buyers at a country fair. They felt our muscles. The officers did not bother to speak with any of us during these proddings. Their faces expressed neither tension nor satisfaction.

To be truthful, we had more confidence in the German officers than in our Hungarian slave drivers. We were electrified when we heard the news that our next destination was in the mountains on the Hungarian-Slovakian border. We were encouraged by promises that our treatment would be made more bearable.

This commentary surprised everyone in the company.

The traveling circus was off again.

In reality, we lived like the crew of a submarine, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. We were entrained once more. A kaleidoscope of fields, villages, railway stations, and staring faces flashed by our windows. This constant motion from past to future, gave the illusion of space travel. All we wanted was to settle down, because staying in one place meant relative peace emotional balance time to catch up with events, and ourselves.

I doubt if there is a trace of evidence left of our encampment in the clearing on the mountain where the three borders meet. Moss has certainly overgrown the holes of the tent poles, the dug out latrine, and the cavity where the "kosher boys" dug out a fireplace. The camp is merely a memory of the surviving members of the Third Company of labor servicemen formed at Zebegeny.

We tried to make everything as comfortable and homey as possible. We covered the top of the long tent with moss and green branches. Our quarters stood in the center of the clearing surrounded by the smaller tents used by the cadre, the officers, and the supply depot.

Within a few days, the insecurity of our journey was something that belonged to the past. In the mornings we walked along an already worn path that ran the length of the mountain ridge like a long wound. It represented the border between Hungary and Poland. Down in the valley, a few hundred yards

away, we could see a deserted Polish village. To the left, was the sign post that marked the intersection of the three borders. This is the spot where we dug the tank traps.

We worked with little enthusiasm. The sound of Russian cannons grew louder each day. The mountains resounded with the echo of a nearby battle. The front was moving ever closer. The allied airplanes overhead made caution a necessity. We knew that the Germans could not hold out much longer. The Red Army was breathing down their necks.

The irrational behavior of some of the boys in the company was as confusing as the chaotic life we lived. The only other group in this no man's land was a "white unit" of Jewish converts made up of doctors. We saw them often on our way to work. One day, fifteen of our boys exchanged their yellow armbands for the white armbands of the new "Christians". The majority of labor serviceman were outraged by the incident. I was overwhelmed with despair to the point that I was unable to utter one word to the spineless infidels.

Rumors had spread through the company that Archbishop Seredi and Bishop Ravasz would intervene on behalf of the converts. In actuality, the Government had no intention of sparing any Jews converts or not. But, the Christian functionaries were taking advantage of the situation to "save souls." "This contagion is spread by three converted men in the company," someone whispered hoarsely in a tone of absolute contempt. "The false promise that conversion will save lives is the invention of the white armbanded clerk, Lazar."

A boy named Wald shared the information he had gained. "Zoltai is part of it. And his buddy, Szekacs, has also put on the white armband."

It did not take long for most of the boys to regret their decision to wear the white armband. They removed the "white rag" from their sleeves. Perhaps, because they were ostracized by the steadfast members of the company. They might have sensed that the days of Awe were near. At home, the shofar was already sounding.

Our proximity to the front lines had an effect on everyone. At night, we saw luminous, balloon-like objects in the sky.

"Stalin candles! Something will happen soon!"

"This is where the Russians will attack!"

The war had reached us. We could no longer walk down to the small Polish village in the valley because it was ringed in barbed wire, marking the limits of no man's land. German soldiers occupied the trenches we had dug. We were afraid to glance in their direction. We feared that any sign of open interest on our part over what they were doing would provoke an attack against us.

Meilech offered a timely quotation from the Talmud. I cannot remember what he said on that occasion, but I am certain that the annihilation of Amalek was the central theme of his commentary. There were about fifty Wehrmacht soldiers on the mountain ridge. I suspect that I had become too insensitive to the continual assault of change to appreciate the chilling significance of that moment.

On the first day of the Jewish New Year, the soft green and gold Autumn colors disappeared behind a curtain of mist. It rained so hard that we could not go to work. I led my fellow Jews in prayer. I felt the entire Heavenly Court of Justice descending around us. We shook hands, and shared the traditional wish of the New Year with each other. "May you be written in the Book of Life."

On the evening of Yom Kippur, our entire company prayed together in the long tent. A candle flame danced in the darkness.

"I forgive you, my people!"

Apparently, our cries of despair had found their way to the footstool of the Creator. In this moment of forgiveness came a barrage of Russian artillery shells. Every member of our unit panicked. "Put out the candles," someone yelled. The whistle of shells sent the entire company running from the tents.

"Demolish the tents," the Ensign commanded. "Take the planks to the village at the foot of the mountain."

I stumbled down the dark mountainside. The lightening of battle danced in the sky. The shells seemed to whistle passed my ear. I thought I had been hit. Everyone threw down the planks, and dove for cover. In the flashes of light I spotted familiar figures. In the short silences between incoming rounds the comments of those around me touched my consciousness.

"We should have expected this attack following the long rains. The German soldiers were exhausted. They were grateful for the rainfall. When the ground dries, the Russians will be here."

Someone else mused in the darkness. "This would all be very

nice; if we were not in the middle of it."

The bush and trees and snarled roots of the forest ripped and roared in a chorus of madness. A river of fire flowed down the mountain. Wave after wave of danger seemed to sweep towards us with no other purpose than to wash away our helpless human existence. Russian artillery shells burst all around us. Bodies jumped in every direction to avoid the flying missiles.

Yom Kippur was celebrated individually most of the company fasted the entire day. The plateau where we had been preparing for a peaceful Holy Day was a whirlpool of fire. The battle raged at full force. The dead and the wounded were carried in an endless procession to the camp hospital that was set up in the village. One German soldier had a terrible head wound. I suspected he had manned the trenches we had dug on the mountain. Another German soldier brought in three Russian prisoners. The sound of machine gun fire indicated that more Russians were coming.

Two days later, news reached us that Horthy had resigned; the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szalasi, was named Head of State. The company was assembled to listen to the officers and soldiers pledge their loyalty to the new regime. Ensign Honti did not comprehend the meaning of the change of government. He accepted the advice of his former schoolmate, Miskolc Honti ran inland, away from the border, and the Russian attack.

"This will be a point in Honti's favor when the Russians arrive," someone commented.

"He needs a good many points in his favor to balance the dirty tricks and beatings he so generously dealt out to us," someone else replied.

I cannot remember entering the village of Taksany. My memory is flooded with roads teeming with fleeing civilians loaded carts, frightened and hopeless people refugees. "The Russians will be here soon," were the words that were murmured everywhere. It was a death sentence for the Fascists; a whisper of hope from lips that had been silenced for so long.

In Taksany, our company was equipped with saws and axes. We were marched five kilometers to the nearest forest. We were ordered to engage in the most senseless woodcutting one could imagine. There was no chance that these logs would ever be put to any use. I did not want to have a part in it. I hid in the dense forest. I read psalms form my worn prayer book to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

Not a breeze moved in the mournful grove where I secreted myself away from the slave drivers. A noise in the woods struck fear into my heart. I saw two guards approaching my hiding place. When I realized that they were not looking for me, I laid out flat upon the ground. My nose filled with the scent of the damp earth. The hatred of anti-Semitism penetrated even the darkest part of the woods. I overheard the conversation between the two guards.

"These Jews are beasts, not humans," one guard growled.

"Don't they realize that the Germans are making soap from their bodies," the other guard said. "Everybody knows it, except them. What happened to their famous intellect?"

"Szalasi will change the tide of the war. Horthy protected the Jews. That's why Dolfi kicked him out of the government." The guard shook his head. "It would be awful, wouldn't it, if the Reds won the war. The Jews would survive, and be the victors."

The two guards agreed that it would be a terrible turn of events.

After a long silence, one guard whispered to the other. "Can you hear that?"

"Yes. Planes."

I heard the sound of aircraft as well. There must have been hundreds of airplanes passing overhead.

"Our planes?"

"I doubt it."

"Let's go see that the men are working."

"Don't call them men. Say, 'bloody kikes'. Not men; 'bloody kikes'."

When I was certain that the guards had gone, I jumped up and ran to join my comrades. As I stood on the slope leading to the camp, I could see the allied airplanes. The sky was black with them.

"They are dropping their bombs very near," someone called out.

"Taksany?"

We climbed to the highest point on the plateau. From there we could see the village engulfed in smoke. Flames rose to the heavens. Bombs seemed to be falling everywhere.

As we approached the flaming village, the stench of burning wood and flesh intensified. Soot floated skyward on plumes of fire. Cries of injured children put my nerves on edge. The

survivors mourned their dead. Every yard was littered with dead horses and cattle. Even before I reached the silo where we had slept the night before, I could see that the structure had taken a direct hit. Miraculously, all the members of the company, who had remained behind in the village, were not injured. Everyone had found shelter in a nearby cellar. I searched through the rubble for my personal belongings. Everything had fallen out of my blackened rucksack — clothing, books and personal effects. Still, my rucksack contained my most valued possesion: my tefillin. With tears in my eyes, I thanked the Almighty for this symbolic message. I had lost everything except my Jewishness — the essence of my life.

On the Feast of Shemini Atzeret, our company was herded to the railway station to load wood into freight cars. A formation of Russian planes appeared on the horizon. The Germans ran for shelter the moment the alarm was sounded. Our unit was forbidded to hide. The Russian aircraft assaulted us with machine-gun fire. Bombs fell all around me blasting dust and debris into the air. I was not touched by the bombardment; some of the other boys were not so lucky. Poor Gyuri Sterk, who stood two steps from me, lost his life in a second. Steiner was severely wounded. He tried to hold back the flow of blood from his own wound with the palm of his hand. Steiner's teeth chattered uncontrollably. He wept hysterically. "Don't let me bleed to death," he pleaded.

Two of us threw together an improvised litter, and carried Steiner to the company area. A guard ordered us to bury Sterk's body in the Taksany cemetery. By the time we returned from the graveyard Steiner's brilliant, alert eyes had turned to orbs of glass. He was dead.

"Poor Wohlberg has been taken to the German hospital at Szinna," Osterman informed us. "He was shot in the stomach." Osterman's spirit was broken. He and Wohlberg had eaten from the same dish, slept side-by-side, and exchanged the deepest personal thoughts and convictions concerning the war, and the wisdom of Judaism. Osterman knew that no one at the German hospital would be overly concerned if Wohlberg lived or died.

There was just no time to mourn over the dead. The Russians already occupied the mountain where the three borders meet. The commander ordered the battalion to marching formation to prevent widespread desertions. Panic was etched in the faces of

fleeing civilians, and Hungarian military personal alike.

The disciplined German soldiers were untouched by the turn of events. Like robots, the Germans continued to work at their tasks of war. They busied themselves by digging a gun placement for a huge cannon on the outskirts of the evacuated village. A platoon of gendarmes forcibly cleared the roads to insure an "orderly" Wehrmacht retreat. Pedestrians were run into ditches. Our entire company, carts, kitchen wagon and men, were ordered off the road. The German infantry jogged passed us in precise formations. The soldiers in their mobile units sat straightbacked in the lorries that drove by neither looking left nor right.

We passed village after village noting little more than the rising stench from lifeless bodies and dead animals. The peasants' houses were destroyed. The Russian bombs and artillery did not bother to discriminate between civilian and military targets. The whole landscape was fuel for the fire of an all-out attack.

At Ungvar, our exhausted company was assembled in a schoolyard. "Jewish swine," Sergeant Oster screamed at us. "They lag behind. They hide in lofts. We have to drag them out of every crevice by their ears. They think the Russians will welcome them with opened arms. That idea is laughable. The Russians will shoot them in their rears. The Russians will round up the Jews for a death drive to Siberia."

Our guards knew as well as we did that the threat of exile to Siberia was a greater danger for them than for us. Everyone could sense that the balance of power had begun to shift.

Meilech woke me in our dormitory. He held a long loaf of bread under my nose. "I got it at the baker's on the corner," he related. "Hurry. Perhaps you can get a loaf as well. We must prepare for the long march. We will fare poorly if we have no reserves of food."

I ran myself breathless in the warm Autumn afternoon. For the first time in months, I had the freedom to move about the streets unguarded. The town was prepared for the worst, but, as yet, there were no signs that the Russians were coming. I sensed that this section of the village had once been inhabited by Jews. I moved along cautiously passing at least forty deserted dwellings. I felt uneasy about entering the bakery Meilech had told me about. The line to the counter was made up mostly of women. Behind the counter a female clerk busily cut coupons from a bread ration booklet. Every eye in the shop turned to me, as I closed the door

behind me. The people in line seemed as frightened of me, as they would be of a ghost. I was a murder victim who had returned from the grave.

"They say the Russians will be here tonight," a young girl said breaking the silence in the shop.

The bakery girl did not ask why I was there. Silently, she took two pieces of paper and wrapped them around a loaf of bread. I thanked her warmly for the unexpected gift.

When I returned to the dormitory, I discovered that the paper wrapped around the bread were sheets torn from a Talmud book. I wondered who the owner of the sacred tome could be. I pondered where he might be. The ice hardness of my heart melted away. I wept bitter, soundless tears.

CHAPTER XIII

It was the dead of night.

"Company attention! Fall in line!" The commands were yelled out in panic.

The dream-like confusion of the situation had the effect of a superstitious delirium spun from a old folk tale. I felt empty amidst the hectic activity. Meilech ran alongside of me in formation. He was still trying to tie the cord that held up his trousers.

Surprisingly, Meilech was not sure what to do. "Should we stay behind to wait for the Russians?" he said to me. No one was certain how long it would take the Communists to break through the German lines.

"We risk being captured by the military police," I noted. "They would shoot us dead on the spot if they caught us." I pulled Meilech after me. "We will find a good hiding place along the road to wait for the Russians," I encouraged him. A force, from beyond the material world, impelled me to continue on the present course.

The urgency to retreat created total disorder in the streets. Cannons roared in the distance. Houses burned, illuminating the moonless night with red and yellow flames. Our guards, who usually wore hard, ruthless expressions, seemed confused and unsettled. We jogged through the streets until we reached the edge of town. The crossroads, on the southern outskirts of Ungvar marked the beginning of the great plain.

This is where the drama of a major retreat unfolded before our eyes. Our company, what was left of the cadre and carts and wagons and labor servicemen, turned onto the road leading south. Exhausted Hungarian wagon-horses limped along in the reflector light of the German lorries. Hungary was ill-equipped to go to war against the mechanized units of the Allied Forces. They were a far cry from the "elite army" of Europe, they had claimed to be. Tired soldiers sat, or laid, on stalled carts. Many soldiers had put on civilian clothing. They were a mindless mass: without leadership, without purpose. Axis vehicles were running amuck, crashing into one another, blocking the retreat. On the side of the road, a lorry burned out of control a demonic torch --.left behind to light the way to hell for those who dared to follow.

