



Flight, Return, and Emigration: The Wanderings of a Yiddish Writer During and After the Holocaust

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For fifteen years (1988–2003), Dr. Fishman was editor in chief of *YIVO-Bleter*, the Yiddish-language scholarly journal of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. He is a member of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and serves on the editorial boards of *Jewish Social Studies* and *Polin*. Dr. Fishman is a dynamic and engaging teacher and has taught in diverse Jewish communities across North America.

Selections from *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, a memoir by Chaim Grade, translated from Yiddish by Channa Kleinerman Goldstein and Inna Hecker Grade

Return . . .

SINCE MY RETURN TO VILNA, I have roamed through the seven little alleys that once made up the Ghetto. The narrow alleyways enmesh and imprison me, like subterranean passages, like caves filled with ancient graves. Orphaned, they cast a spell upon me; their emptiness hovers in my brain, they attach themselves to me like seven chains of stone. Yet I have no desire to free myself of them. I want them to carve themselves still deeper into my body, into my flesh. I feel the dark, icy stiffness of bolted gates and doors creep under my skin. Shattered windows stare out through my eyes, and someone inside me cries aloud:

“So be it! I want to become a ruin! . . .”

This inner cry comes from the dybbuk—the spirit of the ruins. Since my return, he has taken up residence within me, and I am no longer master of my thoughts, or even of my lips. The demon within speaks on and on, without end. I hear every word he utters, I implore him to be still; but his lamentations continue, at times as a wild outcry, at times with bitter calm, as of a mourner grown hoarse from wailing. And then, just when I want him to shout and lament, he falls silent, and his silence is so loud it deafens me—a terrifying silence, the furtive silence of a criminal, of an arsonist, as if it were he who had set all the fires in the Ghetto.

Now he speaks, the dybbuk within: Woe unto me that I have returned here. There, in Central Asia, there are snowcapped mountains; here, razed houses. I walk across paving stones, and it feels as if I am walking across a pavement of heads. Every stone has a different face, a different mask. How much better to have the sands of Kara Kum blowing in my face, or to look upon the saksaul tree of the desert, with its twisted branches and crippled trunk, than to hold in the palms of my hands the ashes of the Ghetto, or to gaze at a tall black chimney which, like me, stares up at the sky and, like me, asks: Why? If only just once a wind howled in the chimney! But even the wind lies poisoned, slaughtered—all is empty, still, dead. When I was a child I heard my mother say that in a ruin, evil spirits dance. Would that I might come upon a band of demons . . . at least then I would see that there is a Hell, then I would know that there is a reckoning.

All that is left is walls, roofs, pillars, cornices, tottering beams. All

that is left is broken iron bedsteads, the rusty entrails of Primus stoves, twisted forks, knives, spoons—without the mouths. And I am left with eyes without tears, like window-holes with neither frames nor glass. I cannot squeeze even a single tear from my eyes, just as not even a single solitary Jew sticks his head out a window-hole. Behold! An entire row of shops, shuttered and bolted; an entire street with locked gates and doors. I think I hear laughter—behind one of the bolted gates someone is stifling his laughter, or perhaps choking on a consumptive cough.

“Open up, you brigand, open up!”

No one laughs, no one coughs, no one answers.

Thus does the demon within me rage without respite, cry out unceasingly, beat with my fists against the locked gates; and the slaughtered alleys answer with a moan, aggrieved at this disturbance of their deathly rest. For days on end, and half the nights, I drag myself through the same seven alleys of the Second Ghetto—the “Great” Ghetto. There had been a “Small” Ghetto, too—the First Ghetto, consisting of the Synagogue Courtyard and a few surrounding alleys. The Germans had slaughtered the Jews who lived there four years ago, and the entire area has remained desolate ever since. Even my dybbuk is afraid to drag me over there. That was where my mother lived.

More than once it has happened that, sunk deep in thought, I have come upon the Ghetto's exitway, where the gate had been; one step more—and I shall be on the other side. It is dusk. Here among the ruins it grows dark earlier than anywhere else. From here the darkness spreads into the city, where people are strolling, talking and laughing. Vilna is gradually coming back to life. In the distance I hear the heavy, measured steps of soldiers. A military band begins to play and the soldiers sing. Those marchers and singers are the victors, but the Ghetto has not lived to see the victory. Hastily I turn back into the narrow streets. I am the guardian who may not leave. I hear the eerie silence asking me: “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?” And the spirit of the ruins who dwells within me answers: “Here the day is as dead and desolate as the night. Here the week is made up of seven Sabbaths, seven Sabbaths for seven alleys. But the Sabbath here is the Sabbath of Retribution—a Sabbath accursed eternally.”

“And what do you seek here? What more are you waiting for?” asks the mysterious stillness, and the accursed one inside me begins once more to wail softly: “I am waiting for the moon to rise and to spin, from its cold rays, the silvery beard of an old Jew who will lean his head out a window toward me. Or perhaps, fluttering down a broken staircase will come a young Jewish girl in a white nightgown woven of moonlight. With her long black hair unbound she will run out from her hiding-place, embrace me and cling to me. Or perhaps someone is still alive in

a hide-out and cannot believe that the day of salvation has come. Let him, this man driven mad with fear, emerge now from his living grave to laugh with a hollow, subterranean laughter. He will laugh—and I will shudder. I want to shudder! I want to be shaken!”

But the moon avoids the Ghetto, and the nocturnal specters spun from my sickly fantasies do not reveal themselves to me.

The narrow alleys grow pitch-dark. From a street-lamp at the Ghetto's exit falls a red ray of light, pointing toward me like a bloody knife. Something rustles at my feet: a bunch of crumpled stray leaves from prayerbooks and Bibles, scattered pages from volumes of commentaries. The Ghetto has long since been exterminated, but these pages of sacred books are still strewn about, as though the dead return at night to immerse themselves in their tomes. After reading each page, the dead scholars tear it out and give it over to the wind, to bring to me so that I may see what has become of the People of the Book. I pick up the torn leaves and stuff my pockets with them. When I return to my lodging, I shall sort them out and smooth out each one. Perhaps I shall recognize the fingers that crumpled them. Perhaps I shall hear the voice of the scholar who involved himself in the Talmudic disputation between the sages Abbaye and Rabbah. Perhaps the tears that have been absorbed by the pages of the women's prayerbooks will glisten again for me. Perhaps my own childish face will glow anew for me, and I will be able once more to dream over a book of miracle tales.

