

The Brothers Ashkenazi





I.J. Singer

THE
BROTHERS
ASHKENAZI

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The Brothers Ashkenazi

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Introduction

I.J. Singer: Life and Literature

Anita Norich

Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944) was one of the most well-known Yiddish prose writers of the twentieth century. Like many Yiddish writers, he was both multilingual and peripatetic. Born in the town of Bilgoray in the Lublin province, Singer spent part of his childhood in Leoncin in the province of Warsaw. When he was fourteen, the family moved to the hasidic court at Radzimin (also in the Warsaw province) and then to Warsaw. Singer traveled extensively in the Soviet Union and Poland and settled in New York in 1934. He was the second of six children in a family of Yiddish writers that included his elder sister, Esther Singer Kreitman, and his younger brother, Isaac Bashevis Singer. (Two younger sisters died when they were toddlers;

Moshe, the youngest son, died along with his mother and his wife when they were sent to Siberia after the 1939 partition of Poland.) Singer's reputation as a Yiddish writer eclipsed those of his siblings. Although Bashevis Singer may be more famous among English readers, his older brother was unquestionably the more heralded writer in his own day. Singer's works were translated and met with favorable reviews in both the Yiddish and English press. He died on February 10, 1944, when he was just fifty years old. News of his untimely death appeared in the Yiddish and English press in the United States, often alongside increasingly horrifying news from Europe.

Singer received a traditional Jewish education and worked at various times as an unskilled laborer, a proofreader, a painter, and a writer of stories, novels, essays, travelogues, and literary sketches. He was raised by parents who were learned in Jewish texts and were, by all accounts, ill-matched. They embodied the opposing poles of Eastern European Jewish religious life. His father, Pinchas Mendel, was a follower of Hasidism, a movement characterized by its devotion to a *tsadik* (a "righteous man") and by its enthusiastic, emotional expression of religious devotion. His mother, Batsheva (from whom Isaac Bashevis Singer derived his nom de plume), adhered to the misnagdic [religious opponents of Hasidism] teachings in which she had been raised. Misnagdim were characterized by their devotion to rationalism, learning, and skepticism regarding what they considered the excesses of hasidic practice. Singer rejected both his father's hasidic enthusiasm and its opposite, his mother's misnagdic rationalism. His father was described by him and both of his siblings as the warmer and more gentle parent, but also as naïve and something of a simpleton in worldly matters. Batsheva, on the other hand, was seen as harsher, more aloof than her husband, "*a froy mit a mansbilishn kop*," [a woman with a masculine head], as Singer described her. For Singer, the conflict between his father's passion and his mother's reason meant they had reversed expected gender roles. He summed it up most pointedly when he wrote, "My parents would have been a well-matched pair, if my mother had been my father and my father,

my mother" (*Of A World That is No More*). The siblings, he claimed, put things right because he and his brother were like their unsentimental mother, and his sister was more given to what he considered the emotional excesses of their father.

Singer began writing stories in his early twenties but entered onto the world stage when he published the short story "Perl" (*Pearls*). Written in Kiev in 1920, near the end of his two-year sojourn in the newly established Soviet Union, the story did not find favor among Soviet Yiddish literati who derided it as too bourgeois. But when the story was published in Warsaw, it came to the attention of Abraham Cahan, the powerful editor of the New York Yiddish daily *Forverts*, who reprinted it in his newspaper and offered Singer a position as a correspondent. From 1923 until his death, Singer published serialized novels and short stories in the paper, as well as scores of feature articles or feuillets under his own name and the pseudonym G. Kuper, his wife's (Genya Kuper) maiden name. He published in Warsaw as well, testament to the geographical scope of Yiddish literature in those decades. Singer returned to the Soviet Union in 1927 and described the life he found there in articles for the *Forverts* that were later published as *Nay Rusland* (*New Russia*, 1928). After meeting Cahan in Berlin in 1931, he visited the United States at the editor's invitation in the same year (1932) that the extraordinarily successful stage production of his novel *Yoshe Kalb* appeared. He intended to return to New York with his family but was delayed by the illness and death of his eldest son, Yasha. In March 1934, Singer, his wife and eleven-year-old son Joseph were finally able to settle in New York. Joseph Singer translated several of his father's works (and those of his uncle) into English. Singer brought his brother to the United States a year later, but never again saw other members of his family.