Our company kitchen-wagon overturned. The guards drove us into the ditch that ran alongside the road. They tried to make certain that no one escaped. We were glad to have the short rest. The guards shouted for a platoon of labor servicemen to lift the overturned cart out of the ditch.

Surrounded by the apocalyptic chaos, I felt as though a fog had lifted from my eyes. We were on the outskirts of a village not more than three kilometers from Ungvar. I detected the silhouette outline of a haystack against the night sky. Meilech and I exchanged glances. We did not need to discuss the plan of escape. We crept across the dung-filled farmyard. Within seconds, we dug our way into the sticky, mound of straw. I felt as though I was surrounded by a protective shell. A sense of peace rose in my heart.

I am not certain which touched my consciousness first on that early Autumn morning I sensed the warm rays of the sun I heard Meilech's cautious footsteps near by.

I climbed out from the pile of straw. The road was empty. My feelings of confusion and despair had fled with the retreating armies. I inhaled deeply, savoring the sweet breath of freedom.

We were near the last house on the edge of the village. There was not a sign of life anywhere. We approached the stable carefully. The door had been lifted off its hinges. The animals had been driven away. Green flies gorged themselves on mounds of dung.

Next, we walked around to the house. There was not a stick of furniture left inside. Straw had been spread out on the earthen floor someone had camped there before us. We searched every

corner of the house for a bit of food. All we could find was a few onions that had been left in the loft. Fortunately, we still had our supply of bread.

We could hear the noises of domestic animals near by. I did not think that it was time to take risks by scouring the area. I wanted to hide in the darkest corner of the loft. Meilech, on the other hand, gave proof of his courage and ingenuity. He trekked to the next farm house, and returned with a bottle of milk, a few eggs, and some apples.

"Where in Heaven did you lay your hands on all this?" I asked in amazement.

"The Creator sent it."

"Yes, but who was His messenger?"

Meilech grinned slyly. "I begged it from our neighbor. I saw her through the plank fence. She listened to my request without making a reply. The woman walked to her house, and returned in a few minutes with the food." Meilech shook his head. "As I was thanking her, the woman assured me that she had always been good to Jews. She told me she never laid a finger on the property of deported Jews. She would rather loose a hand than do such a thing. The woman is frightened about her fate. She asked me to say a few good words for her when the Russians get here."

"When the time will arrive for the coming of the Messiah," I quoted from the Talmud, "the people, who have persecuted the Jews, will swarm around the people of Israel and shower gifts upon them."

During the afternoon, we decided that it was better to remain inside the house. The ceaseless roar of cannon fire was very close. The battle was on. The Russians attacked. Somewhere near us, the Germans ground their teeth, and dug in for the fight. During the brief periods when the Russians paused from their artillery barrage, we heard the rattle of machine gun fire.

Reality had lost its power to frighten me. There was nothing to do but let the future take care of itself. A gentle breeze stirred the branches on the tree next to the house. They brushed against the outside walls. Meilech and I prayed and ate our Sabbath dinner in darkness. We hummed the ancient festive hymns. It was one of the most extraordinary Friday nights of my life --celebrated on the frontier between life and death.

Meilech folded his trousers for a pillow, and wrapped himself in a blanket. He fell fast asleep. I merely pretended to sleep. The

holiness of the Sabbath served as a source of comfort, dispelling all sensations that were not in harmony with the festive moment.

Suddenly, from somewhere out of the darkness of the night, there was a knock at the door. The knocking turned to pounding. The words were strong and penetrating in a language that sounded strange to my ears.

"Go," I told Meilech in a trembling voice. "Go and open the door."

"Go yourself!"

There was no time to hesitate the fingers of a front-line soldier are quick on the trigger. The instant I removed the crossbar, the door flew open. A handgun was aimed at us. The soldier, who was holding the weapon had flashing, almond-shaped eyes and high cheek bones. His squat, muscular body was clad in a uniform that looked like it had been sewn together from old cotton blankets.

There he stood before us our liberator. A Russian soldier. The Red Messiah.

We did not protest when the Russian soldier searched through our rucksacks, and "liberated" our loaf of bread. We were happy to give it to him. We embraced the soldier. We told him, in sign language, that we considered the bread small payment for being brought back to life. He was more concerned with his hunger than our gratitude. It was difficult to say how long ago he had strayed from his unit to pursue the retreating Germans on an empty stomach.

Early in the morning, several Russian lorries backed into the farmyard. They were followed by a long line of exhausted soldiers. They spoke in a tongue that sounded oddly primitive. From their mannerisms, I sensed that they were a race who inhabited a savage landscape. It seemed natural that they should conquer the land of Hungary.

Among the thirty Russians who rested in the farm house and stable, we met a Russian Jew. We were able to speak to him in Yiddish. I realized that he was an officer by the uniform he was wearing. The Russian Jew was suspicious of us at first. But, as we talked his mistrust waned.

"We are Hungarian Jews forced into labor service," I related. "Our families have been herded into ghettos, and deported abroad somewhere. We have not heard from them in months."

"Yes, I know," the officer said in a serious tone. "We met labor

units made up of Hungarian Jews in Russia... and later, along the entire front. Those, who survived, were taken to prison-of-war camps along with the Germans. At the Don (river), the Germans stripped thousands of Jews of their clothing, and allowed them to freeze to death. I have also seen Germans and Hungarians burn hundreds of thousands of Russian houses. You must realize that our people have suffered severe cruelties. The victorious Red Army will take better revenge." The officer concentrated on rolling crude Russian tobacco into a piece of Russian newspaper. "Would you like a cigarette?" he asked us.

"We do not smoke," Meilech replied. "We are religious Jews, and this is the Sabbath." Meilech wanted the Russian officer to satisfy his curiosity. "Are there religious Jews still left inside Russia?"

"Did you realize we are celebrating the Sabbath today?" I asked. I wanted to know what Communist Jews thought of our religion.

"There is no calendar on the battlefield," the officer stated. "Even in civilian life, I was never particularly interested in what day it was." He made an unconscious smile, and left me with unanswered questions. "The cursed Fritzes are preparing a counterattack. I think they will reoccupy this village by evening. If you value your lives, I suggest that you make your way back to Ungvar immediately." The officer raised his hand in farewell, and he was gone.

We took his advice.

Meilech and I crossed several fields to get back on the main road. We came across the scene of our flight on Thursday night. The landscape presented a shocking picture. The dead were scattered everywhere. No one had moved the bodies from the positions in which they died. The dreaded Reaper had wielded his scythe across the earth we had trodden upon. The sight of the horror made my knees shake. I could barely walk. The entire stretch of road back to Ungvar was an exhibition of death. The fog and gray clouds added to the eerieness of the slaughter. The stench from the smell of the decaying corpses penetrated the mist that hovered over the countryside.

Even though Meilech and I ran as fast as we could, the sound of the German cannons moved closer and closer. It was already dusk by the time we reached the crossroads. The road was crowded with running Russian soldiers. It was obvious that the

Russians had played out this act of war many times over. They did not flee in panic like the Hungarian soldiers had the night before. Their movements displayed a sense of the routine. They seemed confident about fighting in the monster's own territory. It was clear that the retreat was temporary. A time to regroup forces.

German cannons roared in the streets of Botfalva --the scene of our liberation. Looking back, we could only see a red mist in the distance. Ungvar was crowded with refugees. Women and children were fleeing from the battle ground.

The Russians did not remain idle. We saw one unit dragging a huge cannon into a ditch. They were turning the barrel in the direction of the enemy. The soldiers faces were distorted; their teeth clinched in their strenuous effort, their faces blacken with soot.

Meilech and I knew we had not escaped all dangers. We ran through the town of Ungvar. We reached the road to Munkacs, where the Russians had fortified their position. We did not dare look back. Behind us Sodoma burned, and the flames from the blaze ignited the clouds above.

"It is best not to think about what would have happened to us had the Germans found us in the deserted village at Botfalva," I said.

We had been shown a miracle.

CHAPTER XIV

"Dokumenty."

We were stopped by a Russian patrol. The soldiers had their hands on their guns.

"Dokumenty," the Mongolian-faced soldier repeated. He expected us to prove our identities.

He had no way of knowing that Meilech and I were two innocent dreamers. We were certainly not hatching a plot against the glorious Red Army. They had liberated us from the yoke of the Monster.

Unfortunately, we were not able to communicate our good will and gratitude to the soldier.

I had an impulse. I opened my filthy rucksack, and took out my

faithful frontlet. "Jewish roboty," I stated proudly. ('We are Jewish working men.")

The Tartar face lost none of its harshness.

We held out the Hebrew books that we had found in Munkacs to show them that we were sons of noble people.

The soldier inspected them upside down. His face took on a stronger expression of malice. We did not understand his language, but it was obvious he was swearing at us.

He let us go.

Meilech and I trudged along the storm swept road. We were in disheartened spirits. The taste of freedom was bittersweet. We wandered aimlessly. The Jewish homes, the Synagogues, every dwelling place had been robbed of its contents they were empty. Meilech and I picked up a few of the thousands of Hebrew books we found in the deserted houses. But we could not read them. We were overwhelmed by the unbearable horror of the silence. Joyful people would not return to their homes from their daily tasks to read over the pages of these tomes. The streets did not resound with the laughter of children.

Meilech and I kept roving. Occasionally, we entered farmhouses owned by Hungarians. The men greeted us with grim expressions; their women glared at us with cold, hostile eyes. I could not care about that we could not survive without food. So, we begged for a few potatoes, tomatoes, eggs, fruit and milk.

We came to occupy a vacant flat, formerly inhabited by bureaucrats. We prepared our kosher meal. There were six in our group: three boys who had been able to stray from their units, and Berele Osterman. Osterman had hidden in a loft at Ungvar before our company moved out under the Russian attack.

Hundreds of labor servicemen had been liberated in the Russian advance through the Carpathians. Still, the bulk of the labor companies had been driven south by the fleeing Facist troops. There would be few opportunities for the labor servicemen, driven onto the plain, to escape the Monster. Beyond the mountains, natural hiding places were scarce.

Many of the labor service boys did not fare better under Russian domination. Unknown faces were pointed out to the Russians by the local populace — it was difficult to escape being noticed in Munkacs. Jewish laborers were picked up in the streets, and sent off to Russian prison camps along with their German and Hungarian persecutors.

"The Russians will not catch me," Osterman said as he reclined in comfort on an old mattress.

An older companion, Jankev Diener, had been to the Soviet Union. Diener related the horrors he had witnessed:

"Jewish labor servicemen suffered the worst, the most unimaginable atrocities in a small village on the Don. On the outskirts of Dorohich, on the last day of Passover, I died and then rose from the dead.

"Hungarian soldiers revealed the face of the beast. The first, so called, 'hospital' for Jews was established on a farm just outside the town. Of the sixty-thousand Jews, who were sent to Russia, the few thousand surviving labor servicemen were herded to Dorohich. All the others had starved, or frozen to death, or were murder victims of their Hungarian overseers.

"At first, the Jews were brought to the farm in small groups. Later, they came in carts and lorries. There were others who crept along on all fours to cover the last few kilometers to the hospital. Many of the Jews had gone insane because of the horrors they had seen, and from the sadistic torture suffered at the hands of Hungarian soldiers.

"Typhus spread through the hospital like wildfire. The ill were delirious. I lived through my battle against Typhus, and became immune to the disease. The lack of food and medical attention killed many others. Jewish doctors and nurses tried to care for the sick without the benefit of instruments or medicines.

"The hospital area was surrounded by barbed wire. Discipline was maintained by soldiers armed with machine guns. Hungarian soldiers walked up and down the rows of sick Jews lying on the ground laughing like hyenas, the soldiers kicked the dying Jews in the head, they jumped on emaciated bodies with their boots. The soldiers made a good time for themselves with this kind of torture.

"On the last day of Pesach, a stable housing eight-hundred Jews, myself among them, burst into flames In all four corners. The wood and straw fed the fire. The stable door was wired shut from the outside. The burning victims wailed and screamed. The healthy and convalescent patients tried to escape the inferno. Those who were able to break out of the stable were mowed down by a barrage of machine gun bullets.

"The nightmare lasted less than ten minutes. Most of the inmates died in the blazing stable. The others died within a few days, either from third degree burns or bullet wounds.



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"I was shot in my right leg. I crawled along on my stomach to the security of a nearby stable where I lost consciousness, I awoke the next morning in a room in a brick building that was located next to the burned down stable. Someone had placed a paper bandage on my leg. There were a number of Jews crowded into the same room. Most were badly burned. Most.died within the next few hours.

"I was out of danger. But it was a long time before I was back on my feet again."

"Our company spent the war in a resort," Osterman said to break a long silence. He ignored the fierce attack from the army of lice that inhabited his mattress. Osterman maintained a level of optimism with dreams of returning to his home town. He related how he would recover the possessions stolen from his family. "I'll let those thieves and gangsters have it," he cried. "Should the members of my family return, I will receive them in a completely furnished home."

Unlike Osterman, I lived from one day to the next without a definite plan for the future. In my daydreams, I remembered the stews my mother use to prepare: the aroma of beef and lots of red peppers filling the kitchen. I wondered if my mother had the necessary ingredients to cook her beef stew -- but I refused to question whether she was alive or not. The problem was: I did not know if I still had a home.

Early in November of 1944, Meilech and I took our leave from the "kosher group". We walked out to the Munkacs-Beregszasz Road to wait for a ride. Luckily, we were joined by an attractive woman, who was traveling in the same direction. Before long the three of us were picked up by a Russian military vehicle. The Red Army had a pronounced weakness where women were concerned.

We had traveled less than one kilometer when our lorry passed a sad procession. Armed Russian soldiers herded German and Hungarian prisoners along the road. I felt a deep sense of disappointment when I realized that a large number of Jewish labor servicemen were mixed in with our enemies. The Jews in the procession were being led to another place of unknown suffering. I could not help but feel a sense of gratitude to the Russians riding next to me on the lorry. If Meilech and I had been on foot and met the prisoners marching along the road, we would have been taken captive and suffered the same fate as the others. Still, I felt the Russians should consider all Jews their natural allies in the war

against the Nazis.

In our travels, Meilech and I rarely covered more than twenty kilometers in a day. Autumn took on a melancholy quality that hovered over the muddy streets of every Hungarian village. Now and then, a lone peasant cart crossed the desolate landscape. Darkness fell early, and we were forced to search for quarters for the night. It was not advisable to roam the streets after sunset.

As we tramped from village to village, Meilech and I learned that a new order was evolving. Returning labor servicemen were demanding a place in the new order. The people who came forward to teach the new ideas, to preach the new convention, were given the means to spread their propaganda in newspapers and publications. In every village the word was circulated that the world would never again fall into the trap of riches and poverty. Communism was taking hold. The Russians had placed Jews in the positions of Mayor, and Chief-of-Police in both Munkacs and Beregszasz. Hungarian agitators, sent home from Moscow, made clumsy attempts to disguise the fact that most of the Ministers in the Provisional Government were Jews.