Do you remember, I murmur to myself, do you remember that wondrous tale you read when you were a boy? A pious Jew loses his way in a forest late one Friday afternoon. The sun sets and the pious man begins to weep in sorrow, because he will be unable to observe the Sabbath. Suddenly he sees a palace standing amidst the trees. An old man appears and motions wordlessly to the lost Jew to follow him. The old man leads him to a fragrant pool, in which the Jew bathes, and then gives him luxurious raiment to wear in honor of the Sabbath. When the guest tries to ask a question, the old man signals him to be still. Then he leads the wanderer into a chamber that glitters with silver and gold, with pearls and precious stones. From there the guide takes him into a second chamber, where candelabra and chandeliers gleam with the radiance of the seven great lights of the Six Days of Creation. And so the guest wanders, enchanted and bedazzled, from room to room, each more beautifully and splendidly adorned than the one before—until, in the seventh and last chamber, he is approached by seven ancient men who with their white beards resemble a forest of snow-covered oak trees. They welcome him and tell him that with his arrival they now have a minyan. This bewilders the poor Jew: here are these seven elders, he is the eighth, and the old man accompanying him makes nine, but nowhere does he see the required

tenth man. Yet he vividly senses the tenth everywhere about him, like the radiance of the Divine Presence. And he is seized by overwhelming feelings of fear, of awe and reverence, though of the ordinary kind of fear that makes the limbs tremble, there is in his heart not a trace. Now an elder wearing a royal crown takes his place at the cantor's pulpit and welcomes the Sabbath, chanting with such sweetness that one might think him to be the Psalmist himself. After prayers, the Jew is told to wash his hands, and he is then served meat that tastes like the Wild Ox which the righteous will eat in Paradise, and wine with the taste of the wine reserved for the coming of the Messiah. And thus does he spend the entire Sabbath in the elders' company, in prayer, in singing Sabbath hymns, in study of the Torah. And if he essays even a single word about profane matters, they silence him with a gesture. At the conclusion of the Sabbath, he is given spices to smell which have the fragrance of the Tree of Life. Finally, the old man who has been his guide leads him back out into the forest, and whispers in his ear that he has just been in Paradise. And the elders are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, and David and Solomon, and he, the caretaker of the palace, is Eliezer, servant to the Patriarch Abraham. And the tenth for the minyan was the Holy One Himself, Blessed be He. . . . The palace disappears and the Jew finds himself no longer in the palace's seven chambers but instead in the seven bereaved alleys of the Vilna Ghetto. The Patriarchs who have come to welcome him are the shades of those who have perished. And the prayers he has heard are the torn pages of sacred books that rustle at his feet.

By now the dybbuk within me is weary unto death; I try to rouse him, but he seems too dazed and exhausted to answer. At last I can go home. I live on Giedyminowska Street, in a Gentile neighborhood that has remained untouched, the residence also of the other Jews who have returned to Vilna. I drag myself along the dark streets, followed by houses with windows that have no panes, by empty walls and smoke-blackened chimneys, by crooked roofs and maimed dwelling-places—a throng of cripples, a host of blind beggars who feel their way with their hands.

Across the cobblestoned pavement of one dark Ghetto street a shaft of light falls and bars my way. I spring aside as if I have stepped on the body of a living Jew who has just crawled out from some secret hiding-place. The light is seeping out from a cellar window, close to the ground. In the window hangs a black boot with a pointed tip—the sign of a shoemaker. I peer in: he appears to be a Jew. The slow, sleepy hammering in the cellar drifts toward me with a familiar warmth, and impels me to descend to see who this workman is. I feel for the door and walk down several slippery, half-broken steps. My nostrils are assailed by a smell

of mildew, decay, and filth. I open the lower door that leads into the cellar, and the smoky kerosene lamp, suspended by a wire above the cobbler's workbench, becomes agitated. Its flame blazes up, begins to jump and quiver, as though it is happy to see me, the midnight guest.

The Pediatrician

I

THE PEDIATRICIAN ANNA ITKIN SURVIVED, together with one of her twin sons. Her husband and her other son perished. I know her from before the war, and her appearance has not greatly changed. She is tall, erect of bearing, with a dark complexion, brown eyes, and gray temples. On one cheek she has a wart that gives her an expression of grandmotherly kindness, mitigating the otherwise masklike quality of her face, which—in the deliberately masculine manner of women doctors at the turn of the century—bears not a trace of makeup, not even lipstick.

Her attire, too, has something of the character of a professional uniform. She wears mostly tailored English-style suits with a plain silk blouse, a straight felt hat, and somewhat heavy shoes with low “Viennese” heels. When she smiles, she appears at once younger and more tense.

Her calm, aloof manner had made her very popular with all the respectable young matrons in Jewish neighborhoods. Before the war I would often see her walking the streets, doctor’s bag in hand, and pausing at street corners to talk with young mothers as they warmed their babies in the sun. Anna Itkin would recall in precise detail each child’s illness or condition, which greatly impressed the mothers. What impressed them even more was the doctor’s refusal to waste time in housewifely gossip or chit-chat. She would briefly ask one young woman about her daughter’s digestion, another about her little boy’s rash, a third about some chafed skin between her child’s toes—and then continue her rounds. The young women were rather in awe of her, and if on occasion a mother became seriously overwrought, a sharp word from the doctor to “stop getting hysterical” sufficed instantly to calm her.

Since my return to Vilna, I have met her walking about with doctor’s bag in hand, as calm and aloof as ever. Her eyes, it is true, no longer search out young mothers with baby carriages on the corner of Zawalna or Rudnicka or Stefanska Street. But she still works as a pediatrician, in the children’s home in which the surviving orphans have been gathered. She goes there every day, and I’ve noticed that she makes a wide detour in order not to have to pass through the Ghetto.

At our first meeting she told me that in the Ghetto she and Frumme-

Liebche had worked together in the children's ward of the Jewish hospital. When I remained silent, Anna Itkin realized how painful this subject was for me, and never mentioned it again.

One morning, shortly after that evening when the shoemaker had offered to take me up to the attic in Number 9 where Frumme-Liebche had lived, I went to see the doctor. All I wanted was to sit and talk, nothing more, to the woman who had worked together with my wife in the children's ward. Yet, at the same time, the prospect of Anna Itkin's speaking of Frumme-Liebche filled me with fear.

It is the mistress of the house herself who opens the door and asks me to step into the office where she receives her patients. On the way I manage to get a glimpse of her private quarters. Anna Itkin is someone who could be expected to have her affairs always in perfect order, as much in her closets as in her mind; it comes as a surprise, therefore, that her room, partitioned by a screen in the center, is a scene of great disarray. Crowded together along the walls stand numerous *étagères* and cabinets; old and faded oil paintings lie in corners unhung, along with rolled-up carpets; and on the table in the middle of the room are stacks of dishes. She must, I decide, have found some furnishings of her prewar home and stored them all in her cramped present apartment.

Her office, by contrast, is spacious and rather bare. It contains a couch, a glass cabinet with medical instruments, a desk by the window, and, on a small marble table, a scale for weighing infants. With its freshly painted walls and sparse furnishings, the room gives off a blinding glare, as though frozen within a crystalline case of snow. The mistress of the house—as she sits at the desk, her back to the window and her face toward me—herself looks frozen. The masklike quality of her face intensifies. It is the face of a woman who conceals more than she tells. A heavy, oppressive feeling comes over me. What is this woman's real face? Does she herself know? What kind of face did she show Frumme-Liebche? Could the possessor of this mask ever have been a friend to Frumme-Liebche? If only Frumme-Liebche had been in the Warsaw Ghetto, at least, among her own family and friends! In Vilna she lived among strangers, all alone . . .

With an effort of will, I banish these thoughts. I gaze at the infants' scale, a large, white-enameled bowl: Only earth has remained to be weighed now—no children.

"Where's your son?" I ask.

"Bolek is still asleep, there behind the screen," sighs his mother, as though she had been sitting and thinking about her son even before my arrival. "When I lost my husband, only I, his wife, lost him. But when I lost my son, the world lost him too. He was young and could still have given the world much. Now I have only one son left. I plead with him

to go back to his studies which he began before the war. But he has other ideas in his head now."

Anna Itkin's son, Bolek, is a swarthy, broad-shouldered fellow with a fine, intelligent face and the sportive eyes of a playboy. He retains the look, if nothing else, of the well-bred offspring of a wealthy family. From his murdered father he inherited a little money which he managed to hide while in the Ghetto, and immediately after the war he started "to do business." The strict Soviet laws against black-marketeering fazed him not a whit. "I've lived through much greater dangers and survived," he says, and he deals in everything that is forbidden. He fritters away his money on friends, on women; he plays cards and even drinks with Soviet officials in the newly opened restaurants. He never speaks of the Ghetto, never boasts about his earnings, never mentions how much money he has given away to friends, almost as though he doesn't even remember these things. He only talks about women and tells jokes, at which he himself laughs uproariously.