Singer died when Yiddish culture and the Jewish world were in mourning. Just two decades earlier he had entered a vibrant Yiddish cultural world that was international, mobile, and often announced its independence from all that had come before. When he began his literary career, the most well-known Yiddish writers were the

recently deceased so-called *klasikers* [classicists] Sh.Y. Abramovitch (1836–1917, also called by the name of his most famous creation, Mendele Moykher Sforim), Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916), and I.L. Peretz (1852–1915). But this was also the era in which self-proclaimed avant-garde artists and writers could be found throughout the Yiddish speaking world. In Vitebsk (Belarus), prominent artists such as Marc Chagall and El Lissitzky were part of the Russian avant-garde. Like these artists, groups of Yiddish writers asserted that they were producing a new, modern culture no longer bound by the satire, humor, or calls for social reform that many associated with *di klasikers*. The names of some of these short-lived but influential literary circles made their cultural stance clear: *di yunge* [the youth] in New York, *yung Vilne* [Young Vilna], *yung Yiddish* [Young Yiddish] in Lodz, and *di khalyastre* [The Gang] in Warsaw, to which Singer belonged.

Singer's fame waned in the immediate years following his death. The themes of which he wrote, his critique of Jewish life, and his despair about the future were hardly likely to attract readers after the Holocaust. This was a time for mourning and attempts at consolation, and Singer died before he could memorialize those who had perished or offer solace to those who had survived.

* * *

Singer's early works included the symbolist drama *Erdvey* (*Earth Pangs*, 1922); the short-story collections *Perl un andere Dertseylungen* (*Pearls and other Stories*, 1922) and *Af Fremder Erd* (*On Foreign Ground*, 1925), and the travelogue *Nay Rusland* (*New Russia*, 1928). His first novel, *Shtol un Ayzn* (*Steel and Iron*, 1927) was published in *Forverts* and generated considerable controversy about the place of politics in fiction. Accused of not understanding politics and convinced that his critics were merely political hacks, Singer bitterly renounced Yiddish literature, proclaiming that he was turning to journalism and to other languages instead. But only four years later he published his second novel, *Yoshe Kalb* (1932). *Savinkov: drame in 12 bilder* (*Savinkov: a play*

in 12 scenes) appeared in the Warsaw publication *Globus* in 1933, just before his departure from Poland. He published three more novels after his arrival in the United States: *Di Brider Ashkenazi* (*The Brothers Ashkenazi*, 1936), *Khaver Nakhmen* (*East of Eden*, 1938); and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* (*The Family Carnovsky*, 1943). The success of *Yoshe Kalb* on the Yiddish stage was followed by dramatic adaptations of his subsequent novels: *Di Brider Ashkenazi* was first performed in 1938, *Khaver Nakhmen* in 1939, and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* in 1943. In addition, a collection of stories, *Friling* (*Spring*, 1937) appeared in Warsaw and two more books appeared posthumously in New York: his autobiographical memoir *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* (*Of A World That Is No More*, 1946), and *Dertseylungen* (*Stories*, 1949).

Singer is best known for the four novels that followed *Shtol un Ayzn*. *Khaver Nakhmen* is an uncompromising rejection of Soviet communism, exposing the hypocrisy and corruption of its leaders and those who follow them. *Yoshe Kalb* is a psychologically astute novel about an enigmatic figure. *Di Brider Ashkenazi* and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* are family sagas that present a view of Jewish history as inexorably cyclical, repeating itself in every generation, even when the rest of the world moves on. Written in the first years of Nazi rule in Germany, *Di Brider Ashkenazi* traces the history of twin brothers and the industrial city of Lodz. Singer's last novel, *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski*, was written with knowledge of what Yiddish writers called the *khurbn* [destruction]. It traces the fates of three generations, following the family from a Polish shtetl to Berlin to New York and ending almost at the moment of publication.