Most Jews believed that Communism offered them career opportunities they would not have had before the war. Neither Meilech nor I were enthusiastic about the changes that were taking place. Once again, misguided Jews were developing roots in Hungarian soil. It would be only a matter of time before they would be ripped out once more.

Meilech repeated many times: "The rebirth of Judaism should not take place in this cursed land. Palestine is our true home. Be assured, Moshe Menachem. I will not stay here. I am going to Eretz Israel."

Throughout our travels, Hungarian peasants complained to us about the treatment they had to endure under the hand of the conquering Red Army. The Hungarians considered Meilech and I, partners in league with the Russians. They pleaded to us for mercy.

I was dismayed. Even in defeat, the Hungarians were permitted to stay in their houses, they slept in their own beds, they remained protected behind their own fences. The Hungarian peasants could not see beyond their own troubles. Meilech and I, and other "liberated" Jews had gained little more than the fragile freedom to wander endless roads in search of lost dreams.

We reached Debrecen, the provisional capital set up by the

Russians. New Debrecen had little in common with the old one. On the streets, Meilech and I met emaciated people dressed in ragged clothing. They pushed around little carts cluttered with useless articles. They whispered mysterious words in one another's ears. They exchanged their poor possessions. The streets were lined with bombed out houses. Not one shop, or even a shack, was open for business. Milling crowds of men and women wandered aimlessly.

As Meilech and I stood watching this pathetic scene, a tall, gaunt Jewish boy approached us.

"I can see you are labor servicemen," he said. "Let me advise you, in your own interest, to keep off the streets. This is the 'black market' area. The Russians will be here shortly to carry everyone off to do some hard work. Haven't the two of you had enough forced labor?"

The young man led us to a side street. He gestured towards the street we had just left. His contempt for the crowd was obvious. "Those swine, they deserve to starve. All the items they carry in their carts have been stolen from Jews. Now they try to exchange what they have robbed for geese, flour, bacon; anything to eat. Only the peasants from the villages, who were wise enough to stockpile food, have something to eat."

The young man led us to the Jewish part of town known only as "The Ghetto".

"Have any deportees returned?" Meilech asked.

"None," the thin young Jewish boy told us, "Everyone was taken away to Germany or Austria. Those countries have not been liberated." The young man shook his head. "The rumors we have heard are frightening." He stared into the distance with vacant eyes. "You can find lists of those who have returned at the Jewish Council. But, those lists contain only the names of labor servicemen, and those who were in hiding using Christian identity papers,"

Loud whistles sounded. We could hear yelling voices from the direction of the main street. A shot was fired. Even though the crowd dispersed quickly, the Russian overlords captured a dozen people to put to work as unpaid laborers.

Our new friend conducted us to a kosher food center, which also served as a Synagogue. The kitchen director informed us that we had to be disinfected for lice. Meilech and I settled in for the night. In the morning, after we finished eating breakfast, Meilech surprised me by announcing his plans.

"I want to leave for Eretz Israel," he told me.

I pointed out to Meilech that a member of his family might return to his home town.

"That world does not exist any longer," Meilech stated. "Should someone return from deportation, they can find me in Jerusalem, or some other town in the Holy Land. It will be much better if I prepare the way to Eretz Israel for my family. We have no buried treasure in this land."

I walked Meilech to the railway station. My eyes were brimming with tears. Meilech had become a part of my inner life. The train departed, and my good friend was gone. My "Guardian Angel" flew off into the distance. He left me with the parting words: "Go to Jerusalem."

I felt sad about remaining behind. But then, I had a special gift for loneliness.

The news about the war was more frustrating than comforting. The Germans were still resisting the Russian assault at the river Tisza. I read an article that mentioned Vamostelek had changed hands five times. I walked to the Jewish Council. I checked "the lists" --no one from my family had returned. Disappointed, I made my way to the Hotel Bika, which was the seat of the Provisional Hungarian Government. It was fashionable, for those with nothing better to do, to stand outside the hotel and look in the window as the Russian officers downed tumbler after tumbler of Vodka. The sidewalk was always crowded.

A large number of ambitious labor servicemen were always gathered among the curious observers. They were easily distinguishable from the rest of the crowd by the clothes they wore. The young men dressed in leather coats, that the Russians had peeled off the SS soldiers, and boots once worn by the Arrow Cross boys. It was their status symbol.

The less knowledgeable spoke about these young men with admiration. There was one, Sanyi Kertesz, who had become an "emperor" within a month. Stories about Sanyi spread faster than news about the war. It took a quick mind to take advantage of every opportunity that came along. Sanyi supplied low ranking Russian officers with all the liquor they could drink. He even promised to provide what was needed before he knew where to lay his hands on the bottles. Sanyi remained the "emperor" of the black market until his best buddy, Sergey Ivanovich, took it into

his head to rob Sanyi's stock.

Emperors did not remain on their thrones for very long.

I found that I had been seduced by this enchanting, lively town, which hummed with legal and illegal activities. It was an impure dream translated to reality. All my holy strivings, my saintly thoughts, the faithful observance of "The Law", which was my strength throughout my days of slavery, now deserted me. It occurred to me that after succeeding at overcoming exterior obstacles, I was faced with a struggle to find inner peace. My confusion stemmed from the fact that I had not learned how to live without conflict.

I roamed the streets without purpose. I watched the streaming crowds in their search for pleasures of the night. I moved from group to group. From one sidewalk to the opposite one, listening to meaningless conversations. One evening I ran up against a loud laughing mob that was blocking the sidewalk. In the center of this group of rogues I saw my landsman, Geza Rosenberg, the Baron.

The Baron had become an irresistible man-about-town and professional womanizer. He could have printed such titles on his calling cards. The Baron shone and sparkled in his leather coat and riding boots.

"Rabbi. Mike. Holy One." The Baron called to me joyfully. "You are alive. I was convinced you were smelling violets from below."

"I detached myself from our company after Ungvar," I said. "Bad pennies always turn up again." I was not only referring to myself.

The Baron paid little attention to what I said. He put a protective arm about my shoulders, and drew me into his charmed circle. The Baron's face held a devilish glee. I knew what was coming, and blushed in advance.

"Don't think for a minute that he is a genuine Rabbi." The Baron played to the crowd. "He is only a synthetic one. He was called Rabbi in our labor camp. Before he entered the Yeshiva he was not exactly, ah, what you would call a puritan. But he cheated the devil and went off to study the Talmud. He was a tough lad once upon a time. I must admit that he stuck to his foolish principles in the camp. He suffered all kinds of hell for his stubborn 'kosherism'."

Even though this extravagant introduction failed to create

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moral indignation among the Baron's buddies, I was embarrassed. The Baron sensed my discomfort, and shook me gently. As much as I found the Baron's company unpleasant, he was the only one whose aim was to return to our common home town.

"When are we off to Vamostelek?" I asked.

"In a day or two, Mike. We will bring order to Vamostelek." The Baron was drunk on triumph. "We'll show those Arrow Cross boys what justice is all about."

My partnership with the Devil seemed doomed from the start. We were captured by a Russian patrol. They took the Baron and me to a military hospital. There was no elevator. We had to trudge up and down thousands of steps carrying heavy litters. These were the soldiers who were wounded in fierce fighting on the banks of the river Tisza. The wards and operating theatre were filled with amputees and injured soldiers screaming in their delirium. Legless and armless invalids lay groaning in the corridors. After working for five hours, an opportunity to leave presented itself.

We departed without saying goodbye.

Walking so fast that some would say we were running, we left that town of blackened scars behind us.

CHAPTER XV

The Baron smiled sarcastically. He had regained his self-assurance. He spoke as if he had cheated the entire Russian Army; outwitted them all by himself. "Well, you won't catch me again, you vodka-guzzling tovaris-chi," the Baron yelled over his shoulder at the receding city of Debrecen. Rubbing his hands together, he set off across the Hortobgy Plain at a pace that would have left Alexander the Great in the dust during his conquest of Asia Minor.

Our triumphant advance was slowed by the ankle deep mud we had to trudge through. The local authorities had never done much to keep the roads in good condition. German and Russian tanks had completely destroyed the primitive transportation system.

We came upon a multitude of burned out, overturned war machines scattered across the countryside.

"Ha, I hope they learned.their lesson," the Baron said with a

grin, referring to the retreating Fascist hordes. The Baron made it sound as though he had played a vital role in the rout.

"According to the newspapers, this is where the fiercest tank battle of the war took place," I replied. "Both sides threw hundreds of tanks into the clash. The Nazis resisted like mad dogs.

"We may have started out too soon," I suggested. "We might end up in the middle of the fighting. Perhaps we should cross into Rumania. The American Jewish Aid Organization has been set up in Bucharest, where they look after refugees. The Rumanian leaders capitulated to the Russians in August. They fight alongside the Allies now. The stupid Hungarians remained loyal to the Germans."

The Baron glared at me sharply, and then broke out into loud laughter. It was obvious that the Baron did not want me to desert him.

"It is a most ridiculous paradox, Rabbi. The Hungarians have always considered themselves the best soldiers in the world. Yet, they have never won a war. Once again, the Rumanians will maneuver themselves into a position to acquire considerable territorial gains at the end of a lost campaign. The Rumanians will land on their feet, like a crafty old cat. Hungarians will wander aimlessly in a country turned to rubble."

The cheerless, muddy landscape, and the Baron's company had turned this adventure into a senseless journey. At each stop, I wished more fervently that I had never agreed to the absurd idea of walking across Hungary.

"Listen," I said as I stopped and faced the Baron. "I'm sorry, but I want to return to Debrecen.

"Are you out of your mind?" the Baron cried in astonishment. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"It isn't too late, is it?" I said.

"Do you know what you are, Mike?" the Baron shouted at me. "You are a certified lunatic. Do you know why you're crazy? You went mad from all that praying, and hand washing, and from that poor food you cooked for yourself.. If you hadn't gone to Telekes things might have been different. All Vamostelek nearly split their sides with laughter when you came home the first time with your new beard. You should have seen yourself shaking like an epileptic in the Synagogue. Your desperate attempt to seem religious was so exaggerated that many people doubted that you still had all your marbles. Everyone tried to maintain a sense of

moderation. You, my insane friend, completely departed from the norm." The Baron forced a smile to his lips. He placed an arm around my shoulders as if he were asking for forgiveness for his slip of the tongue. "Mike, the truth of the matter is: we can't go back."

I was convinced that staying with the Baron would lead me into trouble. I recalled what was said about him in the labor camp when the lack of camaraderie was the greatest of all sins: "The Baron is so selfish, he would burn down a palace to have a fire to fry and egg for his supper."

For the time being, we struck an imperfect accord. We walked into Balmazfalva. The inhabitants of the village glared at our worn rucksacks with suspicious eyes. We were ghosts returning from the grave to haunt them. The life of the gentiles continued with or without Jews. The manner in which they ignored their guilt drove me mad. I hated the bloody murderers. The sight of the abandoned Jewish houses was heartbreaking. Everything of value had been carried off by the good gentile neighbors. The vandalism against Jewish homes made me think of ancient, desecrated graves. I knew that there was no hope that I could remain in this country.

There was a large number of Russians occupying the village. We decided to seek safe quarters immediately. We found a roomy hostel inhabited by four Jewish labor servicemen. Every room was filled with furniture. The place reminded me of a well stocked, but deserted pawnshop.

We were received with open arms. Those at the hostel shared their dinner with us in such a way that we did not feel that we were accepting charity.

We soon learned that the cohesive force behind Jewish unity in the village was embodied in the spirit of Mr. Gyemant, the first Jew to return home. He wore a peaked cap, and was never seen without his gray woolen scarf wrapped around his neck. He was a man of few words. He had gentile eyes. There was something impressive in his manner. He carried himself with dignity. When he blew his nose into his large red handkerchief, it sounded like the Shofar on the day of Rosh Hashana.

Mr. Gyemant took on the task of recovering stolen Jewish possessions with a dogged determination. Every day after morning prayers, Mr. Gyemant took his blackthorn stick and followed the latest "clues" he had been given by gossipy people, or by those eager to denounce their "friends." Everything he found

was brought back to the Jewish hostel: furniture, dishes, cutlery, clothing, tubs, and anything else returning Jews would need to begin their lives over again. Mr. Gyemant threatened the peasants with a one-way ticket to Siberia if they did not return the items they had robbed. In reality, Mr. Gyemant worked without Russian authority. His true ally was the fear in the hearts of the defeated Hungarian people. The Hungarians believed that Jewish vengeance was backed by Russian might. Vengeance was not even on Mr. Gyemant's mind. All he wanted was to save whatever Jewish possessions were available, and return them to the rightful owners. If the rightful owners did not return, there were those who had an infinitely better claim to the abandoned articles than the criminals who had stolen them.

Mr. Gyemant's one man recovery campaign rallied the tiny Jewish community. His singular effort raised morale to a high level.

On a pleasant Friday afternoon, I was able to satisfy my cravings for a hot bath. It was a truly sumptuous experience. I felt like I was permitted to greet the queen of the Sabbath in the proper mood. The festive atmosphere was enhanced by nourishing chicken soup and boiled meat, and the inspiring hymn we sang. The bright burning candles set on the clean, white tablecloth lit up the faces of the participants.

Mr. Gyemant, who sat at the head of the table, did not take part in relating experiences about the war. With the steadiness of an ancient oak tree, his eyes analyzed the Bible section for that week. Wagging tongues wondered about the Jews who were still absent. Mr. Gyemant called out in a warning tone: "'Sabbat. Sabbat.' Let them stay silent who have no cheerful subject of conversation." The voices that harbored fear fell silent.

This evening raised the hope that life would soon return to normal. We were only capable of existing while in the service of G-d.

Five days after our arrival in Balmazfalva, the Baron and I were on the road again. Before I knew it, we were riding in a Russian lorry, moving at full speed in the direction of Tiszafured. There was no sense in arguing with the Baron, he was determined to dominate my thinking. He went into great detail to describe the roast pork he had eaten in Balmazfalva. He spoke about the wines he had tasted, and the "willing dames" he had visited. I knew there was no point in preaching to the Baron. He would just laugh in my

face. I took refuge in a feeling of lethargy.

My life had become a play between light and shadow. I knew I had to make a decision. I battled with the alternatives available to me: Should I return to Debrecen? Should I go on to the Holy Land? Should I allow myself to be guided by chance? I was overwhelmed by the journey that was bringing me ever closer to the place of my birth. The road ran across a flat plain. The poor, deserted, gloomy landscape depressed me. I slept for brief periods, but each time I awoke we were still traveling across the same desert. Ghostly trees waved their wintry branches at me. Their mystical dance reminded me of the grief which had been my constant companion since childhood.

"Tiszafured," the Baron shouted. "How much further is it to Vamostelek?"