"Your son is doing the right thing," I tell the doctor. "Everyone now keeps saying: 'Do not forget what happened!' But that's only talk. There are only two options: to remember and be unable to live—or to live, and forget the Ghetto."

"But it's precisely because my son is still living in the Ghetto that I'm upset," sighs the doctor. If Bolek were truly himself, his mother insists, he would be a quiet student, not a businessman or, as the Soviets say, a *spekulant*, a black-market operator. Once his natural inclination was to love one girl, to have a select few tried-and-true friends, and to blush at an off-color joke. But the reckless way he throws money around, his indiscriminating choice of companions and of women, his risky business deals—all this is because he lives still in the Ghetto. It was there that he began to lead a life of dissipation, and that is the life he continues to lead. . . .

Again the same oppressive feeling seizes me: not every supposedly fine young man of good family who was in the Ghetto has become a playboy and black-market operator. But once again I forcibly repress such disquieting thoughts, and listen to what Anna Itkin chooses to tell me, to what she has chosen to tell herself. . . .

Even in the Ghetto, she and her husband had made every effort to maintain a normal life. Other people didn't get undressed at night for fear the Germans would conduct an *Aktion** and they'd have to run to their malinas; she, however, insisted on undressing and going to bed just like before the war. Now her thoughts focus on her life with her husband as it was before the Germans entered Vilna. And even when she does

* A roundup of Jews for deportation or immediate execution.—Trans.

think of the Ghetto, it is the normal times there that she calls to mind.

"Now I even avoid walking through the Ghetto, but you, I've noticed, wander about there for days on end." She laughs but abruptly cuts her laughter short, frightened, as though she senses that in her laughter, as in an abyss, her slaughtered husband and son lie buried.

It is true, I answer, that I spend whole days wandering around amid the ruins and there seek to comprehend that which she, Anna Itkin, terms the normal days, the normal moments, in the Ghetto. I know the exact dimensions of the Ghetto, which courtyards were part of it, and have even crawled down into some of the underground malinas in which Jews hid. I know as well the sequence of the massacres, the chronology of the slaughters. But what I do not understand is this: how did people live from one massacre to the next, singing songs, attending concerts, getting married, celebrating the Festivals? How people perished in the Ghetto—that I understand; what I cannot understand is how they lived there.

"Those who were in the Ghetto no longer understand it themselves," replies Anna Itkin, sitting rigidly, as though her entire body were in the grip of a chronic and painful rheumatism and she is struggling to sit erect and upright. "Since I've come out of the Ghetto, I also understand less and less every day how I was able to exist there, and eventually I will cease to understand it at all."

"You say you don't understand—you say you will cease to understand—and I, I don't want to understand! That is, I do want to understand, but I do not want to accept it!" I jump up shouting, but immediately sit down again. "I don't want to accept what you call the normal times in the Ghetto, nor the return now to a so-called normal life. Before I again enter into harness, before I again begin to live this accursed life, I must find a way to make my peace with what happened here."

"Those who have returned are even more hysterical than those who were actually in the Ghetto." The doctor smiles—a bitter, hostile smile.

"The very fact that we who have returned are hysterical proves that we are sane; it's those who are capable of passing straight from the Ghetto into what they call a normal life, it is they who are the real madmen. It is madness for them to be normal." I begin to speak rapidly, furiously, unable any longer to restrain the demon within who burns my lips with deadly poison. "Since you're a pediatrician, let me tell you some of the things I've heard here, just a few incidents, and just ones relating to mothers and children. I heard about one mother who screamed: 'This, this sacrifice! Three such children! O God! Let them shoot me first so I won't see them fall into the pit.' This is what I must understand before I can go on living. That is, I must understand how it is possible for me to know this and to go on living. I heard of a mother who with a bullet already in her heart could still cry out to her little son: 'Save yourself,

my child, and tell Yankel to say Kaddish for me.' I heard of another mother who called out as she stood at the edge of the pit: 'Run, run, my child, I will guide your eyes!' I know of a little girl who asked her mother: 'Does it hurt when they shoot you?' A fourteen-year-old girl in your orphanage told me that when the Germans shot her parents, she ran away into a field and there fell asleep. The next morning, when she awoke, she heard the birds chirping and mocking her in their bird language: 'Look, she's still alive!' If this could happen, and I'm to go on living, it can only be in one of two ways: either I forget everything, or I and every other survivor must each kill at least one of the murderers. Perhaps then it might be possible both to remember and to go on living. To have settled accounts! But as long as all the murderers are still alive and neither I nor anyone like me has grabbed a hatchet and gone hunting for them, and since I certainly can't forget all that's happened, I shall roam day in and day out about the Vilna Ghetto, even if Fate carries me off to the farthest corner of the earth, even if not one stone of the Ghetto is left standing on another! I have not the slightest wish to leave it, here is my place!"

"In the orphanage there are children who hid in the malinas, where they knew that they must never cry. To this day these children are afraid to let a sound pass their lips, they sit pale and silent, no matter how many times we tell them that now they're allowed to play, to laugh, even to cry." The doctor herself now lapses into a frozen silence; for the moment her face sheds its mask, and her eyes fill with clear quiet tears, as if suddenly suffused with the eerie silence of the deep pits:

II

BOLEK CALLS OUT from the next room, and the tears in his mother's eyes are immediately absorbed into the smile that spreads over her face. Anna Itkin excuses herself: her son is up, and she must go prepare his breakfast. She leaves the room, and after a few moments Bolek sidles warily into the office, as though taking care not to push the door fully open with his broad shoulders. Having just arisen, he is shuffling about with feet and chest bare, hair disheveled; he is wearing a pair of light-blue pants. He shakes my hand without a word and sits down on the couch near the wall, his bare feet on the floor. He stretches, yawns, runs his fingers through his hair, rubs his chin with the palm of his hand, and bursts out laughing:

"If women weren't afraid of getting pregnant and of the gossip of malicious tongues, they'd be a thousand times worse than men. They'd never crawl out of bed."

"What were you doing last night?" I ask. "Drinking?"

"Not a drop. I was playing cards at the Prophet's." He laughs still louder. When he sees I have no idea who the Prophet is, he explains that this is his name for Tzalka the stockbroker. A week before the war broke out, the Soviets had arrested and deported all the businessmen, Tzalka among them. And as he stood on the truck, guarded by NKVD agents, he had called out to the Jewish onlookers on the street corners: "Well, my little chicks, you'll be envying me yet!" Now Tzalka has returned from Siberia, and the Jews who had stood on the street corners are no more. And so he, Bolek, has nicknamed Tzalka "the Prophet." He plays cards well, the Prophet does.

"Did you ever go watch the Maccabee* rowing team in the old days?" He had recently, Bolek says, felt a longing to visit the Maccabee stadium on the bank of the Wilja. In the summertime the riverbanks had once been crowded with young people, even as far as Green Lake. There they sunbathed, swam, sang, strummed mandolins, and the boats filled with young women in swimsuits looked like troughs filled with red berries. So he had gone, and found—a desert. Never before in all his life had a river in full flow from one bank to the other seemed so empty, so desolate. But then he had looked again: yes, there was a single kayak with a long prow on the water, and in it sat Krymski, the former coach of the swimming team—Krymski, who had always sat in a kayak's prow facing four to six Maccabee team members, and intoned commands: "All raise your oars together! All lower your oars together!" Now he was rowing alone, working the oars so swiftly that the boat flew like an arrow upstream and downstream. Krymski himself is thin, tall, and pointy, like a pole, and one might think the Devil himself were driving the kayak forward and back. But as skillful as Krymski is with his oars, just so inept is he at the card table.