Translations of Singer's works appeared in Europe, North and South America, and beyond. Almost everything he wrote was translated into English, sometimes twice. *Shtol un Ayzn* was published in 1935 by his sister's son, Morris Kreitman, as *Blood Harvest* and again in 1969 as *Steel and Iron*, this time by his own son, Joseph Singer. *The Brothers Ashkenazi* first appeared in Maurice Samuel's 1936 translation and was then re-translated in 1980, again by Joseph Singer. Other languages into which Singer was translated include

Hebrew, German, Polish, Russian, French, Spanish, and Italian. More surprisingly perhaps, some titles also appeared in Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Japanese, Norwegian, Persian, Serbian, and Swedish.

In his prose fiction and in numerous essays, Singer was consistent in viewing social reality as the primary constraint on artistic creativity and also its primary subject. Also consistent was his disavowal of any political solution to the problems besetting contemporary Jews. The corrupting influence of politics always seemed more acute to Singer within Yiddish culture than in other cultures because the Jews were, he explained, always living *in extremis*, forced to respond to uniquely cataclysmic upheavals. At times Singer suggested, somewhat disingenuously, that he sought only to tell interesting stories. He did so by examining the political and cultural upheavals in Jewish life between the two world wars and on two continents. For Jews, as for the populations amongst whom they lived, the interwar period was rife with economic uncertainty, internecine conflicts leading up to and following the Russian Revolution, migration, and U.S. restrictions on immigration. Singer's works focus on the fate of the Jews during these times of seemingly endless wars, class conflicts, pogroms, shifts in borders, and political strife.

Singer's harshest criticism was leveled at those who believed in any messianic solution for these problems. Here, too, the choices – all of them lacking, in Singer's view – were many. The fervor of the religious belief in the coming of the Messiah, and the political belief that socialism, Zionism, territorialism, secularism, or Yiddish culturalism were the paths to redemption, all seemed equally illusory or unattainable to him. Messianism of any kind suggested a linear, teleological view of history that was at odds with his view of Jewish history as endlessly repetitive. In 1942, as the dreadful news from Poland was uppermost in his mind, he briefly embraced Zionism as an ideal but remained unconvinced that it could become a practical solution to the plight of the Jews. In a letter to his friend and literary colleague Melekh Ravitch he wrote despairingly, "I don't believe there is a cure for us. I

have the diagnosis but not the cure.” Singer was certainly not unique in voicing such despair about life in the Diaspora or the possibility of an antidote. It is indeed difficult to imagine what a Yiddish writer, living in New York, haunted by the fate of his family in Poland, might have embraced as a curative. Singer was a realist in both his narrative art and his political skepticism. He was not arguing against faith or hope, but rather against illusive panaceas. Instead, his stories assert the modern Yiddish writer’s responsibility to articulate and analyze the dilemmas with which his characters and readers must grapple. They insist on the imperative to face the present times and to make compelling, thought-provoking stories out of that reality.

* * *

The Brothers Ashkenazi is an epic tale about the fates of twin brothers and the city of Lodz, Poland. Instead of either brother assuming the role of epic hero, it is the rise and fall of Lodz itself that emerges as the novel’s focus. Historically and geographically expansive, the novel begins after the Napoleonic Wars and ends more than a century later, after World War I, the Russian Revolutions and its Civil Wars. Repercussions of these cataclysmic events and of the Russo-Japanese War and the Czarist reigns of three Alexanders and two Nicholases are in the foreground of the novel. During this long period, Poland regained its independence (in 1918) from the Russian, Prussian, and German nations that had governed it since 1795. During the same period Lodz, with its sizable Jewish population, grew into the second largest city in Poland. Its textile factories became the major industrial center of the region and earned the city the title of “the Manchester of Poland.” A majority of its factories were operated by the city’s ever-growing Jewish population. It was also a center for competing Jewish and workers’ movements. *The Brothers Ashkenazi* depicts the conflicts between Lodz’s labor unions and factory owners, Zionists and anti-Zionists, traditionally religious Jews and their rebellious sons.