"Thirty-five kilometers," a Russian soldier replied. He ordered us to get off the lorry, and left us standing in the center of the Main Square. The mud in the streets was ankle deep. There was nothing that could have tempted us to stay in this place.

The Baron and I wanted to cross over to the opposite bank of the river Tisza. As we neared the river, we could see the bridge had been blown up by the retreating Germans. Russian soldiers were restoring the bridge for their own use. We noticed that a good number of unpaid workers had been gathered as laborers.

"Halt," the Baron called to me. "I swore to myself at Debrecen, that I would never again voluntarily collaborate in the reconstruction of this country, Let's turn back before we are caught in the machine."

It was too late. We were stopped by a Russian patrol. A soldier demanded to see our identification papers. We had been traveling without any kind of documents. I showed the soldier my Hebrew books. I proudly stated what I believed to be miraculous words: "Jewry roboty."

We were taken to the Russian Headquarters. Our gestures to explain that we were liberated labor servicemen were ignored. We were thrown into a cell. I tried to sleep in spite of the fact that giant cockroaches and mice were watching my every move.

I was awaken early the next morning by the Baron's moans. "I want to see Vamostelek, once more," the Baron complained. "But I'm afraid the Russians will send us off to Siberia." He presented a truly pathetic spectacle with his shaking shoulders and tear drenched cheeks.

The night spent in captivity affected me in a different way. I dreamed about what lay beyond tiny barred windows. The dark sky was filled with stars. The Old Wise One, up there someplace, had devised a test for me. He took me over the tree lined road to Tiszafured once more, but this time their limbs were pure white. Invisible birds sang from the branches. "This is another fateful moment," I told myself in the dream. The Almighty had blessed the path I walked. At the Taksany railway station, when the machine guns reaped death all around me, I was left untouched. At Botfalva, the Russian Jewish officer had warned me to flee the German counterattack. "You see, Baron," I told him in my dream, "one must never despair, never give up hope."

In the morning, the door to our cell creaked open. A Russian guard took us to the anteroom of the Headquarters Commander. A tall, white haired man entered the room, and sat down on a chair. His face looked familiar.

"Tell me, sir," I addressed him, "were you at Vamostelek about six years ago? Do you remember the Weisman's, my grandparents? You were the cook at my aunt's wedding. I was one of the children who ran in and out of the kitchen all day long."

"Of course I remember." The tall man smiled. "Now, I am the cook here." His face turned serious. He examined our ragged appearance and filthy rucksacks. "You have come from a forced labor camp, haven't you?"

The Baron turned to this stranger, and grasped his shoulders. "For Heavens sake, help us," the Baron cried. "I am the son of the restaurant owner at Vamostelek. We were on our way home when we were captured by the patrol. Possibly, they thought we were spies because we have no identity papers. Please, they will listen to you."

The Russian Commander entered the room, He was a medium sized bear. It seemed as though nature had carved out his body with primitive tools, etching only an outline physical structure. The Commander turned out to be a gentle, human bear. The cook testified on our behalf, explaining that we were born and raised in the region. The Russian Commander issued us the necessary identity papers. We would not be sent to Siberia after all.

The moment we stepped out into the streets of slush, the Baron reverted to his former self. His arrogance returned. He spoke as though we owed our escape to nothing but his cleverness.

I turned to him. "Baron, it is time to say goodbye. I plan to leave this country as quickly as possible. If you wish, you may go on to punish the war criminals at Vamostelek. Obviously, you expect the people of Vamostelek to welcome you with music, flowers, and then offer you the post of Mayor on a silver platter."

"It will be exactly as you say, Holy One. It will all be there. I'll be Mayor, and Chief-of-Police. There will be a military band to greet me. I will trod on a carpet of flowers. White clad virgins will vie for my favors." The Baron shrugged his shoulders. "Unless, the triumphant Red Army has already introduced more drastic measures."

We parted company.

CHAPTER XVI

All roads lead to Bucharest Rumania, as far as returning Jews were concerned. The American Jewish organization, JOINT, had set up headquarters in the city. Each escapee was initially given fifty thousand leis, and then thirty thousand leis each month. The bestowal of funds became a natural part of Jewish life; accordingly, the money could be accepted without shame or humiliation.

Long lines formed in the huge waiting room. There was shouting, abuses, at times even fights broke out. A well dressed Hungarian commented haughtily. "These Poles are filthy rabble."

A gentle looking man in the line raised his voice. "It sounds like Your Lordship has not had a taste of concentration camp life. How dare you criticize the 'ungentlemanly' behavior of the Poles. You might hold a different attitude had you been in Poland in 1939. Your Lordship could show a little tolerance for those who have looked death in the face ten thousand times. In the death camps, only the fighters survived extermination at the hands of the usually polite and calm Germans.

This quiet warning told me not to question the behavior of any Jew.

Those, who had been hunted like animals for years by the Nazis, and Jews recently liberated from Auschwitz, entrenched themselves on the square in front of the Committee building. With an indifference I found mysterious, they bought and sold, legal and illegal goods. Over and over again, I heard men who

seemed to be talking to themselves; "I am buying gold," they would say.

This was the black market.

Bucharest was the crossroads for idealism and materialism; filth mixed with purity. It was interesting, and sometimes exciting, to meet people with so many different ideas, and different values. Yet, they were all one people.

We all reacted to the news from the European death camps with the same dazed, disbelief when the horrors were related. It was said that the Nazis nearly succeeded in completing their "final solution." It was whispered that the Nazis had murdered six million Jews.

I was alive, and I was safe; but I was paralyzed by the pain of it. This terrible knowledge overwhelmed me. I idled away my time. Of course, I told myself I was being productive. I bought a copybook. I planned to write down my thoughts pertaining to the Great Ideal. The aim of the book was to clarify not only the problems of Judaism, but those of mankind as a whole. The manuscript would not take shape in my mind.

In the waiting room at the Jewish Committee, I listened to the nightmares recounted by the genuine victims. They raised their complaints, their accusations, against those who allegedly remained passive during the era of doom. According to the survivors of the death camps everyone was guilty!

The allied governments had refused to take in the great numbers of refugees, they did not bomb the railway lines leading to the extermination camps. The local Jewish Committees helped the Nazis fool their victims into going to the slaughter houses without protest.

There were denunciations. An infamous collaborator was in this very building. In Budapest, he had maintained excellent relations with the Nazi leaders. He must have known about Auschwitz in 1942 a letter had been smuggled out to him describing every hellish detail of what transpired in the death camp. Now, he was a member of the Committee.

As passive as the people were in the days of doom, they were all the louder in their "post fact" denunciations. They hollered now, when what had been done could not be undone. The survivors of the extermination camps hated everybody and everything. I, for one, could not blame them for ranting like madmen. They had earned the right to despise the entire world for

its blind submission to the Genocide of the Jewish people.

"You don't believe us, do you?" the skeleton accused us. "Where were you? Do you want proof? Here I am; living proof." The bald man in the ragged camp uniform was named, Smerl. He was one of the emaciated, shrunken Jews liberated from the camps. "Why do you hate this collaborator who is on the Committee? All he did was use his friendship with the Nazis to keep his family out of danger. It would be unfair to denounce all those who survived as collaborators but they are all suspect.

"I have heard you accuse the Budapest Jewish Council and the leaders of the Orthodox community of confiscating forty immigration certificates sent from Palestine. They used the papers to save themselves and their families. But, who here would have acted differently had they been presented with an opportunity to save their loved ones?" Smerl was both accusing and tolerant.

At one point, when he was asked about his liberation from Auschwitz, Smerl curled his hands into fists, and raised them as if he wanted to hit someone. He calmed himself. Smerl smoothed his beard with the palm of his hands, and stared at his bony fingers.

"The instinct to survive turns a man into an animal who will fight to the death for a potato peel," the skeleton stated. "If we take this into consideration, we must find, even the most ruthless 'kapo', not guilty. Everyone is innocent." Smerl's eyes stared at a vision only he could see. "Yes," the man back from hell repeated, "all who survived are innocent. Whatever crimes they committed, they paid for them.

"At the camp, there was practically no water. We slept on wooden planks. Twice a day we assembled in the Appelplatz (in scanty clothing). We were forced to stand at attention for hours in the cold and rain.

"Such conditions did not seem extraordinary it was the norm. Hundreds died everyday."

"What about the local population?" Someone asked. "Didn't they know what was going on behind the barbed wire fences?"

"The people were afraid to approach the camp," Smerl told us. "They were afraid they would be suspected of being spies."

"Why did some die quickly? Others slowly," another man asked. "How did others survive?"

Smerl replied slowly. "Luck. Sometimes a strong body. A more resilient organism." Smerl's eyes stared into a place haunted

by ghosts. "Of course, I have only told you about those who were able to work. Most of the deportees, women, children, the old, the sick, were gassed the first day. The primary purpose of Auschwitz was: extermination.

"Few could withstand the torture, or the hard work, or the lack of food, for very long. Prisoners died within days, or a few weeks at the most.

"Only those who were clever survived for any length of time. One was forced tb establish useful contacts, and make himself valuable to the overlords in some way."

"Did you see Hungarians who were transported?"

"Of course," another skeleton answered. "The Hungarians began arriving at Auschwitz in the Summer of 1944. I was working in the Sonderkommando. The crematoria was operating at full blast."

"For Heavens sake," someone cried out, "why didn't the Poles warn the Hungarians about what was going to happen to them?"

"Warn them!" the skeleton yelled with genuine indignation. "That would have created panic. Nothing would have saved those who were unable to work."

The emaciated Sonderkammando, who had reached a level of knowledge we would never achieve, burst out into laughter. It was a pure, spontaneous, unaffected laughter that convinced us of his undisputable wisdom. He had an undeniable right to teach us a thing or two. "Did you think the cursed Germans lack the devil's cunning?" he asked pointedly. "The death camps did not look like gateways to hell. The camp was surrounded with well-tended flower beds. There were neatly painted sign posts that said: 'BATH'. The unsuspecting victims thought it was natural that they should be disinfected after their long journey. The sentimental operetta music acted like a tranquilizer. An orchestra made up of well dressed musicians played Viennese waltzes as the devil, Mengele, made his selections ordering deportees to line up to the right or the left."

"When did the unfortunate discover they were tricked?"

"In the bath. There is where they learned the soap and towels they had been handed were useless. The hall was crowded beyond capacity by naked people of both sexes. Old men and women, young children with their mothers, all were packed in together. The heavy doors were locked. Not one drop of water fell from the shower heads. Slowly, the gas reached them. That is when, those

condemned to their death sentence, would always panic.

"Screams! Prayers! Curses!

"The people would fight, or cling to one another --some wept, some swore, others prayed to their last breath.

"When it was over, loved ones lay together, hands clasped -- even in death."

"What was the Sonderkommando?" Someone had to know the worst.

"A half hour later the mass of tangled bodies no longer breathed life. The gas was pumped out of the hall. The heavy doors were opened. That is when it was time for the Sonderkommando to begin its work. This group was made up of Jewish men who were promised life and food in exchange for doing the most horrible work ever invented my mankind. They were given gas masks and rubber boots. Then, they went inside and separated the dead bodies. They searched for gold removed wedding rings and ripped out gold teeth. Next, the heads of the dead were shaved and the hair collected. The practical Germans regarded hair as an important raw material for their war effort. Then, we transported the dead bodies to the crematoria.

"Afterwards, we were driven in lorries to the Sola River. There, we dumped the burnt remains into the muddy water."

I found myself gasping for air. I am sensitive to words the accounts of the horrors turned to pictures in my mind. I had to get outside.

I made a conscious decision never to go near the Auschwitz survivors again.

I was always in a melancholy mood, trapped in the joyless passivity of the solitary idler. I had been in Bucharest for two months, and still I was incapable of generating enough energy to get involved in some kind of constructive activity. Most of the Yeshiva students kept themselves busy learning a trade. The Zionists set up workshops, and an Agricultural Academy. I was afraid of any kind of group activity, and kind of "party discipline." I told myself that I disapproved of the feverish preparations for a new life in Palestine. My aim was to delve deeply into the treasure house of Jewish knowledge in preparation to write popular books. I wanted to mirror the true, but greatly misunderstood, essence of Judaism, and write about the mission of the Jewish people.

I sat in a cafe near the Committee building. A strong wind blew outside, and a little drizzle fell on the Black Market. I stared

out at the misty street, nerves tensed with a multitude of ideas running through my mind.

The door to the restaurant opened. A blast of fresh air penetrated the room. A gaunt looking man searched the room with his eyes. He wore a gray military coat that came down to his ankles. There was something familiar about him.

In the next second, I was running towards him with open arms. "Yankel! Yankel! You are alive! Thanks be to G-d." I expressed my joy so loudly that every eye in the restaurant turned towards us. In Bucharest, it was not unusual to see a friend step out from the shadow of death.

Yankel and I sat down at my table. We held each other's arms. Anxious questions flew back and forth between us. Yankel Seidon had just returned from Hungary.

"Immediately after Budapest was liberated, your grandmother, Aunt Weiszman, and your sister Agika returned to Vamostelek. Ten boys, who were in the labor service from the early days, have also returned.

"The village is in ruins. The bombs. Only the Temple walls remain standing. Everything else was stolen from the Jews by the hooligans in the village."

I asked for news about my brother, Laci.

"Two weeks ago, I talked with your grandmother and Agika. I saw your Great-Uncle Menyus. He had just returned from Auschwitz that huge man is now a skeleton. They all live together in your Aunt Magdus' house near the station." Yankel stared down at the table. "Your grandmother weeps and weeps. I tried to comfort her. I told her the war was not over yet. Those in Austria cannot cross the frontier.

"Your grandparents were lucky to move to Budapest when they did. Agika could not leave the ghetto. Your father had sent a well paid gentile to fetch her from your grandparents house. The man kept the money believing that no Jew would survive, and that he would not have to account for his actions.

"Fate walks a mysterious path," Yankel commented.

Other than Agika's good fortune most of the news Yankel shared with me saddened my heart. I had to deal with the dreadful knowledge that my parents were murdered without any sane motive.

"Your Grandfather Weiszman died just before liberation, on the last day of Chanuka. He was the last one to be buried individually for your Uncle Feri took his body in a handcart to the Jewish cemetery.

"All the others, who perished in the ghetto, or who were shot down in the streets by the Arrow Cross assassins, were piled up in the yard of the Kazinczy Street Synagogue. Due to the extreme cold, their bodies froze together. When it began to thaw, the smell was unbearable. The bodies were no longer recognizable. They had to be buried in a common grave."

Yankel stopped talking. .

"What news have you about your brother, Meir?" I asked.

"Meir does not want to hear about Hungary," Yankel told me. "He went to Italy. Meir is in some refugee camp, where he is waiting for a visa to South America."

"Why isn't Meir going to Palestine?" I asked. "Doesn't he believe in the philosophy he preached? It was Meir who filled my head with religious Zionism. It is he who has betrayed that ideal."