"Bolek, there's something I want to discuss with you." I move closer so his mother in the next room won't hear. He must know, I say, how many people would give years of their lives to be able to hear their mother moving about next door, to be able to place a hand on her shoulder, to stroke her hair, to watch her hands as she serves a meal or, a still greater joy, to be able to serve her a meal, to take care of her. But that's not really the heart of the matter—what I really mean to tell him is that, for his mother's sake, he ought to conduct himself a little more soberly, more discreetly, or at least restrain himself in her presence. As far as such a saintly person as myself is concerned, he may drink, play cards all night, and in general do whatever his heart desires. But to cause his mother grief just isn't right! Especially since, so she tells me, he is by nature a

* A Jewish athletic club in Vilna.—Trans.

quiet young man and his present behavior is simply a bad habit he's carried over from his life in the Ghetto, where everyone lived from one day to the next, from one moment to the next.

"My mother lives not only with the Ghetto—she lives with Ponary." Bolek bends his head closer to me, while keeping an eye on the door. "She accuses me of continuing the abnormal life of the Ghetto while she marries me off to dead brides."

"What do you mean, Bolek? I don't understand a word you're saying."

"I don't understand it myself," murmurs the strapping young man, and his face takes on the look of a frightened child. "My mother says nothing to me openly, but I understand her meaning from isolated words and even more from her silence. She speaks of my dead brother, and that one or another girl, with whom my brother kept company for a time, would have been, so she thinks, a suitable bride for him. She says these things to me, and then she asks me my opinion. Then I say that I don't understand why she asks, since my brother is gone and so are his girlfriends. Thereupon she remains silent and lost in thought for a long time, and finally she asks me which of my girls had I planned to marry. So I shrug my shoulders and say, 'What difference does that make now?' At this she gets very angry and tells me that one must not forget one's close friends."

"I still don't understand," I murmur in astonishment. "Your mother reproaches me for constantly roaming about the Ghetto and assures me that she herself tries to remember only the good times. How does that fit in with what you're saying?"

"But that's just it!" Bolek's expression again becomes cheerful, full of laughter. Here his mother chides him for continuing to lead the life he lived in the Ghetto, while she lives in her thoughts with those who perished at Ponary. Truth to tell, says Bolek, he doesn't plan to live this way permanently; he has other things in mind. He and his mother intend to leave for Poland, and from there will go to join their relatives in America. Once they're in another country, he will, perhaps, resume his university studies.

"Did you know my wife when you were in the Ghetto?" Suddenly I have asked the question I had thought never to ask.

"She was a very fine person," he answers. Once, he tells me, word spread in the Ghetto that the Germans were planning an *Aktion*. So he ran to the hospital to find his mother and take her with him to their prepared malina. Some of the staff, doctors as well as nurses, went into hiding. At first, Frumme-Liebche also wanted to run and hide, but then she decided that she could not abandon the children. As things turned

out, the Germans caught the staff members who had gone into hiding, but did not enter the children's ward. Or perhaps they did enter it, but their orders didn't include taking the children or those caring for them. . . . He no longer remembers clearly.

"And, besides, I'll tell you the truth: it doesn't matter!" A moment of silence; then Bolek continues: "It's like putting your foot down in the sand: when you take your foot away, the sand instantly fills up the hole. We want to go on living. Those who were away and have now returned reproach us for not offering resistance; from what I hear, you too blame us. So here's my advice to you: In Vilna there are still plenty of the murderers, Poles, Lithuanians, walking around freely. Go and buy yourself a revolver—you can get one now for a few groschen, unlike the Ghetto days—find one of these murderers, and shoot him down right there in the middle of the street. . . . You see! Neither you nor I nor anyone else will do it, because it's dangerous and we want to go on living at any price."

"You yourself just told me that my wife did not leave the hospital and did not desert the children," I say softly. "So you see there are people who do not choose to live at any price."

"I'm hungry. What's taking my mother so long?" Bolek gets up. "How can you make any such comparison? In the Ghetto we still believed there was justice in the world, that it was only the Germans who were murderers. In the Ghetto your wife wasn't the only idealist. But now we see that for the whole world we're all dead and buried and forgotten. The night before last, I was drinking with some government officials. I needed them to shut their eyes to something, so I treated them to drinks and such a feast as they'd never seen in their lives. And after they were good and drunk they said to me: 'You Jews, you meddle in things too much. You didn't fight in the war, but you want us to lay down our lives for you. You Jews,' so they tell me, 'you're very bloodthirsty but you're afraid to die, so you want us to take revenge for your brothers. But our government has its own aims. The Germans killed us, too, so we paid them back, and that's that. *Nashe dyelo malen'koye*—it's over and done with. Now we need them—the Germans, that is.'"

Anna Itkin walks in and announces that breakfast is on the table. She invites me to eat together with Bolek—she has set the table for two. But when I decline, I can tell she is glad to have me remain behind in the office with her.

AFTER BOLEK LEAVES, Anna Itkin sits down again at her desk and I—deeply disturbed by what Bolek has told me about his mother's planning

marriages for him with dead brides—begin to speak rapidly, with feverish vehemence, at times even bursting into laughter, a laughter of astonishment.

“My mother, you know, had a twin sister. I never used to think about it, but lately, since I’ve returned to Vilna, I can’t get it out of my mind. When I was just a boy and my mother would collapse exhausted after a long day’s work, she would tell me, apologetically, that it was no wonder she hadn’t the strength to work so hard. ‘I’m really only half a soul,’ she would say. Her twin sister lived in Kreuzburg or in Jakobstadt on the Dvina, and, so we heard, was quite well off. She had a houseful of children, all of whom were musicians. And when my mother would tell me about her twin sister, I would think: It’s strange—one half-soul, here in Vilna, rushes about the marketplace, while the other half-soul, in Latvia, listens to her children playing their violins. And since I had a good singing voice, I used to sing for my mother so that her half-soul here in Vilna wouldn’t be less happy than her sister’s half-soul in Kreuzburg on the Dvina. Then my mother would laugh and say that I and my cousin, the violinist in Latvia, would make a fine couple. The odd thing was that my aunt had the same idea. When my mother wrote her that I was married, her sister answered irritably that her daughter wouldn’t remain an old maid either. In their letters to each other, neither had ever mentioned the possibility of a marriage between my cousin and myself, but it seems they had both been thinking of it.”

Anna Itkin’s pale, aging face is suddenly suffused with a rosy glow that makes her look younger, more gracefully feminine, with a touch of shyness; for these few moments, yet again, the mask falls away. But abruptly, I realize that I’ve talked too much—it must be clear to her from what I’ve said, that her son has told me of her speaking to him about girls no longer living. Gradually the glowing pink color fades from her cheeks; her manner is once more cool and stiff, and she speaks softly, gazing down all the while at her fingers, which rest on the edge of the table.