As if echoing these oppositions, characters in the novel are constructed through contrasts. Primary among these are proletarians and capitalists, the Jewish revolutionary Nissan and his pious father Reb Noske, and the twins first known as Simha Meir and Jacob Bunem who rename themselves Max and Yakub. Nissan and Reb Noske are learned men of faith but Nissan's faith is in socialism and his father's is in God; both are certain that redemption will come, but Nissan believes revolution will bring redemption and Reb Noske believes it will be brought by the Messiah. The contrast between the Ashkenazi twins is equally stark. Max is depicted as sickly, weak, cunning, a brilliant student and tireless entrepreneur while Yakub is robust, a dolt in school, lucky in business through no effort of his own; Max is sexually and romantically repressed, but Yakub has many lovers.

The fate of the Jews is a central concern of the novel, as it is for everything Singer wrote. That fate is seemingly unchanging and inevitable. Lodz grows, prospers, is defeated, and rises again. The Jewish characters follow Lodz's trajectory except for the inescapable fact that they cannot ultimately succeed. The novel depicts the Jewish community of Lodz as literally and figuratively unstable. We are reminded throughout that Jewish life there was "built on sand." It cannot prove fertile or stable ground for the Jews who inhabit it. And when their factories convert from handlooms to steam, the ephemeral nature of their existence is underscored. Their lives in Lodz are literally and figuratively unstable. History progresses, but the Jews do not. No matter who rules Poland, Jews are blamed for both capitalism and revolution, economic progress and collapse, nationalism and disloyalty. Workers, magnates, soldiers, classes fight one another but all eventually turn against the Jews. Ultimately, neither attempts to appease their enemies nor rebellion against them will alter the reality that Max, Yakub, and all the characters face. If all this seems irredeemably bleak, it is worth remembering that the novel was written while Singer was in mourning for his fourteen-year-old son to whom he dedicated the novel. And it is the first novel written after his departure from the land in which his family had lived for genera-

tions. *The Brothers Ashkenazi* was first published (in the New York daily *Forverts*) between December 1, 1934 and July 7, 1935, in the wake of catastrophic events including Hitler's rise to power, increasing antisemitism in Poland, and quotas and legislation against Jews in education, business, law, and medicine.

Near the beginning of the novel, a reflection on the growth of Jewish Lodz asserts that "like a torrent overflowing its banks, the Jews smashed down all barriers set up to exclude them." Neither Singer's contemporaries nor our own can ignore the dreadful irony in that hopeful, rather brash beginning.



Part I

Birth

Chapter 1

Down the sandy roads leading from Saxony and Silesia into Poland, through fields, forests, towns, and villages razed and ravaged by the Napoleonic Wars, rolled a strange procession of vehicles, people, animals, and objects.

Polish serfs stopped tilling the earth to shield pale eyes and gaze at the spectacle; women pushed back red head kerchiefs and leaned on hoes; flaxen-haired children raced with dogs out of mud huts and beyond thatched fences to point and stare.

Before Jewish country inns, boys with black earlocks and tzitzit dangling over ragged breeches gaped at the odd caravans rolling by and cried, "Come see, Mama... come see!"

Nothing like it had ever been seen in Poland. These weren't the splendid coaches of the gentry, the long latticed carts of peasants, the

patched covered wagons with dangling buckets of Jewish draymen, the stagecoaches with teams of four and trumpets blaring. Even the harness was different – full of odd straps, bands, and traces.

Some of the wagons were wide with high heavy wheels and drawn by sturdy horses. Some were like houses on wheels with the roofs and sides of circus wagons. Some were ribbed and canopied like gypsy wagons. There were carts drawn by big dogs and even by man-and-woman teams while children pushed behind. And in each case, the occupants matched their conveyances.

The sturdier wagons contained fat, pipe-smoking men, clean-shaven in front but with blond beards dangling behind their chins and watch chains straining across their bellies. Their equally fleshy women wore bonnets and clogs over red woolen stockings. The wagons were loaded with bedding, clothes, copperplates of kings and battles, Bibles and prayer-books, crates of squawking fowl and rabbits scurrying in the hay. Fat, heavy-uddered cows brought up the rear.