Yankel related what had happened to Meir. "While in the Miskolc ghetto, he escaped being entrained to Auschwitz. A Captain, named Horvath, recruited all boys over fifteen years of age into a labor battalion to save them from deportation. He was one of the few gentiles who saved Jewish lives undoubtably, he will receive his reward in Heaven.

"The labor camp was located within the borders of Hungary," Yankel continued. "It was a vacation resort in comparison to the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camps. The labor camp was a target of the Allies' airplanes. A bomb exploded right next to Meir." Yankel shook his head. "Meir was buried alive. He had to be unearthed by his comrades."

I felt empty. My heart turned to icy hardness.

Yankel and I left the restaurant. On the other side of the large Committee building stood the "Linas Hacedek." It was a hostel used by impractical dreamers, like myself. The bleakness of the place did not surprise Yankel. It was as disorderly and dirty inside as it was outside. The inhabitants of the hostel lacked any kind of discipline. It never occurred to anyone to sweep away the rubbish. Most people went to sleep wearing their clothes. The hostel had been in operation for two months. It was already filthy, smelly, and worn out a reflection of the people who lived there.

There were not many of us, but everyone assembled to

welcome Yankel. All wanted to hear the news from Hungary. Yankel was tired. He placed his rucksack on the empty bunk above mine. He folded his clothes to make a pillow. He covered himself with his long coat, and slipped into a deep sleep. The other residents of the hostel retired to their bunks.

I remained awake for a long time. I listened to the mutters and groans of my companions' nightmares.

I realized what was troubling me: I had to return to Vamostelek to see my surviving relatives.

CHAPTER XVII

I started my journey home. Movement, the clacking rhythm of train wheels beneath me, relieved a feeling of invalidism that had been induced by a long period of abstract apathy. Reaching Vamostelek, gave a temporary sense of purpose to my life.

I learned that my beloved Master from Telekes was staying in a town in southern Transylvania. The Master had been liberated to one of the protected houses in Budapest. It was related that he rarely spoke. The Master spent his time studying and reciting psalms without pause. He gave no advice to the helpless; he refrained from uttering words of comfort.

How could he, with ten martyred children and his young wife gone? The Master was inconsolable.

When I saw his tragic face, the white stubble of his new beard I felt as though I was standing before the wailing prophet, Jeremiah. I kissed his hand. My hot tears wetted his thin fingers.

I abandoned my resolution to seek out the surviving members of my family. Another dreamer, Zalman Gross, and I decided to accompany the Master on his travels. We revolved around the Master like the planets revolve around the sun.

The three of us travelled from place to place under the most miserable of conditions. As often as not, we had to ride inside closed freight cars. One village was the same as the next. I cannot remember entering one town, or leaving another. I never stayed in one place for more than a day or two.

Someone gave me a Hungarian newspaper that described the mass execution of labor servicemen at Bor. The Jews were led out of a Yugoslavian copper mine, and during a forced march of several hundred kilometers, they were all shot down. I read this

article aloud to the Master to learn his views on the great tragedy. The oracle remained so stubbornly silent that I was afraid to speak about the horrors that had befallen our people.

I had expected the Master to answer with a well composed, practical reply. His deep mournful eyes merely served to pose greater questions in my mind.

I did not behave well as.an assistant. I was a champion of inattention. Fortunately, Zalman Gross was not the dreamer I thought he was. He had an instinct for knowing when the Rabbi was in need.

I am certain that the towns we visited were unknown to our Master. He never looked up; he did not perceive the world around him. He walked with his head down --looking inward. In each town, we accompanied our Master on visits of courtesy to other Rabbis. The Master was received in an atmosphere of great respect.

At Arad, our host related how the thirteen thousand Jews in the community were exposed to deadly dangers. In the Summer of 1944, the Hungarians occupied the city for a short time. On Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, the Chief of Police refused to hand over a list of Jewish names because of the holiday. This delay, of a Single Day, saved the lives of the Jews. The freight wagons that had been prepared for the deportees were needed elsewhere.

Still, it was clear to me that a world capable of genocide, the mass murder of millions of innocent people, was built on an immoral foundation. Europe, streaming with the blood of innocents', was undeniably a Christian world.

Based on these ideas, I began making notes listing the important historical facts, to distinguish reality from the warehouse of masks that might disguise the true events as they took place. I planned the book to rid myself of the poison of lost illusions, and also to satisfy my vanity and ambitions.

I busied myself in this endeavor to fight off an all embracing weariness. My state of lethargy made me almost useless in my position of "shames."

We settled down in Nederesd, where the Master planned to establish a Yeshiva. In this town without Jews, in an empty flat once inhabited by Jews, I became rigid. I managed to arrange the furniture, collected here and there, in the two rooms where we lived. Set against a backdrop of smoke stained walls were a chest of drawers, a few imitation mahogany chairs, a bed with a flowered

cotton spread, a large table, and an armchair for the Master. Zalman Gross and I camped out in the smaller room and ate our meals at a communal kitchen located nearby.

We brought meals to the Master, which were prepared in the private kitchen of a Jewish couple. I remember one Friday afternoon when the Master ordered me to wrap the hot meat the Jewish couple had cooked in a towel to keep it warm for the festive dinner. I was so clumsy at the task, that this most patient of men, lost patience with me and carried out the procedure with his own hands.

Still, it was an exalting feeling to be near him. On a balmy Spring day, the Master spoke to the Yeshiva students in the schoolyard. There were five of them at that time. Under his clever guidance the theoretical debate became heated. His facial expression relaxed, I could sense his joyful excitement. Even the Master's mournful eyes showed a hint of a smile as he explained the elements of the Law.

After the Sabbath feasts, the Jews of Nederesd assembled around the Master's table. They wanted to learn more about the exalted teacher. The Master was held in high esteem by all.

I avoided the overwhelming reality of life by never letting my mind function completely. I lived on the surface. I viewed the world as flashes of light glimpsed through train windows. Travelling was like a drug for me.

In the Spring of 1945, I took leave from my Master, The long journey to the Great Hungarian Plain helped lift me out of my constant state of lethargy. I moved deeper inside Hungary. The fact that I recognized the reawakening of old habits excited me. I realized I still held a strong attachment to the country of my birth, in spite of what the Hungarians had done to the Jews.

The train stopped at a station that reminded me of Vamostelek. I observed the Russian guards on the platform with malicious pleasure. I approved of an extended Russian occupation. I realized with a sense of shock that my feelings were diametrically opposed to those of the general population. With that concept understood, I knew that it was impossible for me to live at peace in this country again.

At Debrecen I changed to the Vamostelek train. I prepared myself for the sight of my unfaithful home town. I wondered how I would react to the false friendliness that I might receive from old acquaintances. I did not feel tolerant towards the non-Jewish

inhabitants of my hometown.

A man wearing a clerical collar boarded the train. The shabbiness of his clothing betrayed the poverty of his congregation. He sat nearby in the car. I kept my eyes on the Talmud I had brought with me from Nekeresd. The man moved over to my seat. He smiled at me. I gave him a curt nod.

"The book you are reading is in Hebrew, isn't it?" he said.

"Not completely," I answered hoping that I would not have to converse with the man.

"You must forgive me," he said, "but I did not understand your reply. Can something Hebrew be only half Hebrew?"

"I am studying the Talmud, which was written apart from Hebrew, in Aramaic."

"Isn't the Talmud the traditional Jewish commentary of the Bible? This is to say, the Hebrew Bible? Unfortunately, we learned little Hebrew at the Protestant seminary where I studied. I think it is a pity that they do not teach Hebrew in the Christian seminaries. Just like you, we are never without the Bible." He pulled a worn covered Hungarian Bible from his attache case,

I felt uneasy speaking with this sugar-tongued missionary it is against our tradition to talk to them. "You say it's a 'pity' that they don't teach more Hebrew to Christian theological students. I say it is the root of Christian criminality. You quote falsely translated paragraphs from your Bible as if they were authentic interpretations of the Sinai original.

"Of course, we speak of an impersonal guilt that grew through generations. One day, I hope the Christian masses will realize what bestial crimes they have not only permitted, but supported. Fundamentally, the millions of murdered Jews were victims of a ritual murder that is deeply rooted in the Christian faith. Jewish scholars can reveal the monastic translators of the Bible knowingly mistranslated the precepts they wanted their followers to see. Today is the time to speak clearly.

"The Hebrew Bible, whether you like it or not, speaks of the mission of an entire people. It never speaks of the mission of one individual. All men are mortal --therefore, no one person can be entrusted with a mission that is to continue throughout history. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible undeniably entrusts this mission to its priestly people, the Jews. It is obvious that any other interpretation lacks authenticity.

"The Christian translations of the Bible are full of


1941
1944
1942
"OUR LORD SAID TURN YOUR OTHER CHEEK"
כמעט כלוי מארץ

falsifications, which can be seen by a comparison to the original Hebrew test. Perhaps the time has come to inform the world that the basis of Christian religion is in great error. It is the most shameless bluff in history."

The man flushed at my accusations. "I must admit it would not be human if you did not react so forcefully to the bestiality you experienced," he said. "What you are saying offends the majority of civilized people. You are exaggerating." He displayed exemplary self-discipline. "As you said, there were vile Hungarians, and vile Germans; but the entire population cannot be faulted. The Arrow Cross members, the Fascists, the Nazis, the gendarmes, yes but don't you think the spirit of love and forgiveness should prevail?"

"I once heard that a Slovakian Rabbi approached the Bishop of Nyitra, and asked him to intervene on behalf of the Jews. The Bishop answered: 'This is your punishment for the crucifixion.' Two years later, the Rabbi, in complete despair, knocked on the door of the Papal Nunzio at Pozsony, who declared indignantly: 'On Sunday I do not deal with profane matters.'

Is the murder of innocent children and old people a profane matter?' the Rabbi asked."

"Nunzio replied, 'Since the crucifixion of the Messiah, their blood is tainted.' Then Nunzio added, 'Unless you leave immediately, I will call the Gestapo.'"

"This was the shameful role played by Slovakian Christianity in the extermination of European Jews. Vicar-Prime Minister Tisho paid the Germans 5,000 crowns for every Slovakian Jew they deported. I do not think there is any point in discussing the attitude of the Hungarian clergy with the Archbishop at their head.

"Reverend, haven't you heard about Pater Kun, who participated in the torture of Jews with a crucifix in his hand?

"What about those who did not protest, but just looked on silently?" I cried fiercely. "What about the hundreds of millions who have been raised with unthinking anti-Semitic hatreds, because of the ceaseless incitement of various Christian churches?

"The pagan world has gradually transformed itself into a Christian world a Centaur half man, half animal.

"It was believed that Jewish truth could be suppressed forever with the Christian world playing the part of the accuser, the judge, the false witness, and the executioner. It was the Christian

states, through their religious and racial prejudices, who permitted human beings to be exterminated for no other crime than that of being alive. Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, Eichmann: were Christians. Szalasi, Endre, Baky, the SS soldiers, the gendarmes, the labor camp guards: were Christians.

"Collectively, you are all responsible."

The Cleric's face was red. I almost felt sorry for him. "What's the use?" I said.

I allowed the Reverend to remove himself from my presence. There was nothing for him to say. I had nothing left to say to him.

The train was approaching Vamostelek.

My heart was heavy with unshed tears. I wondered what I would see in the eyes of my sister, in the eyes of my grandmother.

I asked myself, "Who else might have survived?" At that moment, I thought of my brother, Laci.

CHAPTER XVIII

The British "Liberators" had done good work. Most of the steel rails curled skyward, and the houses around the station had been flattened. Vamostelek had suffered the fate of a small village, which had boasted arrogantly of being an important railway junction.

The whole station reminded me of a sick old man, one had known in the bloom of his youth. People wore shabby clothes; most of the women dressed in dirty old trousers. A Russian patrol paced the railway platform carrying machine guns.

I did not find the present Vamostelek less desirable. On the contrary I felt that this sinful village had become more tolerable by its deserved defeat.

It was two o'clock on a beautiful, May afternoon. Lilacs bloomed in the front garden. A thick lawn lay beneath the bushes. A line of women selling fruit, loudly offered their produce. I wandered across the wide Station Square to the house of my poor Aunt Magdus. Of the four houses belonging to my family, my grandmother had chosen this one as her residence.

I stepped into the yard through the open gate. I saw Grandmother Weiszman standing on the porch, slightly bent, under the burden of the times. She uttered a scream, "Misi."

Noticing my new beard, the symbol of my persistent Orthodoxy, she called to me a second time, "Moshe Menachem." She embraced me warmly, and wept like a storm unleashed by the wind. In the next moment my little sister was in my arms. She had become a woman. Her delicate heart-shaped face was ruled by her warm dark brown eyes. They were filled with tears.

The three of us sat on the front porch. While I struggled to down the sour milk put before me, my grandmother told me about the Budapest ghetto. She spoke about my grandfather's funeral. My Uncle Sandor, her brother, perished with his entire family. They were denounced as Communists by their swinish janitor.

Uncle Benno and his family had survived. Uncle Feri escaped from the labor camp, and joined grandmother in the Bethlen Square protected house. Uncle Benno, who was a lawyer for the Jewish Aid Bureau, helped them reach Budapest.

Grandmother began to cry again. She had devoted her whole life to her family. "I, an old and useless woman, survived," she sobbed.

My grandmother wanted answers for all the horrors that took place. "Tell me, Moshe Menachem, how do you explain these events?"

I remained silent as I stared at the ivy that had wrapped itself around the porch pillar.

"Believe me, Mike, happy is the family in which no one survived. These wounds will never heal. I am afraid of the night which is filled with the images of my little grandchildren. I feel as though the millions of murdered children are still out there. I can see my own grandchildren choking in the gas-filled room. I can see the little shaved heads in the lime pit. I can see abandoned baby carriages on the banks of the frozen Danube. Believe me, son, I should not be here."

The three of us wept together.

After relating my own experiences, I washed off the dust of my journey. I dined on a light meal, and slept to recover my strength.

The next afternoon our yard was filled with people who had returned from the dead some from forced labor, some from Auschwitz, some from hiding. News of my return home had spread through the entire village. Everyone was kind. We embraced with tears in our eyes.

My great-uncle Miska had always been a fat, jovial person.

Auschwitz had literally emaciated him to skin and bone. Since his return to Vamostelek he had shown himself to be far more than a clever corn handler. He was a veritable business genius respected on the white market, and simply adored on the black market. He held phenomenal prestige, especially among the local and visiting Russians.

Russian officers surrounded Uncle Miska in the yard. He was buying Bulgarian tobacco brought in on a Russki military train. There was the obligatory toasts as the brandy bottle was passed from hand to hand.

There were unfamiliar faces in the crowd that had gathered. Jewish men and women trying to adjust as quickly as possible to the economic possibilities of the present. They would fill empty cigarette papers with Uncle Miska's supply of Bulgarian tobacco, and pack them in boxes. Everything would be sold in Budapest to take advantage of the existing cigarette shortage. The profit from the Budapest transaction would be invested in purchasing articles that had great value in the countryside.