She reminds me of something I said earlier—that in order to go on living, one must choose between two alternatives: either to try to forget everything, or to take revenge, for only with a sense of vengeance satisfied would it be possible both to remember and to go on living. But she, Anna Itkin, does not believe that revenge can bring any lasting comfort, especially since we are too weak to properly punish the murderers. And if some courageous young man were to ask her whether he should risk his life to kill one of the butchers, she would tell him that so few of us are left alive that we must not, even for the sake of executing a murderer, risk our own lives. But neither can we, or may we, forget. And so we must live with our memories of those who have perished—not with the

memory of their terrible deaths, but of their joys and sorrows in life. Those who were alone, who were strangers to us, who left no one behind, must receive a place in our hearts just as do our own loved ones. A young man must remember an old man, and an old man a young man. Whichever of them has remained alive must recite the Kaddish for the other—with his heart, not with his lips. She often tells Bolek that she thinks about mothers, strangers to her, who did not live to have joy in their children, the same way she thinks about herself and her dead son, Bolek's brother. A wife must not be jealous if her husband sees before his eyes the murdered brides of other young men; and if she is so enamored of herself and of her own peace of mind that it makes her shudder to know her husband is thinking of brides dead and unknown, then let her—cold, egotistical woman that she is—shudder with wide-open eyes. Let her know that she must pay for having stayed alive. She must be prepared to accept her husband's giving a part of his love to those who are no more, whom no one longs for or remembers, those poor, mute doves.

"What this comes to," I rejoin, grimacing sourly, "is that instead of taking revenge on the murderers, we should take revenge on ourselves. And what good will that do those who have perished?"

"You see, I believe—or, rather than believe, I feel—that those who died are comforted when we think of them." Anna Itkin speaks with a smile of indifference, as if to show me that she doesn't care what I think of her. She has a feeling, she says, that those who perished are wandering about, desolate and anguished, because we do not live out their lives, because we have abandoned them in their mass graves. It seems to her that our houses are filled with their shadows and when there is no one near, they come closer to us, they cling to us. But when others enter the house, when there is laughter and loud talk, the shadows feel insulted and withdraw into the far corners of the room. It is not to wreak vengeance upon ourselves that we must remember those who are gone. On the contrary, it is to ease our own burden so that we can go on with our lives, just as a mother who has lost a child goes on living for the sake of her other children, and even doubles her love and care for them, while the dead child continues to live in her heart. If we could learn to live such a double life, to live along with our memories, then our wounds would slowly heal. But trying to forget, and perhaps actually doing so for a while, brings us back sooner or later to even greater pain. Because to forget altogether and forever is impossible for anyone who has a heart, and so we go on for a time only to be brought up short, feeling even guiltier and more sinful.

"To live in a dream, to live with shadows—" I squirm impatiently on my chair—"that's an attitude of having no alternative. I too have no alternative, but I don't look for excuses. In the end everything will be

resolved very simply: those who torment themselves will eventually die off, and so will cease either to suffer or to anger those who feel they've sighed and groaned enough and that it is only we, the survivors, who insist on reminding them of the horror and refuse to let them get on with their lives in peace."

"And among the survivors themselves," says Anna Itkin, "there are some who are always ruminating and philosophizing about the general tragedy, so as not to have to think of those who were closest and dearest to them." And though she is directly across from me on the other side of the desk, she seems to be sitting inside a glass box, or enveloped by some thin, transparent covering of ice. I am silent as I await her next words—knowing that she will now begin to speak about Frumme-Liebche.

"Your wife never doubted that you were alive." Anna Itkin cracks the knuckles of her fingers, which lie limply on the edge of the desk. "She always guarded a suit of yours, as well as a bundle of your manuscripts. She hovered and fretted over them, and no matter how often we had to run off to hide, she never forgot to take them with her. I advised her many times to sell the suit and buy things she needed for herself, but she wouldn't hear of it. 'When the war ends,' she would answer, 'and my husband returns from Russia, he's sure to need this suit.' That's how certain she was that you were alive." The doctor's face is suddenly bright and animated. "Your Frumme-Liebche came to full bloom in the Ghetto. I knew her before the war, but in the Ghetto she became even more beautiful, younger. Waiting for your return made her blossom."

Anna Itkin's words might have made the world go dark before my eyes, made my knees give way beneath me. Instead, her manner of speaking fills me with annoyance rather than sorrow. As I listen, I am convinced she is avenging herself on me for rejecting her insane theory about those who perished.

"What," I ask, "did Frumme-Liebche say to you about my escaping to Russia and leaving her behind? Did she bear any resentment against me?"

"How could I know that?" Anna Itkin shrugs her shoulders, her voice edged with what seems like disdain, and a certain note of condescension—as though I had come to ask the hand of her daughter in marriage and she, the aristocrat, is unwilling to surrender to me this only daughter.

"She couldn't have been angry at me. We left Vilna together, on foot, but the walking made her tired—and no one could have known then what was to happen later." I scowl at the doctor from beneath knit brows. "The Germans were at our heels, if they'd overrun us on the road to Russia, it would have meant certain death. Other refugees had panicked

and were turning back. I too panicked, I insisted that Frumme-Liebche go back, I didn't want her to take the risk. The refugees were saying that the Germans would leave women and children alone. That made sense! Who could ever have believed what was going to happen?! In the middle of the twentieth century, in the middle of Europe, the Germans, supposedly a nation of humanists, slaughtering helpless old people, women, and children! Frumme-Liebche went back to Vilna. At that moment I was convinced she was safer there than on the highway with me. She returned to be with my mother. . . . Had my ailing mother expired in Frumme-Liebche's arms while I was away, it would have been a tragedy, but a human tragedy. What really did happen was inhuman! Who could have known it! And yet some people did. Why? Because of their own potential for extreme evil, or because of some extreme awareness of the evil in human nature? And how do you draw the line between the potential for extreme evil in one's own nature and an awareness of the extreme evil in human nature? . . ." These are the thoughts that whirl through my head. I suddenly realize that I have not in fact spoken aloud; not a sound has escaped my lips. Better that way: why should I justify myself before Anna Itkin, a fellow-sufferer, yet a complete stranger? Much more a stranger to me than the shoemaker Balberishkin. And how do I know whether Anna Itkin might not have some reason to justify herself before me regarding Frumme-Liebche? After all, she was the doctor, and Frumme-Liebche the nurse. No, Anna Itkin doesn't look like a woman capable of concern for anyone else but her own, especially in the face of mortal danger. It's so easy to utter that beautiful discourse about remembering those who perished, but to show humanity to a living human being is something else! And the truth of how she acted toward Frumme-Liebche is something I will never know. . . .

"And my mother—did she also believe I was alive? I'm not asking you this for myself, but for my mother's sake. If she believed that I was alive, it was easier for her to go on that last journey. But if she thought I had perished on the way, as people said, then it was hard for her, very hard. . . . What did Frumme-Liebche tell you about that?"

"She never talked to me about it. And what difference does it make to you now what your mother was thinking at that time? After all, you believe that the silent reckoning between the living and the dead is an invention, a hallucination, a disease." Anna Itkin sits hunched over on her chair, wrinkled and weary. "You ought to be looking for your manuscripts. When the rumor began to spread that the Vilna Ghetto was to be liquidated and its remaining people transferred to other camps, your wife hid the bundle. I remember her telling me about it, but I don't remember where she hid it."

... HOURS & SABBATH DAYS

“Believe me, I have no need now of those manuscripts.”

I am hard-pressed to resist the leaden heaviness now spreading through my limbs.

“Maybe your wife hid a letter among the manuscripts; maybe she wrote something about herself and about your mother.” Anna Itkin’s voice comes to me from afar, from the ruins of the Ghetto. “In the Ghetto your wife lived in a garret, at Number Nine—maybe she concealed it in the wall there. Have you gone yet to Number Nine?”