Nags as lean as their masters limped as they strained to pull the poorer wagons, dragging their muzzles close to the ground. Only the smallest children rode inside, while the parents and older offspring trudged alongside, prodding a horse or freeing a wheel from ruts. If there was a cow, she was all alone and often emaciated and half dry.

The leanest, meanest lot were those with carts pulled by themselves or by dogs. They had plenty of children but no other animals, except for a rare goat. The women struggled alongside their men, heavy ropes cutting into their shoulders.

But prosperous or poor, they all shared one item – a polished wooden loom strapped to their cart or wagon.

The peasants called out, “Blessed be the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Where are you headed, strangers?”

The only response was a “*Guten Tag... Gruss Gott,*” and the peasants spat and crossed themselves.

“Heathens! You can’t make out a proper Christian word...”

The Jewish innkeepers made better contact with their Yiddish. They invited the strangers to wash down the dust from their throats

with a pint of aquavit, but the travelers declined. They carried their own food, slept in their wagons, and didn't spend a single groschen along the way.

They were weavers from Germany and Moravia coming to settle in Poland since there were too many people and not enough bread at home, while in Poland there was bread but no goods. The Polish peasants wore coarse linen clothes they wove of flax, but the city dwellers and the military had to rely on foreign imports brought in by Jews and usually shipped down the Vistula from Danzig. This created a drain of money out of the country. Agents were sent to Germany to induce German weavers to settle in Poland, where they were promised free land, exemption from military service, deferment of taxes in the initial years, and the freedom to follow their customs and to worship in the Protestant faith.

The weavers, who were essentially farmers, brought all their possessions with them, from livestock to household pets, from spindles to concertinas, from cat-o'-nine-tails to plows. Among them were Lutheran pastors with their families who would guard the Protestant faith in this hotbed of popery and assure continued allegiance to the German God and to the kaiser.

The caravans headed for the lowland regions stretching from Zyrardow to Kalisz, from Pabjanice to Zgierz to Piotrkow. Some of the weavers settled around the town of Lodz, which lay beside a stagnant body of water called Ludka. On the outskirts of town, by a road leading to pine forests, they built houses, laid out gardens, dug wells, planted wheat and potatoes, and set up their wooden looms. The Poles called the community Wilki, Polish for wolves, which frequently roamed the area on cold days, and they forbade Jews from settling there.

The few dozen Jews who were permitted to live in Lodz were tailors whose services were essential to the gentile community. They had their own guild and a shack where they met to discuss the restrictions imposed upon them by their gentile neighbors. On a table inside this shack stood a plain wooden ark containing a Scroll of Law,

since the Jews also conducted their services there. They had no rabbi, ritual bath or cemetery. If a woman had to visit a ritual bath, she was taken to a stream outside town and protected against the depredations of gentile youths. In winter, a hole was chopped in the ice, and the women immersed themselves. Jewish corpses were transported by peasant cart to the community of Leczyca, of which the Jews of Lodz were officially a part.

The Jews of Lodz were at odds with the Jews of Leczyca, who were mostly impoverished tailors. While the Lodz Jews were kept busy the year round sewing for the gentiles, the Leczyca Jews starved between the seasons when Jews order new gabardines. The Leczyca tailors, therefore, smuggled themselves into Lodz and agreed to work for lower fees. To protect their livelihood, the Lodz Jews denounced the interlopers to the authorities as bunglers and botchers who undercut legitimate guild members and taxpayers. Their humble petition also pledged a donation of tallow for the church and a prayer for the continued wellbeing of that illustrious sire the prefect.

The prefect's subordinate, the subprefect, sent constables to round up the interlopers. They confiscated their shears and irons and ran them out of town. Those who tried to sneak back were hogtied and flogged.

The Leczyca Jews then refused to bury any more Lodz Jews until they received a ducat per corpse in tribute. The Lodz Jews responded by refusing to pay their communal levies. The Leczyca town elders struck back and persuaded the authorities to post a soldier in each Lodz Jewish household. The soldiers made themselves quite at home. They sliced their pork with kosher knives, talked smut, made free with the women and mocked the men at prayer. Passover, when it is forbidden for a gentile to be in a Jewish home lest he render it impure, was coming, and the Lodz Jews were forced to lay aside the work they had to finish for the gentiles' Easter and to beg the Leczyca rabbi to have the soldiers removed from their homes.