The entire country lived on a system of exchange and barter because of runaway inflation. The pengoes was no longer an accepted means of payment. The salaries that were received in the morning had lost half their value by afternoon. Those who could, purchased dollars, rubles, or gold coins, or invested their money in salable goods. Every merchant had to learn to be flexible to survive. This also included overhead the ever present Russian soldiers were always on the lookout for easy prey.

Uncle Miska had made my grandmother's flat an important center. It was dangerous to loiter on the station platform or in the waiting rooms with a full rucksack. After sundown, one often heard loud screams from that direction. The Russians systematically robbed the black marketeers. As a result, we always had guests in our house.

I did not fit in with most of Uncle Miska's associates. They considered me odd. They nodded politely to me before deserting me and surrounding Uncle Miska. They remembered my presence only when I called the men to form a quorum for prayers. Then, I took my place at the "east wall" to assume my new role as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community.

My grandmother gave me a small room overlooking the street, where no one would disturb me in my studies. It was good to have a resting place that was not temporary. I can still

remember the first dream I had in my Vamostelak home. Our dreams touch on things that would be better left alone. They condense our entire lives into tiny packages.

The Protestant minister, from the train, was hauling me over the coals. He announced triumphantly that the Jews had started off their new lives exactly where they had left off he said we behaved like parasites, to the detriment of the country. I replied with indignation, "You sir, are far from innocent where the crimes of murder and robbery are concerned. Yet, already you complain that your victim, who had the impertinence to survive, is now selling cigarettes. A man has to live until he can leave this jungle, ruled by robbers and murders, behind him." I screamed at the minister, "you will see, dear sir, how different our Homeland will be, compared to your world built on Christian 'love'."

My grandmother told me that it was time that we should recover our stolen furniture. "Alone, I did not dare begin," she said as we set out to face the village. "But now there are three of us."

We were greeted by a peasant woman wearing a shawl on her head. Grandmother nodded curtly, then walked on with long determined steps.

"Where are we going, Grandmother?" I asked.

"You will see."

We walked along main street. The white-washed houses bred a sense of familiarity. We turned into the Doctor's Lane, and knocked on the second gate. A sleepy dog yapped at us, but was soon silenced by his mistress. A bony peasant woman, who recognized my grandmother immediately, broke into loud wails. "Oh, my dear lady, so you are back. These are your lovely grandchildren, aren't they? And the others, when are they coming back?"

"Shut your mouth, Mari. You know very well where they are. You had better tell me who stole our family's furniture and clothes."

The woman claimed to have no idea where the stolen property might be. She related how she cried when the gendarmes took the poor Jews away.

"Don't lie to me, Mari Zele. We were sent here by those who saw you carrying away the dining room cupboard that belonged to my daughter, Mrs. Weintraub. If you had the strength to steal it, you'd better have the strength to return it, too."

"I didn't steal it," the peasant woman replied blushing to the

roots of her hair. "I defrauded only the state it was government property."

"I don't care who you took it from, Mari. No harm will come to you if you get your horse and cart, and bring it back at once. You know that things have changed in this world. The big villains are all being hanged, one after another, by the People's Court. The little ones won't escape Siberia, either."

My grandmother only hinted a threat. It did not hurt that people thought she had connections among the Russians.

Within hours, the two dining room cupboards were returned.

Next, we went to the home of my parents, the house where Agika and I were raised. In the hands of its new inhabitants, it had become an ordinary dwelling. Even a house can lose its soul. It was evident that Birinyi was not pleased by our return. He had his excuses for being there. Birinyi claimed he moved into the empty house only after it had been vacated by a bureaucrat from Budapest, who fled to the West when the Russians were approaching.

My grandmother informed Birinyi that we were not moving in at the present. She told him he would have to pay us rent until we decided to live in the house, or sell it.

I did not find a common link to the young Jewish returnees. There was a great divergence in political philosophy. Communism was in vogue. I could not get excited about that system of government.

We were the only family buying meat from the kosher butcher. Single men, and those who had lost their families, had their meals in non-kosher restaurants. Some men set up house with Christian women. No one seemed to care about the Sabbath, or regular prayers. Our religion is closely tied by a multitude of ritual exercises.

It was not part of my nature to do missionary work in this kind of environment. Still, I travelled to Miskolc and brought back a Torah scroll. I held regular services, attended by most of the survivors, in order to at least establish a minyan. I received help from JOINT, in Budapest, to set up a hostel for Jews in transit. Jews were able to remain at our house for the Sabbath. These travelers gave our beleaguered souls a sense of joy, and our home a rare festive light.

Hungarian Jews were unable to celebrate an individual Remembrance Day. "Jahrzeit Days" were just being established,

ghetto by ghetto, throughout the country --according to the day the inhabitants of a ghetto arrived at Auschwitz. Those, who were condemned to death, were usually gassed on the very first day. Over 600,000 Hungarian Jews were killed.

It was related to me that Lili Deutsch had been a nurse on the train that took my father to Auschwitz. I did not have to search my soul to admit that there was something, apart from piety, which compelled me to visit her.

Lili Deutsch stood before me, medium tall, dark complexion, black eyes and hair. But our meeting was far less dramatic than I had pictured it would be. She had lost the magic that use to entice me. Wearing a checkered blue dress she had brought with her from Auschwitz, she looked to me like a frightened little girl.

"Yes, I was with your father to the end," she related. "The old Rabbi from Obecse was in the same freight car. At Auschwitz, they were immediately 'place on the left'. I cannot remember if he said anything. Tens of thousands came and went. Each one had his own troubles."

She did not look me squarely in the eyes while she told me about my father's last days. Perhaps, because she had betrayed her people. I listened to her talk about her work at Auschwitz near the crematorium.

"At first, I couldn't bear to listen to those desperate screams. After a time, I became use to it. When the gas had done its work, Slovak and Polish deportees entered the bath. I worked in the warehouse where they kept the valuables found on the victims."

I was not indifferent to her suffering. I was well aware Lili had been ostracized by our Jewish community. Lili had her Fascist lover. Perhaps she had broken with the Jews. I wondered what offer of hope I could give her.

Madness. Why go on dreaming, when I was now fully awake?

CHAPTER XIX

I visited my Uncle Feri's salon in Budapest. I found him, and his friends, reclining on comfortable modern armchairs and sipping coffee. My uncle introduced me to his guests.

"He is the son of my poor sister who perished at Auschwitz," he said sadly.

The men shook hands, the women only nodded. Aunt Manci had warned them that I had become "terribly Orthodox."

There had always been a deep chasm between the nonreligious family on my mother's side, and the orthodox Weintraubs. We seemed to have established an armistice. Everyone was close to Uncle Feri, a Vamostelek boy. He married at a late age, and his wife was still new in the family. This first meeting was very moving. We also realized how small our family had become. We were a few straws in the wind.

I directed my comments to the fact that my sister and I had decided to emigrate as soon as possible. One of Uncle Feri's friends, a lawyer, wanted to know why I was leaving Hungary. Everyone believed that it was possible again for Jewish youth to enter any career desired.

"What was done to us is unforgivable," I said. "If the Hungarians had only robbed us, then it would be possible to make good what was lost. But those who were murdered cannot be brought back to life. The gentle Jewish philosophy prevents the desire for vengeance from being satisfied. Mutual trust and good will have been poisoned forever because of what happened.

"I am in favor of all Hungarian Jews leaving this country demonstratively, in a body. Such a demonstration would be authentic, and worthy of the Jewish spirit. If the families of victims compromise, for love of comfort, it will only lead to a new synthetic period, which will end in 'nothing'."

Aunt Paula and Pannika entered the salon. I felt joyous seeing them. We retreated to a window with s beautiful view of the Danube.

I had often thought that no matter how "high" I climbed on the ladder of grace, my "holy" feelings would always evaporate in Pannika's proximity. I listened to Aunt Paula and Pannika relate how their old flat in Berlin Square had received a direct hit by an American bomb.

"Well, perhaps not completely destroyed," Aunt Paula said with her usual wink.

"I know," I said somewhat ironically, "the piano survived."

"You're right," Aunt Paula said with a smile. She was ashamed of attaching such importance to an object, when so many beloved human beings had perished around her. "Fortunately, we were in a protected house in the ghetto. We lost our home and our possessions, but we are alive. Your poor Uncle Sandor's home,

with all its valuables, was not touched by the bombing. Unfortunately, he and his family disappeared forever.

"Where was G-d, Mike? Sandor was such a quiet, wonderful man, an outstanding surgeon. He treated the poor without payment, Jews and non-Jews alike."

Aunt Paula wiped at her tears. "A bullet from the pistol of a fifteen year old put an end to his life on that death march to Vienna.

"Did you hear, Mike, how they herded fifty-thousand Budapest Jews from the brick factory? It was a cold, rainy November night. Those condemned to deportation were driven on foot along the road to Vienna. They had no food or medical attention along the way. It took eight days to reach the Austrian border. They were handed over to the Germans, who entrained them to Auschwitz. But, many did not reach the border. Those who could not keep up were shot by the gendarmes and the Arrow Cross guards.

"Representatives from four foreign embassies tried to save them. Letters of protection helped bring back a few hundred Jews. The survivors told of the dead bodies along the road, or swinging from trees. A film was made for the Papal Nunzio, commemorating the inhumanity of the 'chivalrous Hungarians'."

The atmosphere of tragedy became too thick. It was time to lighten the mood by switching to a more cheerful subject. I let Pannika speak without interruption.

It took me a long time to realize that, while I built dreams on memories of the past, Aunt Paula and Pannika lived in the present. Their ideals sprang from a world of music. They had already caught my cousin in their net. He was a veritable idol to the fussy Budapest public. Pannika's eyes flashed with pleasure when she told me that the critics called our Mike, the "Hungarian Caruso."

"How did Mike live through the horrors?" I asked.

"He was in a forced labor battalion," Pannika said. "One of the SS officers fell in love with his voice. When the Russian Army reached their village, he helped Mike get across the border into Hungary."

"Mike, here is your kosher food," Aunt Manci called to me. Laughing, she placed a basket of fruit in front of me.

"This is the boy who stuck to kosher food in the forced labor camp," my uncle said nudging his friend. "In our battalion, we barely had food at all. In the Ukraine, we were happy if we could

find a frozen dead horse to eat."

"It is admirable when someone sticks stubbornly to his principles," one of the guests said to smooth the biting comments.

"The emphasis is on stubborn." Uncle Feri said with a smile.

With the conversation centered around me, I decided it was time to take my leave. At the door I was surrounded by Aunt Manci, Aunt Paula, and Pannika. I dashed down the stairs.

I came to the conclusion that not one girl I had ever known could vie with Pannika. Except for Miriam, my cousin on my father's side of the family. Sadly, Miriam died at Bergen Belsen of typhus only days before liberation.

I travelled between Budapest, Miskolc, Debrecen, and Obecse with the excuse that I was seeking an answer to the question: Was I a parasite? Actually, I spent my time jotting down notes, from which I would later write a book.

In Budapest, I heard a speaker of the Orthodox Agudah say that the Hungarian diaspora was being liquidated. It was time to turn to the leaders of Global Orthodoxy. The significance of the Holy Land had increased due to the fact that it held the greatest concentration of surviving Torah scholars.

I learned about acquaintances who had already gone. They crossed the border with the help of professional smugglers. They settled in "Displaced Persons" camps in Italy, Austria, and Germany. From those countries they waited for visas to America, Australia, and the other free nations of the world. Others waited for an open immigration policy to Palestine.

I was inspired into action. The dreamer in me had no time to search for new answers. I was preoccupied with my plan to return home. I wanted to begin writing. I had to pull myself out of my state of inertia. I felt I had finally found purpose in my drifting existence.

I caught the train to Vamostelek as it was pulling out of the station. What a trip it was. I had to fight my way through the crowd to reach the interior of the car. The slow journey took all night.

The train stopped at a large station. Red)necked Russian soldiers invaded the coaches. They relieved women of their packages. Screams, sobs, and curses ensued. My inner fortress did not yield to the attack of terror surrounding me.

In the morning, exhausted from the tension generated by my unrestful mind, I arrived at Vamostelek.

I had the perfect environment in which to create my masterpiece. I knew beyond a doubt that I had to write a key novel. I tried to crowd all the errors of the past, all the utopias of the future, onto the blank pages in front of me. After a week of desperation, I began to realize that the problems I wanted to address were beyond the scope of the written word.

I took many long walks through the dusty streets of Vamostelek before I reached this conclusion. I could have solved my problem sooner, had I been ready to admit that my failure had but a single cause: I was not a novelist.

Finally, I simply ran away from my experiment.

Friday brought real liberation. I received a guest, Berele Osterman, my friend and fellow sufferer at the forced labor camp. I introduced him to my grandmother as my kosher comrade. I praised him for looking so well.

A calm smile spread over his self-assured, intelligent face. "Thank G-d, I cannot complain," he said. "As far as you're concerned, you look like a genuine Rabbi now." He pointed to my growing beard.

When the last rays of sun disappeared below the horizon, my grandmother lit the Sabbath candles. Most of the surviving Jewish men in the village assembled for prayer we honored Berele by asking him to greet the Queen of the Sabbath.

Berele and I talked late into the night, and continued again the next day. Our memories were revived by the ancient Sabbath melodies. In the afternoon, we took a walk to a local grove. I found the old path that once led to a pine forest. I took Berele to a mound that marked a mass grave. It was a product of the recent past. Russian and German troops had fought a bloody battle for possession of Vamostelek. The Monster had already suffered a fatal wound but the gendarmes had no other preoccupation than the murder of eight Jewish forced labor servicemen.

The small mound lay before us like a mythical symbol an oracle. I saw the souls of my parents, and the souls of all the murdered Vamostelek Jews dancing on this grave. Most of them had drifted on the wind to this place from Auschwitz. They seemed to ask me to read their secrets.

We walked silently along Railway Street, passed its old buildings. The golden-green summer was vibrantly alive. Trees, bushes, blades of grass, swayed comfortably in the warm gentle breeze. I had seen this panorama many times before, but now I

viewed it through new eyes. The ground I walked on had absorbed the blood of the innocent. It was seeping through the soil to the roots of the trees slowly rotting away the leaves and the branches. Even the spirit of the earth, that use to spring forth life, was slowly dying.

"Did G-d know that this world was irretrievably lost? Rotten to the core?" I asked.my friend. "Did He feel tempted to annihilate it all?"

"In this week's Torah paragraph, there is a reference to this," Berele answered me. "The decadence of the other people of the world is clearly evident. The behavior of the Jewish people, while far from perfect, is judged relatively faultless. This is why the Almighty chose the Jewish people above all others."