“I’ll look there,” I answer slowly, in a muted, subterranean voice, the voice of Balberishkin the shoemaker, who sits in his cellar waiting for me to bring him news of his son. “Frumme-Liebche always dreamed of working with children. She used to tell me: ‘I want to work with children, where life begins, not with old people, where life ends’; but somehow she could never arrange it. Only in the Ghetto, I see, did she at last manage to work with children, where life begins. . . .”

Anna Itkin does not answer. She sits enmeshed in the empty silence of her office, and the sad stillness that rests upon her face falls like a shadow upon mine as well. We both gaze mutely at the little marble table on which stands the infants’ scale. The scale’s white enameled bowl looks as though it has frozen while waiting for the little pink body of a living child to be placed in it.

Ruined Synagogues

THE FEW MINYANS OF JEWS who are all that remain of the Vilna community now rise in the Choir Synagogue to recite the Yizkor—the Memorial Prayer. Their lamentations entangle them as might the lines of a sinking ship, they are drowning in their own tears. But I, I am not reciting the Yizkor; around me all is still, peaceful, serene. I am standing at the iron gate of the Vilna Synagogue Courtyard and the sun, in the center of a clear sky, sprays all about its rays of fine gold, just as it had done four years earlier on the secluded forest path between Minsk and Borisov, that path of my perils which has left implanted in me a sweet dread, an unfathomable stillness, and a longing. Today the sun shines again exactly as it did on that other day in the distant Asiatic city of Stalinabad, when I nearly perished together with Misha Troiman, the refugee from Lodz.

From the walls around the Synagogue Courtyard slogans shriek at me, slogans dating from before the war. Painted red letters call upon the viewer to vote for this party or that in the communal elections. Living faces immured in the bricks vie to outshout one another:

“Long live the Jewish Workers’ Party!”

“Through blood and struggle toward freedom in the Land of Israel!”

“Buy the products of the Land of Israel!” pleads a placard of the Women’s League.

“Baths and tubs in the Synagogue Courtyard,” advertises a small sign affixed to the iron gate.

I close my eyes: perhaps it is all no more than a bad dream? I open my eyes again, to behold an entire row of shattered windows in the Straszun Library, directly opposite the poster-covered walls. On these walls the library casts an enormous shadow, like a black cloth hung over the mirror in a house where there has been a death.

I climb over large piles of rubble and refuse, attempting to go up into the Synagogue of the Gaon of Vilna. But the stairs are broken, as though the ladder of Jacob’s dream had toppled. I look up into the black void of the Gaon’s house of study, above whose entrance there yet remains the inscription “Synagogue of the Gaon Rabboni Elijah, of Blessed Memory.” The inscription hovers above the entrance like a bird that has returned to its nest and finds its tree . . . cut down. Frightened by the

silence of the forest at dusk, the bird utters not a sound, but remains suspended in mid-air upon its weary wings.

Here is the Gravediggers' Chapel. It is itself now—a grave. Here, too, the steps have collapsed. God wants his synagogues to be suspended in the heights like clouds, so that no one can reach them. I look up: that was where the bima once stood. Once, on Tisha B'Av, during my youth, I had sat shoeless* on a low stool on the bima of the Gravediggers' Chapel and read the Book of Lamentations for the congregants. Now the bima is gone, and gone too is the pious young boy who had once lamented: "The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against his word. . . ." High up on the East Wall, there where the Holy Ark had stood, one solitary word, formed of beaten copper letters, still hangs: "*Anoḥi*." I want to scream, but my breath has congealed, my feet are benumbed, and the numbness creeps closer, ever closer, to my heart. All around me is a deathly silence, and above the ruins there burns the first word of the first of the Ten Commandments: "*Anoḥi*—I am the Lord thy God. . . ." Then again, could it be taken from the verse in Isaiah: "I am He that comforteth you"? Or does it mean, rather: "I am the guilty one"? . . .

A tremor passes the full length of my body; it seems to me that the *Anoḥi* is moving—soon it will swoop down like an eagle and peck out my eyes for this blasphemy. I stand there as frightened as when I was a child in the synagogue on Yom Kippur and the entire congregation would fall to their knees at the intoning of the words "And we bend the knee and bow down." I gaze upon the mounds of earth in the dug-up Synagogue Courtyard, and they seem like the bent backs of gray and ancient Jews as they kneel during the recital of the Priestly Service of Atonement. I turn, and behold the Old Synagogue.

Old Synagogue, it is for you that the Prophet laments: "The Lord hath cast off His altar, He hath abhorred His sanctuary, He hath given up into the hands of the enemy the walls of her palaces. . . ." Your façade has been torn down, as has the curtain before your Holy Ark. Now the unclean ones, the uncircumcised, can see how your unsteady pillars strain to support your vaulted ceiling—and they, the unclean, laugh. Are you not waiting, Old Synagogue, for another Samson to burst your pillars asunder and bury those who blaspheme and plunder you? They climb up to your windows to take away their wooden frames. They wrest out the oaken doors of the bookcases built into your walls. They pull down the carved lions and deer that adorned you, and use them for kindling wood under their unclean pots. Whatever the Germans have left is now carried off by our neighbors, the Edomites—the Poles and the Lithuanians. Old Synagogue, your ruins are for me as Mount Nebo, where

* Shoes are removed as a sign of mourning.—Trans.

Moses died. For me you are as the Temple Mount where the Holy Temple stood. Your crumbled walls block my way, so that I cannot get to the other part of the Synagogue Courtyard. Your tottering pillars may collapse without warning upon anyone who tries to steal into the forbidden, rubble-covered, martyred ground. Yet that ground reverberates with an eerie stillness which draws me toward it, an air of perilous mystery—like ice-covered mountain peaks that terrify the beholder with the abysses that surround them, and yet attract him with their snowy silence, with the hope that whoever attains them will behold at last all those eternally shrouded mysteries that only there lie revealed.

I clamber across piles of stones and iron beams, crawl through holes and crevices, until at last, covered with plaster and dust, I enter the second part of the Synagogue Courtyard—and halt, surrounded by wild, thorny weeds. Weeds climb upon the walls, wind and plait themselves around empty structures, conceal the Artisans' Synagogue, the Tifereth Baḥurim Synagogue, and the small synagogue of the Kaydanover Ḥassidim, so they shall not be shamed for nakedness. But the buildings' inscriptions will not permit the weeds to grow over them. The letters burn and fall like sparks upon my face: we were built—so say these houses of study and prayer—in the year 5641, in the year 5635, in the year 5505.* Here lie buried—so they scream, in silence—here lie buried all the prayers that Jews have uttered for hundreds of years.

The Old-New Synagogue: to keep you from collapsing, an external wall was erected to support you, while the congregants within upheld you with their prayers. The great philanthropist and man of wealth—Rabbi Judah, the Scribe and Judge—who built you, donated a fortune to the community on the condition that his son-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel, be appointed Chief Rabbi of Vilna. The community's leaders accepted this condition, but after the death of the father-in-law they became embroiled in a bitter dispute with Rabbi Shmuel, and so humiliated and persecuted him that he was at last compelled to leave Vilna. After his passing the community, out of remorse for the shame and disgrace it had visited upon its rabbi, placed in his memory a large stone slab in the Grand Synagogue, next to the Holy Ark—signifying that no one ever again should occupy the seat of Vilna's last Chief Rabbi. Now all of Vilna is a gravestone for its last Jew, and the Gentiles now sit in the Jews' stead, like owls amid the ruins.