The Leczyca elders forced the Lodz Jews to remove their boots and humble themselves before them in their stocking feet. The

Lodz Jews also paid an additional tribute and swore on the Torah never again to turn over a Leczyca citizen to gentile hands. The soldiers were duly withdrawn, and the Leczyca Jews began to settle unimpeded in Lodz.

But when a Jew occasionally stumbled into German Wilki, flaxen-haired youths pelted him with rocks and set their dogs on him with the ancient cry "*Hep, hep Jude...!*"

Chapter 2

The Lodz merchant and community head, Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi, known as Abraham Hersh Danziger for his frequent trips to Danzig, sat over a Tractate Zevahim, brooding and tugging at his long and thick black beard.

He wasn't worried about making a living. Even after decades of exclusion from Wilki and the Weavers' Guild, a sizable Jewish community had managed to flourish in Lodz, complete with its own rabbi, assistant rabbis, ritual slaughterers, ritual bath, synagogues, and cemetery.

The reason the Jews prospered was that the German weavers produced a very inferior cloth that was disdained by the rich and the discriminating, who demanded the soft wools, fine silks, gleaming satins and velvets from abroad. To fill this need, the wealthier Jews took wagons and, later, the first trains to Danzig and Leipzig, while those less affluent conspired with border guards to smuggle in fabrics from Germany. At the same time barefoot Jewish peddlers and runners fanned out across sandy country lanes to buy wool from the peasants to sell to Lodz merchants, who in turn shipped it abroad to be spun into yarn. The peasants, who used to leave their sheep filthy and unshorn, now bathed them in streams to render the fleece white and clean. Speculators and leaseholders bought up entire future yields of flocks on landed estates.

The German master weavers of Lodz vilified the Jews for importing foreign goods from Germany at the expense of the local industry. They also resented the fact that Jewish merchants issued cotton to the

poor German weavers, thus bringing down the price of the finished goods. These cotton merchants weren't able to obtain credit at the banks, as were their German competitors, and they lacked the cash with which to pay the weavers. They therefore issued their own scrip to the weavers when they delivered the finished goods on Friday evenings, and the Jewish tailors, cobblers, and shopkeepers accepted the scrip in lieu of money.

When the German master weavers complained, the authorities outlawed the practice. They also sent a representative to England to buy up cotton, thus pushing the Jews out of business. But the cotton ended up being stolen by government officials. The authorities generally found it easier to accept bribes from the Jews, who continued issuing the scrip and doing business as usual.

Among the most respectable and affluent citizens of Lodz was Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi, who traveled to Danzig on buying trips several times a year. He had just returned from such a journey which had proved even more profitable than usual. He had fine presents for his wife and daughters and a handsome silver cup that he was saving to present to the Rabbi of Warka, whose disciple he was.

Things at home were going along splendidly, and Abraham Hersh was delighted. But as a leader of the community, a position he held despite his youth and as the result of his wealth, scholarship, and piety, he was disturbed by a number of problems that had cropped up during his absence.

First, funds were needed to provide Passover products for the town's poor, not only the beggars but also those who worked but hadn't managed to save up enough from a year's toil to buy the necessary matzos, wine, eggs, meat, and cooking fat for the holiday. Upon his return, Abraham Hersh had taken his red kerchief and, accompanied by several other community leaders, had solicited the affluent households. It hadn't sufficed, and the poor had stormed the communal house, demanding their due.

Second, there were Jewish prisoners to be ransomed. Throughout Poland, the czar's Cossacks were fighting the Polish gentry, who

sought to restore a Polish king to the throne, and loyal Jewish leaseholders were engaged in smuggling gunpowder to their Polish masters hiding in the forests.