We walked back into our flowering garden. Grandmother and Agika were sitting on the porch. They offered us sour milk as the third meal of the Sabbath.

CHAPTER XX

As head of the family, I knew I had to take responsibility for the fate of my sister, and myself. I questioned Agika about making preparations to leave the country. We discussed this subject behind grandmother's back in order to avoid causing her unnecessary anxiety.

"As far as I'm concerned, we can leave tomorrow," Agika replied.

"We must be certain about the reliability of the person we entrust with our lives, to lead us across the border," I said.

Agika looked at me so seriously. One would have thought she was eight years older than I, and far more experienced.

I took my leave for Budapest.

I was attracted to the large crowd that had gathered in the square in front of the Budapest station. A skinny young man was holding an even skinnier mouse. The mouse pulled bits of paper from a box, on which one's fortune was written. The sight of the fortune teller surrounded by blackened walls of bombed out houses created a surrealistic effect. I recognized a familiar female face. The girl was caught up in the collective emotions of the street scene. She stared at the mouse with her mouth open.

She was the red-haired, spectacled girl from Telekes, whom I had seen many times. She noticed me, and waved in a friendly manner. "You are the Hungarian student, aren't you?"

I thought about the tremendous upheaval that had changed this previously modest Telekes' girl. She climbed out of a basket set on a tricycle, and worse, she spoke to a man, a bocher.

"First of all, give me a 'Mazel Tov'. I am a happy bride," she stated gaily. "Did you know that the whole world is filled with brides and grooms? Those who have returned from Auschwitz and the labor camps seem to be in a hurry to be married. One couldn't do any better," the happy bride said enthusiastically. "Aren't you engaged yet?" she asked out of curiosity. "Or are you more or less engaged, and won't admit it yet?"

I blushed at her teasing inquiries.

I recovered my composure. "I am looking for the perfect girl," I said. "Should I find her, I am certain that she will be looking for the perfect man. In that case, she will be searching for someone else."

I related that my present concerns dealt with a more serious matter. "I want to cross the border with my sister as soon as possible."

"There, you see," the red-haired girl exclaimed. "You came out of the station at the same moment I arrived. The truth is, we had to meet, because I have a solution to your problem." She spoke with the conviction of a mystic. "My advice is: don't waste time looking for Zionist smugglers. Let's admit between us, Jews are suspicious of those Zionists, who lead so many of G-d's people astray."

I had to dam her flood of words.

"Zionists have nothing to be ashamed of in Warsaw, they tried to save the honor of the Jew. Sadly, their efforts were in vain. Zionist rescue work in Hungary, especially around Budapest, vied in boldness and self-sacrifice with the Warsaw uprising. They risked their lives to save as many Jews as possible. Many Zionists became victims of their own selflessness. At Auschwitz, even the Orthodox Jews had to change their attitude concerning the colonization of Erecz Jisrael."

"I am only a simple Jewish girl. All I know is that Telekes is near the Austrian border. I know a Jew called Neugroschi, who guides people over the border." The girl continued with her forwardness. "Besides, if you are going on such a long journey,

don't you think that you should ask your Master's advice?"

There was no doubt that this girl was sent to me by the Creator. I immediately walked to the railway station, and boarded a crowded train to Telekes.

The happiness of the red-haired bride drew my thoughts towards the problem of marriage. A familiar restlessness arose inside of me. Although my heart was free, at times my soul longed for a mate.

I had suppressed my feelings for two years. As I approached Telekes, my imagination drew me to her with unbearable urgency. The face of the girl I had met during my last weeks in Telekes dominated my thoughts. I remembered the first time she appeared in the narrow hallway outside my quarters. She was waiting for the chicken parts she had ordered; I moved through the small passageway. Our eyes met in a friendly greeting, but we never spoke. She had entered the narrow hall by my lodgings like a fresh breeze, dispelling the smell of slaughtered fowl.

We kept our Thursday afternoon rendezvous, agreed to wordlessly, with religious punctuality. She spoke in a loud melodious voice, as if it were done to awaken my interest. I always found urgent business requiring me to pass through the hall.

The girl was not strictly Orthodox, so when she appeared in black stockings and a long sleeved dress one hot afternoon, I took it for an overt play for my favors. And, though we continued not to speak, I sensed a very friendly air when we passed one another.

This is as far as we had gotten by August of 1943, I had to leave Telekes, and my studies, to enter the labor service.

I hastened along Eszterhazy Street in Telekes, looking for a sign that would tell me if my future bride was still alive. The first place I stopped was at the public kitchen. It was the natural meeting place for survivors.

I heard the bad news from a broken old man. The former corn-handler had no idea why I asked him so many questions about his family. He alone, remained to mourn. He could not have known about the way I dreamed of his curly-haired daughter. I did not tell him.

This was another dream that I had to relinquish. It was a time when a man had to be flexible, or he would break. Like an oak, I bent, but I did not break in the storm of sadness.

When I asked my Master for permission to leave the country, he raised his hand in protest. "No. It is inconceivable that you

should go out into the world by yourself."

"I am not going alone," I replied. "I would leave with my young sister."

"Moshe Menanchem, it seems you have failed to understand me," my Master said seriously. "You must find a wife before you leave this country. As you walked through that door, it occurred to me that I know someone who would be perfect for you.

"Yesterday, I asked her brother if there were marriage plans for her on the horizon. They are a very decent family. Three girls survived. The older boy now acts as substitute father. He is solid as iron. Meet the brother, and you will know what kind of spirit reigned in that family. I think the older daughter would accept you."

The first evening I met the girl. The second evening, the end of a hot August day, we celebrated our engagement. I sat at the head of the table next to the Rabbi. Rella Heller, my bride to be, and her friends, stood around the table. They read the engagement document; a plate was broken.

"Wish your bride Mazel Tov," the Rabbi whispered to me.

One of the younger sisters served an apple pie baked by the bride, who was apparently a good cook. Outside thunder roared, lightening lashed, and it poured; the heat inside the room was stifling. I took on the illusion that everyone in the room expected of me: I would be a decent, reliable Jew, who lived only for his family.

The next morning, my dark-haired future bride and I met to walk to the vegetable market. Rella told me about her father. He had been a salesman, who worked for an important chemical factory.

"After the outbreak of the war, it became increasingly difficult for my poor father to travel from town to town. He was immediately picked out, and abused. He could have been stoned, or had dogs sicked on him, or he could have been thrown from a train. We used to see him off, and meet him when he returned on Thursday evenings. Somehow, the peasants were better behaved when women were present.

"Father was always cheerful. He simply could not believe that the Almighty would not protect His people. On Saturdays he assembled us together, and had us read aloud from a morally uplifting German-Yiddish book. We were not permitted to read novels.

"My sister, Berta, was caught with a novel once. Berta's liberalism was treated ruthlessly the book was thrown into the fire."

"Did you ever feel the desire to read a book?" I asked. I wished to know what had held her back.

"Never," Rella answered. "My father said that evil was learned from such books. His word was sacred to me."

I felt a noticeable change in me. As we walked through the destroyed ghetto to the market, I felt like singing.

Rella picked up the live chickens to inspect them. If it was not fat enough, she placed them down with a wry smile, and walked to the next stand. She displayed her housewifely qualities. The vendors called to her from all sides. From time to time she gave me a bright look.

"It is simply miraculous that we met," I said to Rella as we walked home. "I would like you to tell me why you agreed to our marriage so quickly. I am sure you were told that I was a penitent, a Baal Tesuvah."

"At first my family and I agreed because it was the Master who brought you to our house. Of course, we discussed every detail." Rella smiled. "You did make a good impression on all of us. My brother, David, is very enthusiastic. He has a good eye for people.

"Still, no one wished to influence me in case I had any doubts. I made the decision. I think, the Master's recommendation was the deciding factor. Only good can flow from such a holy person."

We arrived at her apartment.

"Oh, here you are," Etelka said. She was Rella's charming sixteen year old sister. "We can have dinner," she said as we entered.

The affection this family showed to one another was delightful. Rella filled the role of substitute mother in the house. I was anxious for her to meet my young sister, Agika. Whenever the conversation touched upon the Days of Doom or Auschwitz, someone introduced a new subject. Rella's brother was particularly clever in seasoning the conversation with humor. I was drawn into the loving intimacy surrounding me.

David began to put questions to me. He was very polite, for in this house they were always careful not to offend anyone. I knew the reason for any anxieties he might have stemmed from his deep concern for his sister.

"I have mentioned that my purpose for coming to Telekes, was to take leave from my Master before going to Germany, and from there to Palestine. I have made it clear that the woman who marries me must be ready to follow me to the Holy Land.

"Personally, I want to go into construction. I have a cousin in Tel Aviv, who is an architect. I am confident about earning a living in such a fast growing country. I am not attracted by the business opportunities here. A Jew cannot seriously think of remaining in this G-d forsaken country."

"How will you live until you cross the border?" David wanted to know. "A drunk will say, 'let's go to the tavern and drink our fill'. Just be careful not to die of thirst on the way." David smiled. He felt his example hit the nail on the head.

Rella and her sisters sat around us listening to the conversation. My bride and her brother and sisters were all part of my ecstasy. I found great harmony in their collective presence.

CHAPTER XXI

I have always loved winter. The days are short.

At four o'clock, my wife and I retired to our room. A street lamp shone under our window. In the dim light we watched downy flakes float to earth. There was great tenderness and ease between us.

We recalled the events of our November wedding. The weather was so inclement my sister was unable to attend. Uncle Feri braved the storm to represent the family of the groom.

I like and respect my Uncle Feri more than any other of my relations. He was gentlemanly, and always willing to lend a helping hand. The only trouble was, for some mysterious reason, he could not stand the Weintraubs --especially my poor father. This dislike remained even after my father's death, Uncle Feri would drop biting remarks about him as if he were in the next room. For reasons I could not comprehend, he included me in this general hostility, as if I were sole heir to the dominatingly aggressive nature of the Weintraubs.

Could this be true?

As we stood under the wedding canopy it began to rain. Some took this to be a bad omen. Many began to shout, "It's because the bride was greedy."

I broke into loud sobs. People whispered that I was probably recalling my many sins. The truth was: I was remembering my dear parents.

Rella was like a pure and simple wild flower. The entire household succumbed to her charm, even my seventy-two year old grandmother submitted to her lead without shame. My extraordinary young wife was a master at creating harmony.

I had to laugh when my grandmother offered Rella's cakes to guests. "They were made by my granddaughter."

It snowed heavily all night. With a shovel borrowed from a neighbor, I cheerfully cleared away the snow from the main door of our shop. We had upgraded the old butcher shop to a general store. My wife, wrapped in shawls from head to toe, laughed mockingly. It was obvious that I was trying to impress her.

"If my young man starts working with such energy, he won't wield that shovel very long." Rella aimed a snowball at me.

"You want to teach a former Labor Serviceman how to handle a shovel?" I replied.

Rella was intent on showing her own skills. She stuck the heavy shovel into the snow, and pushed forward. After a few minutes she had dug a long narrow trench in the snow. She looked at me triumphantly as she leaned on the shovel.

What else could I do but praise her?

"After Mengele's selections, my sisters and I found places next to each other in the barracks. In the morning, Berta chirped like a sick bird, 'I can't get up. I can't get up.' I knew that we could not yield to weakness, nor loose the will to live. I forced her to rise. I felt responsible for my two younger sisters. I was determined to make them survive no matter the cost. We did men's work. Dug ditches. I often took the shovels from my sisters hands.because I could not bear to watch their clumsiness.

"After we were liberated, Berta came down with pneumonia in Chenstechova. I had to find a way to improve her diet until she was strong enough to travel. I worked for an anti-Semitic Polish woman. I walked two kilometers to work, and the roads were filled with Russian soldiers. I never realized what dangers I faced. Somehow, I felt my poor mother was looking down on me, protecting me like a Guardian Angel. I saw her in my dreams at Auschwitz. She seemed to gaze at me seriously. She lifted her finger and said, 'Rella, you are responsible for the children'.

The Polish woman exploited me ruthlessly. The long starvation at the death camp had weakened me, but I had to take the hard work that was available. Berta needed eggs and butter to recover from her illness."

Inspired by the coming of our child, I became an enterprising businessman. My partner, Mosi Feldeman, helped set up the store. He was a qualified shop-assistant. I purchased the premises and the merchandise. Mosi was a devoted admirer of the outstanding "financier", Uncle Menyus (Uncle Miska). Mosi spoke to me with the seriousness of a teacher at a military academy. He swore we would never cut a centimeter off the merchandise for the peasants, who were loaded with articles for exchange. The only exceptions were for non-perishable foods, rubles, dollars, or other foreign currency.

An endless stream of clients came through the open door. Some of them were excitable; some were angry. But they all had a talent for making business interesting day in, and day out:

We had to deal with the Russians. In order to establish beneficial business contacts with them, we absolutely required a few barrels of cheap wine, home distilled brandy, and denatured alcohol. While the value of the pengoes declined daily, alcohol held a princely position as a means of exchange.

The main problem my partner and I faced was how to divide the profits from the exchange and barter trade. What was the profit on a bag of salt or a bottle of brandy? It was more difficult to calculate the value of textiles bought for geese, ducks, and eggs.

I served my apprenticeship, and paid for my certificate of Mastership. The Russians stole from us more than once. On occasion, the profit did not always correspond to the risks that had to be taken.

In short, I was earning a living to support my family. It saved us from dying of thirst on the way to the tavern.

The snow was so deep the train service was halted. Our parlor was crowded with friends and old acquaintances. My wife and sister served tea and baked potatoes. Some guests accepted, others felt uncomfortable even eating a potato they did not pay for.

We were happy just to have all the people in our open house.

That night, we heard shuffling feet from the direction of the kitchen. Uncle Menyus threw open the door and sailed into the crowded room. He had four Russian Jewish officers with him. With a grin on his face, Uncle Menyus opened his coat and pulled

out a five litre of demijohn. "My friends, here we have a bottle of genuine Hungarian rot-gut."

Where Uncle Menyus found the officers, I do not know. But it was obvious that we could not exclude them from the New Year's celebration.

Uncle Menyus was in his element. He ordered the female department: my wife, Agika, and even my worried grandmother to bring fresh glasses, and whatever edibles were in the house. The officers put a quick end to the preliminaries, and faithful to their drinking culture, they were only interested in glasses.

"Papka, papka," they called to my uncle. "If you want to be nice to us, bring a couple of raw cucumbers and red Hungarian peppers."

To our surprise, the Russian officers drank rot-gut from tumbler%. We did not remain out of the celebration. The difference was, at each "le chajim" we raised liquor glasses.

There was singing, and dancing. The night wore on, and the details of the evening became fuzzy with alcohol. I sang the Mizsnitz melody. Everyone was carried away by the rhythm of the song, they accompanied me with enthusiastic clapping.

Jewish merrymaking allows us to become one with G-d. The enthusiasm of our Russian guests helped create a most unusual evening.