It seems to me that just during the brief time I have been standing among the weeds, they have grown taller. They enmesh and entangle me, threatening to trap me here. I tear myself out of their net and attempt

* The dates according to the Hebrew calendar, corresponding, respectively, to 1881, 1875, and 1745.—Trans.

to crawl back to the first section of the Courtyard. But bricks have started to fall from the Old Synagogue, as though God has at last heeded the prayer of the desolate sanctuary and is now demolishing it, so that looters can no longer desecrate and plunder it. I experience a momentary pang of terror: will I remain a prisoner here amid these collapsed walls? Then I notice, almost at ground level, the bottom windows of the Grand Synagogue. I crawl down through the empty window-spaces into the depths of the synagogue, from which I can make my way back to the street.

Through the Grand Synagogue I walk with head lowered. I do not want to see anymore—I have had enough of dust and ruins. On the great stairway leading to the exit, the brass railings glisten now just as they once did on festivals, when the congregants would press forward to hear the cantor and his choir. Confronting me in the lobby are the still-surviving alms-boxes for the sick, for the aged, for the scholars, for the charity fund of Rabbi Meir Ba'al Ha-Nes.* The stark emptiness of the synagogue blasts at my back with an arctic coldness that freezes my feet to the steps and bars my escape. Slowly I turn my head to look back, and discover that the synagogue has grown, as the hair and nails of a corpse continue to grow. Without the row upon row of pews, the Grand Synagogue looks twice as large and spacious as before. The four gigantic pillars around the bima and the colonnade of striped marble upon it resemble fountains whose spouting waters meet in semi-arches. High above the cantor's lectern, where David's harp and winged lions once adorned the Holy Ark, there remains a solitary, orphaned verse: "So shall they put My name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them. . . ." The verse gazes down upon the cement steps that lead to the Ark, the steps upon which the Kohanim once stood with hands outspread to pronounce the priestly blessing—Kohanim who will never again raise their hands to bless, those hands that have since been consumed by fire.

I hear a mysterious sound and look round again: raindrops are dripping from the ceiling, slowly and monotonously, as in some stone-walled cave high up in the mountains. There has been no rain in Vilna for months, so this must be water that accumulated on the decaying roof last year, or even two years ago. One by one the icy drops fall to the cement floor, one by one, and in that frozen emptiness their echo is so drawn out and mournful, so tinged with a grieving melancholy, that they might be the very tears of the Jews of Vilna—tears that have secreted themselves in the ceiling of the ancient Grand Synagogue and now speak aloud, giving utterance to their tales, lamentations, grievances, sighing softly, softly, in a still small voice:

* A charity fund for the needy in the Land of Israel.—Trans.

"You have returned from far away with hidden reproaches in your heart. You fled to the north, and lived among alien people skilled in the arts of war, who fought the German enemy attacking them from the west. The fierce valor of these victors has confused you, and now you demand valor of us as well: 'Why did you not resist?' You have saved your life and now you want us who perished to save also your imagined honor; you want to be able to proclaim yourself before the world a last survivor of annihilated heroes. In the presence of the arrogant, of the powerful, of those who live by the sword, you call us to account for failing to exact vengeance.

"Don't you know that they deceived us? The murderers sent traitors into our midst who persuaded us that by labor we could save ourselves from death. No one returned from the grave, and the forests around Ponary hid the secret of the bloody pits even from the birds. The police and oppressors within our own ranks, to keep themselves alive one day more than the rest, assured us after each new edict that no further steps would be taken against us. And we had children and wives and aged parents to care for. They tortured us, to destroy within us the image of God; they stripped us naked, to crush us with shame and humiliation; under a hail of blows and laughter we ran to our graves—willingly, we ran! For do you know what it is to lie in a field, surrounded by executioners, and watch others being led to their death while you yourself are left behind for later—for later? Can you conceive how great a deliverance it is then to die even one moment sooner? And still you demand heroism of us, our dead hands must uphold your honor in the eyes of the peoples of the earth, who bend the knee before power, never before suffering.

"And you, stouthearted fellow that you are, what did you do while we were dying? And your brothers living far away in freedom, what did they do? Did they fall at the feet of the nations and plead for our rescue? Why did you not besiege the leaders of governments? Why did you not lie down in the streets, so that the world could not have passed by so heedless of our murder? Why did you not starve yourselves to death, nor rend your garments in mourning every day, every hour, every moment? You failed to show for our sake a Jew's self-sacrifice, and of us you demand the valor of Esau? Whosoever heaps blame upon us for our weakness has no compassion in his heart. Whosoever says that we are punished for our sins, blasphemes against God. Today, on this Day of Atonement, you must pray for us. Our lives were cut short, our prayers were cut short."

Thus do the drops weep into my very being. Drop by drop, word by word. Every word echoes in my skull, every drop makes me shudder, as though a needle had pierced my body. But I do not leave; it is as though after long searching I have at last found the ghosts that have

haunted me. "Let me go, let me go, torment me no longer," I murmur. "How many more yellowed scraps of sacred pages shall I devour? How many more times shall I cut my fingers on rusty nails and mold-covered dishes? How much more ash must settle upon my lips and enter my lungs? How much more mildew shall eat into my skin? How many more sacred verses shall be carved into the marrow of my brain and inscribed in the furrows of my face?" I turn my face upward in search of the letters left hanging from the synagogue beams, like the scattered limbs of a body torn apart. And in the Ghetto-prison I had to bend down to the ground, to the very ground, in order to decipher the writing that a little Jewish boy had scratched into the wall: "Yossele is preparing himself for Ponary. . . ."

By the rays of the sun penetrating from without, I see that it is past the time of the Additional Service. The latticed screen of the women's section, now illumined by the sun, is transformed into slats of gold. On the West Wall, where the clock that showed the time of sunset once hung, a wheel of light glistens like a polished mirror. A sheaf of sunbeams bisects the entire length of the Grand Synagogue up to the East Wall, and there vanishes into the dark recess from which the Holy Ark has been torn. In the black vastness of the shattered sanctuary the sheaf of rays dazzles like a diamond; gleams with all the hidden radiance of the plundered Torah crowns, sparkles and glows in all the hues of the mantles, embroidered with silver thread and studded with precious stones, that once covered the Holy Scrolls. Suddenly the sun-diamond emerges from its hiding-place and swings toward me, as though it were a fiery seraph sent to drive me out of the synagogue. I walk out backwards, over the steps and out into the open, overcome with dread, a fever raging in all my limbs as if the gleaming diamond had invaded them—the fever of the hour of Ne'ilah.

Ne'ilah

IRUN TO REB SHAULKA'S SYNAGOGUE on Jatkowa Street, opposite the courtyard of the goose-dealers' row where we used to live, and opposite the gate where all her life, until her marriage to Reb Refoel, my mother served God as she attended her baskets filled with rotting apples. Now, in the hour of Ne'ilah, it is fitting that I return to that same beth midrash where as a child I played among the benches, where in my youth I studied. Here every wall was covered with bookcases filled with sacred tomes, every bench occupied by pious congregants. Not for nothing was there a saying in Vilna: So much Torah is studied in Reb Shaulka's Synagogue by day and by night that its benches are trayfa from the tallow drippings that cover them, but the hearts are kosher.

There it is—Reb Shaulka's Synagogue! I lunge fiercely at the boarded-up door, which emits a muffled groan, like a wooden gallows when the corpse is cut down. In the death-emptied Ghetto the silence reverberates, as though the ruins are shuddering at my desecration of the Day of Atonement. With murderous force I continue pulling at the door, until at last the rotted boards give way. I go up into the beth midrash—it is in ruins, as in all the other synagogues. But on the wall, in the southwest corner, there still hangs a tablet whose inscription I remember from childhood: "The woman Lieba, daughter of Reb Azriel Hellin, has bequeathed three thousand rubles for the support and maintenance of the Torah scholars of the synagogue." Stepping further into the small prayer-house, I espy another wall tablet: "In memory of Reb Yosef Shraga Trakinitsky, who for nearly fifty years established his place of study and prayer in this synagogue, and served as its Gabbai for forty years. Reb Yosef Shraga died on Yom Kippur in the year 5692,* in the city of Seattle, in the United States of America, where he had stopped on his way to the Land of Israel."

I gaze at the bima, where the tall Gabbai, Reb Shraga, would stand on Sabbath mornings and give out the aliyoth. And then I call to mind another man who also once stood on that same bima—the sexton, Reb Dov-Ber Galein. Reb Dov-Ber, a ritual slaughterer as well as a sexton, was a passionate religious zealot. His full black beard and great black

eyes were perpetually aflame with rage against the "worldly" Jews. His own sons had become rabbis under his tutelage, a source for him of inordinate pride and self-importance. After I abandoned my Talmudic studies, he would avert his face from me when we met on the street. On Yom Kippur he would stand on the bima and in a melodic chant auction off the honor of Opening the Holy Ark:

"Twenty gulden for the Opening of the Ark. . . ."

Reb Dov-Ber looks around: Who will bid more? A congregant at the East Wall raises a finger; the sexton understands the signal and calls out:

"Twenty-five gulden for the Opening of the Ark. . . ."

The first bidder now blazes up, and raises his whole hand. The sexton continues his chant:

"Thirty gulden for the Opening of the Ark. . . ."

The second bidder, infuriated in his turn, now leaves his seat and moves toward the bima; his rival does not lag behind. The two take positions at either side of the lectern and wave their hands at the sexton. When, however, Reb Dov-Ber sees that the bidding is rising too high, he pounds the desk with all his strength: he will not go on with the auction! When men thus outbid each other out of spite and pride, one has reason to suspect that afterward they will not fulfill their pledge. . . .

I stare at the bima and a gasp, a wailing, bursts from my throat, as though someone were strangling me:

"Twenty thousand Jews for the Opening of the Ark. But the Gate of Heaven did not open. . . ."

"Forty thousand Jews for the Opening of the Ark. But the Gate of Mercy remained locked. . . ."

"Seventy thousand Jews have perished. Communities outbid each other: Which would bring more sacrifices? But none could induce the Gate of Mercy to open. Reb Ber, pound the desk: Enough of sacrifices! Reb Ber, turn your fiery black eyes upon me and consume me for my taunts and blasphemies, Reb Ber. . . ."

The beth midrash is empty, silent. I descend the steps.

Where shall I go? Where can I find a place for myself? All the Jews have been exterminated; only their Yom Kippur still dwells within me, cries within me; yet I cannot pray—not for them and not for myself. . . . Another synagogue!

This is the small house on Szawelska Street where poor workingmen came to pray and weary shopkeepers would rush in to recite Kaddish. In my student days, this was a synagogue I rarely entered. I sat instead among the great scholars of Reb Shaulka's beth midrash and dreamed of becoming one of them. Now I drag myself up into Yogihe's Syn-

agogue—and abruptly halt, overcome with amazement.

Out of the buckled floor has sprouted an entire field of sunflowers. Their leafy yellow heads tower over me, they radiate a golden brightness like that of a thousand suns revolving around one another. They tremble in such joyful ecstasy that one might think them the poverty-stricken congregants of Yogihe's Synagogue, gloriously transformed. They nod their heads toward the empty Ark, as if the open repository were still filled with sacred scrolls.

I close my eyes and sway silently with them, feeling drawn, woven into, that fervently sweet stillness. I make no sound, only smile to myself, and wipe the sweat from my forehead. It is with careful, quiet steps that I descend the stairs, so as not to disturb the silent devotions of these luminous flowers.

Once outside, I hurry quickly away: I need to see how the setting sun of Ne'ilah shines upon the spiderwebs in my mother's doorway, just as I had seen the sunset there yesterday, at the time of "Kol Nidrei."

Those are not spiderwebs, my little Mother, hanging in your doorway, but a curtain of gold for the Holy Ark, and behind it a Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the Divine Presence hovered between two cherubim, and in your home the Divine Presence hovered every Friday night between two poor Sabbath candles in their copper candlesticks. In the days when we still lived in the smithy, you used to complain to me about being unable to afford more than ten-groschen candles for the Sabbath. The little candles burned down quickly, and for the rest of the Sabbath evening only the smoky oil lamp continued to sputter. Now, my little Mother, the glow of your ten-groschen Sabbath candles has been woven into a sunny, golden curtain for the Holy Ark, and it hangs before your door.

Once when I was a boy, I left Reb Shaulka's Synagogue with a gang of friends just before Ne'ilah, and we ran off to the church on Rudnicka Street to gather chestnuts. We climbed over the tall fence with its iron palings into the church courtyard, climbed up the trees, and from their heavy branches shook down the velvety-smooth brown chestnuts in their bursting, prickly-green skins. I returned home after my father had already said Havdalah; our post-holiday family celebration was quite ruined. For a long time my father could not forgive me for having left the synagogue at Ne'ilah. In later years my mother often told me how in the closing hours of that Yom Kippur she had peered out between the curtains of the women's section to look for me, only to meet my father's furious gaze, which seemed to accuse her of responsibility for my running off.

The church on Rudnicka Street still stands, untouched; even the tall fence with the iron palings is the same, and the branches of the same old trees are once again densely covered with ripe chestnuts. But there are

no longer any little Jewish boys to run away from Reb Shaulka's Synagogue at Ne'ilah-time to gather chestnuts. Of all those boys, I am the only one left alive, and I am hurrying to your house, my little Mother, so that you may look upon me through the golden curtain of your Holy of Holies, look upon me through the spiderwebs over your ruined home, to see that I have returned for Ne'ilah. But where will I find the strength to reach you? I have wandered across half the world, but this path, through the ruins of this handful of dead streets, is longer and harder. God! I am even ready to make peace with You, for a while—just give me the strength to get there.

THE ENTRANCE to my mother's house is open; darkness stares out from within as from a deep and dried-out well. Someone has torn away the spiderwebs; or perhaps the wind has carried them off. I do not enter the house, but stand motionless in the courtyard until the mounds of rubble are covered with the shadows of night and the young crescent moon rises in the sky, waiting for me to recite the Blessing for the New Moon, as Reb Shaulka's pious congregants had always done following the Evening Service after Yom Kippur.

From the dark open house the cat creeps out and stretches itself across the threshold. I recall how on Yom Kippur, just before the Afternoon Service, my mother would always break off her devotions and return home to feed our cat. Now I approach this stray cat on the threshold, no longer with fear, as on the day before, but with friendly familiarity, as an old acquaintance. The cat, for its part, neither runs away nor hisses; it raises its head and, sorrowfully and sadly, looks straight into my eyes. I sense that my face is wet with tears and that I am whispering meaninglessly to this strange, forlorn cat, defending my mother for having allowed it, one of God's creatures, to go hungry this entire Yom Kippur day:

"Mother has gone to the synagogue and cannot return: she cannot return from Ne'ilah . . . she will not return . . . will not return. . . ."