After midnight, Fedor turned to me. "I am happy you have decided to emigrate," he told me. "With the Russians, everything will be different. Their world is built on lies. Communism has not solved the Jewish problem unless you are talking about the ruthless extermination of Jewish traditions.

"Once, in a drinking bout with fellow officers, one of them said to me, 'We love you, Fedor. You are a good comrade. You drink with us, you are a good Jew. But if things change, we could not make an exception of you. We could not show you mercy.'

"What would cause such a change, I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't speak to me about causes,' he said. 'It will happen just because we want it to.'

"My friends, the best you can do is flee from here. Do not wait for the Russians to settle in. Because then it will be impossible for you to leave."

"Where is there another people like the Jewish people, to whom the Lord, the Creator, feels so close?" I said. "He did not chose us because we are perfect, but because we are less evil."

Fedor made a beautiful suggestion to all those present. "I want everybody to stand up and raise his glass to the Covenant that G-d had made with our people in the distant past. L'chayim."

The next day, a bunch of tough Russian soldiers broke in on us. They demanded wine and brandy. They pointed machine guns at our heads.

Our gestures, and a few Russian words did not convince them that there was no alcohol in the house. We reminded the soldiers the Commander had decreed strict prohibition in the village. They became angrier with us.

"What about last night? Did the Jewish officers drink brandy?"

The truth of the matter was all officers were exempt from the prohibition. It seemed that fraternization between Jewish officers, and local Jewish families has caused bad blood in the ranks. These Muzhiks were infuriated.

There we stood with guns at our heads when Uncle Menyus, and my grandmother came in. My grandmother hissed between her teeth, "I told you a thousand times, Menyus, that you'll bring disaster down on us with your irresponsible trade.

Uncle Menyus assured the soldiers they had come to the wrong person. He patted their shoulders. He stated that he, and only he, was the father of all beverages. He charmed them into submission.

At that moment, two of the Russian Jewish officers, who had spent the previous evening with us, appeared at the door with pistols in their hands. The Major, out of modesty, had refrained from telling us he was Commander of the military train standing at the station.

"Bistra. Bistra." He chased the soldiers out.

It was Agika, who had not lost her head during the crisis. She had escaped out the back door. Agika sought out the Commander and the other Russian officer. That is how they came to our aid.

The dangers in this country were too fierce. Rella and I decided to spend the Passover holidays in Telekes. After the festivities, we would leave.

We celebrated the Pesach at Telekes as we planned. However, our attempt to cross the border failed miserably. We were caught at Szombathely. A Russian patrol emptied their machine guns at our lorry. They fatally wounded one of the Jews with us. The rest fled frantically throwing away their packages.

We lost a rucksack, but fortunately, not our money. Our money was safely tucked away in a bag tied around Agika's waist.

Frightened and depressed, we returned to Telekes. The next two months were filled with celebrations. My brother-in-law, David, was the first to stand under the wedding canopy. Then,in June, my sister-in-law, Berta, found her happiness at the side of her old flame, a returnee from a D.P. camp. He planned to journey to Germany with his new bride.

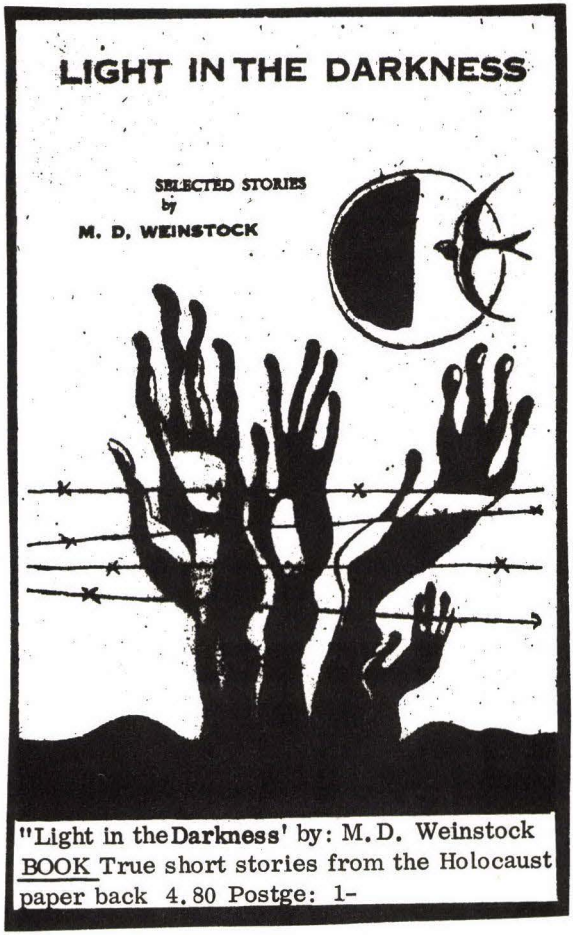
Our second border crossing was organized by the cautious Mr. Neugrochl from Szombathely.

We waited at the house of a Vend peasant. Under the cover of darkness, we set out across the harvested wheat fields. I said goodbye to this country of exile. I wondered which one of my ancestors had first set foot in this land.

We doffed our hats to the Hungarian border guard. When he heard a whistle signal, he came forward. Silently, he pointed his rifle towards the Austrian border.

We were on our way towards a new life. Our Hungarian exile was ended. Our exodus had just begun.

* * *



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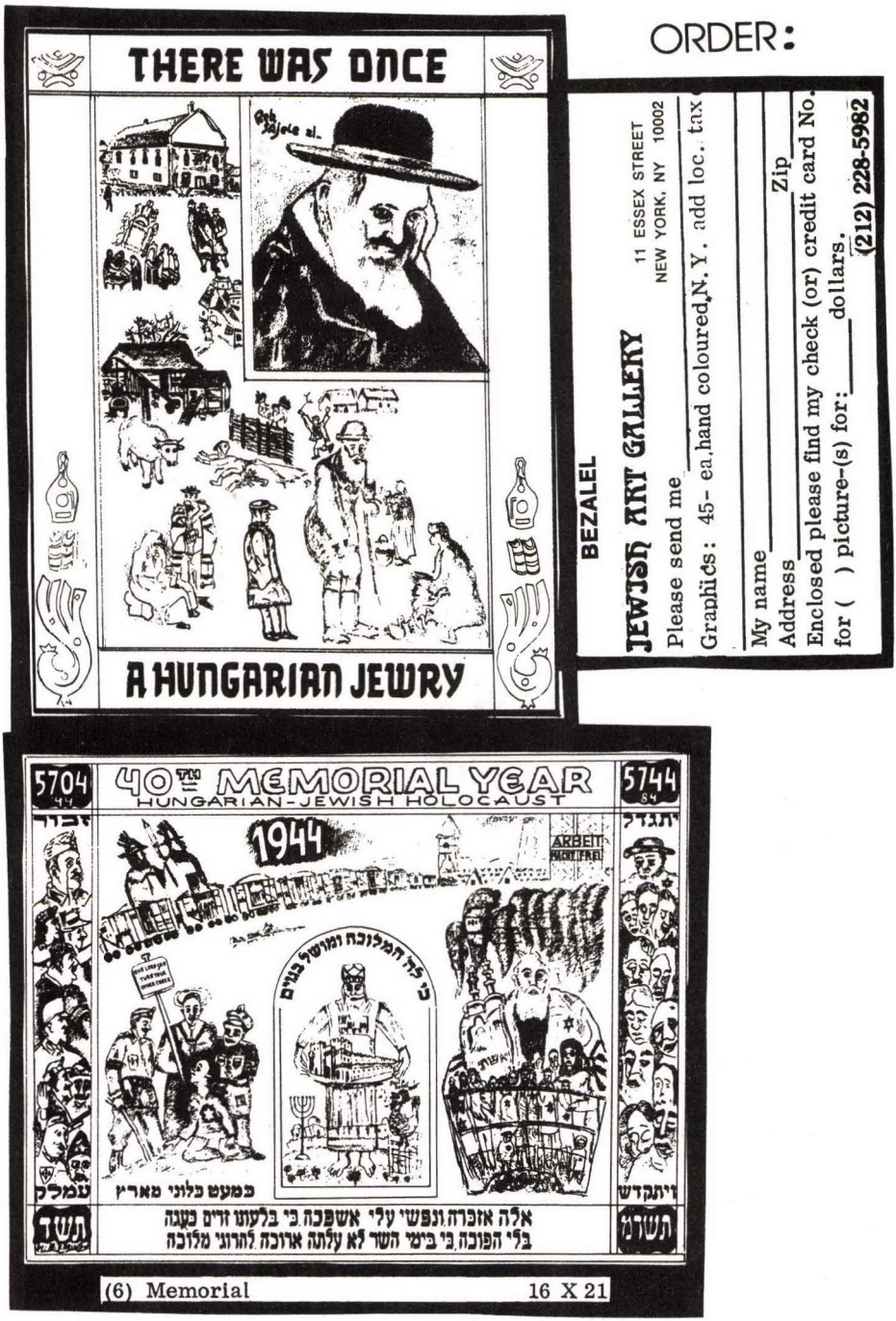
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. D. WEINSTOCK, the many talented author and artist was born in Hungary, 1922, and received both a Yeshivah and secular education. He survived the Holocaust in a Forced Labor Camp, but lost most of his family to Nazi brutality. He was Editor and writer of several Orthodox Jewish papers in Hungarian from 1953-1979 (his wife Olga as coeditor of UJ HORIZONT) he wrote several books, articles and humorous parodies.

It was only later in M.D. Weinstock's life, that he discovered that he can draw just as sensitively as he can write. There is a writers story-telling in every one of his pictures. New ideas in a changing modern Jewish life: showing the Computer and Space Age, the Doctor, the Lawyer's relation to People and G-d. His Holocaust pictures are drawn from memory and experience.

M. D. Weinstock divides his time with daily Torah study, writing and drawing. His talented wife, Olga Gefen, (who is a painter in her own right) paints some of his drawings. His graphics, watercolors, pastels have been bought by the Museum of Holocaust of Philadelphia, and many other private and organizational collections.

DR. JACK KUGELMASS, -curator of the Jewish Artists Exhibit, in Henry Street Settlement, N.Y. (participated by M. D. Weinstock, and Olga Gefen,) wrote :

"M. D. Weinstock wrote his first play when he was eleven and later established a career as a journalist and a writer of memoirs and historical novels. He began painting approximately six years ago. He distinguishes between his serious or dramatic work, which are often pertains to the Holocaust, or portraiture for Hassid Rebbes, -also of the recently deceased and much-liked Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zcl; and his humorous work, wich are often portrayals of Jewish life juxtaposing anachronistic elements - an elderly couple in a nursing home playing tennis, the Messiah riding a donkey in Times Square, or an Orthodox Jewish version of a Van Eyck painting. For he is everything is the idea. He lives in Judaism. He wants to show Judaism."

"" Olga Gefen (Weinstock), in the 1960's began to sell her work, Her themes are Jewish -Jerusalem, rabbis, Hassidic dancing, also Ksubes, Ésesz -chayils. Most of her works is watercolor, although she has some large canvasses in oil.



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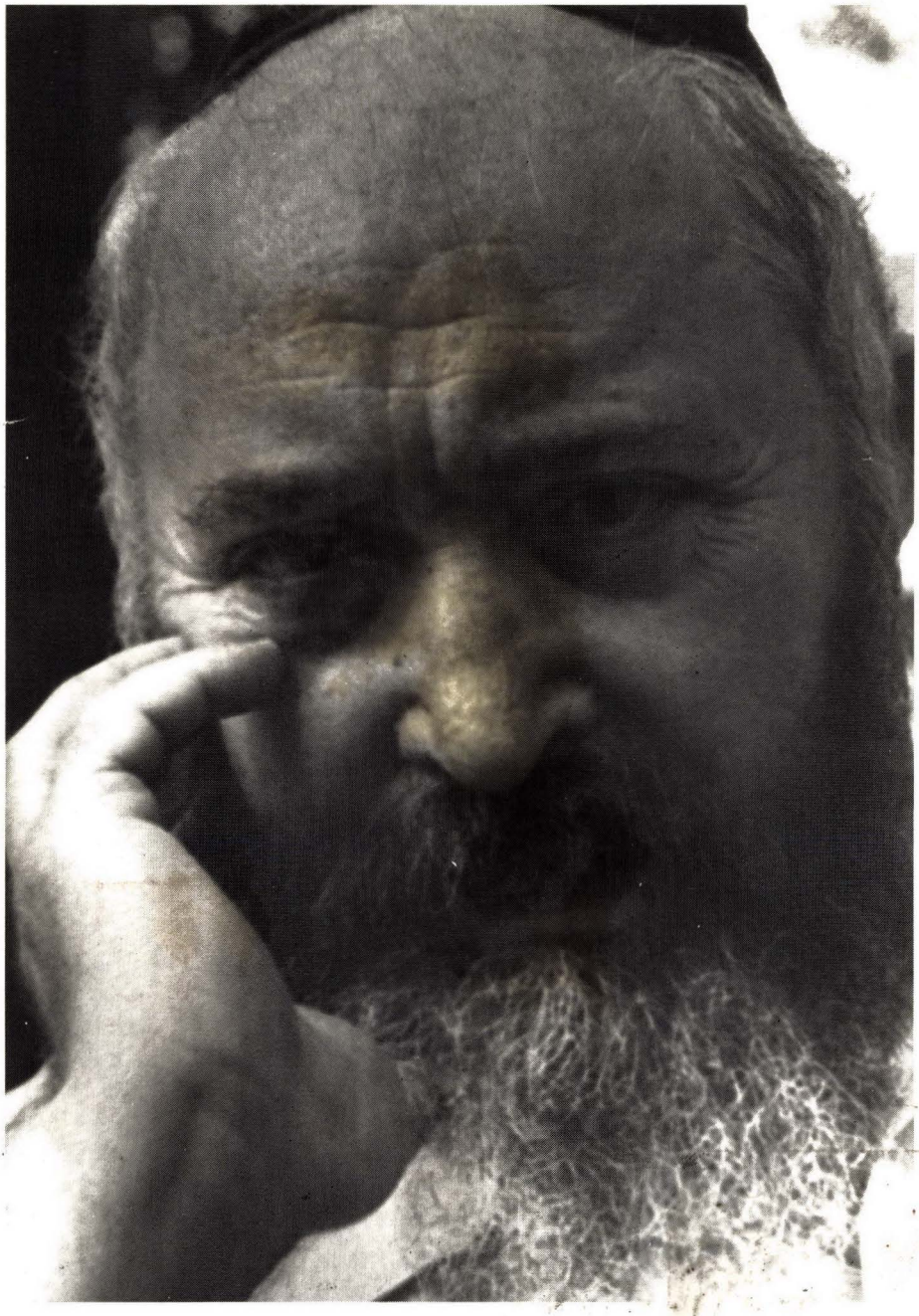


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