Just recently, a group of Jews had been caught smuggling a quantity of gunpowder in barrels of apples. At first, the Cossacks had found nothing by poking their lances into the barrels, but as they started appropriating the apples, they found the powder. Some of the Jews were hanged on the spot; others were thrown into prison. Those who were executed had to be given decent Jewish burials. Those in prison had to be ransomed or at least provided with matzos for the holiday.

Third, a group of newly rich, enlightened Jews who were anxious to shed the yoke of Yiddishkeit had petitioned the government to allow them to put up a modern school where their children could learn the ways of the gentile. There were rumors that they also planned to build a German type of temple with an organ and a cantor who chanted like a priest. Although the authorities were slow to respond to this request, the parvenu Jews were tossing money about freely, and everyone knew what money could accomplish. Abraham Hersh and the other traditionalists considered such a temple far worse than a church since only Christians and converts attended the latter, while the former was liable to entice the poorer Jews away from the path of righteousness, which was the first step toward apostasy.

Fourth, Jewish runners who roamed the countryside buying up wool, hides, and hog bristles learned that a wayward Lodz youth, Naftali the Convert, who more than once had been driven from the synagogue courtyard for flouting the laws of Yiddishkeit, had apprenticed himself to a German weaver, for whom he worked on the Sabbath and with whom he ate pork.

Abraham Hersh sent for the youth and warned that he would turn him over to the authorities for conscription, but the fellow remained recalcitrant. The authorities refused to conscript him despite the community's pleas, and this helped encourage other Jewish youths to make overtures to the gentiles. One, Mendel Flederbaum, who employed several gentile weavers, learned the trade from his workers and applied

to the gentile guild to accept him as a master weaver. He was helped in this by the authorities after he had shaved his beard, renounced the traditional garb, and learned to speak and write Russian.

Following this, several others of shaky faith got the urge to emulate the renegades. At this time an epidemic swept the town, and children died of scarlet fever. This was seen as a clear sign of God's punishment upon Lodz for the sins of its heretics.

Another thorn in Abraham Hersh's side was his wife's objections to his visiting his rabbi on the holiday. He was accustomed to going to Warka not only on Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, and Shavuot but also on Passover, despite his wife's annual complaints that she would be forced to celebrate the Seder at her father's, the assistant rabbi of Ozorkow, like some widow, God forbid.

Not that Abraham Hersh was one to be moved by female tears. A woman was only a woman, after all. But this time things were somewhat different. His wife was due at any time now, and since the child kicked on her right side she expected a boy.

"I'll kill myself if you're not here for the circumcision! I'll never endure the shame of it..." she bleated.

Nor were the roads to Warka safe, people warned him. The Cossacks were scouring the countryside and harassing travelers. Innocent people had been flogged and even hanged.

But Abraham Hersh had urgent reasons to go. On his last visit he had mentioned that his wife was pregnant, to which the rabbi had commented, "Your generations shall be men of wealth."

This had disturbed Abraham Hersh, and he had quickly said, "I would prefer them to be God-fearing men, Rabbi."

But the rabbi hadn't responded, and Abraham Hersh hadn't pressed the issue. Still, the remark had sounded ominous, and Abraham Hersh was anxious to resolve it before it was too late.

The dangers of the road didn't concern him at all – he was accustomed to dealing with such things. The only thing that held him back was leaving his wife alone during the labor and delivery, and later, at the circumcision if, with God's help, the baby turned out to be a boy.

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But there were other considerations. A number of impoverished Warka Hasidim were looking forward to a trip at his expense, and they would jeer at him for letting a woman dissuade him. It wasn't fair to deprive Jews of a holiday at their rabbi's table. Besides, how would it look if he presented the rabbi the silver Elijah's cup on Shavuot instead of on Passover?...

Had his wife been a sensible person instead of a woman, she would have urged him to go and resolve the question of their child's future with the rabbi. But he, being a man, couldn't allow her tears to sway him.

He went to the closet, got down the large leather valise that he always took with him to Danzig, and packed his tefillin, tallit, a satin gabardine, some shirts, the silver cup, and some holy books to study along the way. Being a good Warka Hasid, he remembered to include several bottles of Passover aquavit and sent the maid, Sarah Leah, for the coachman.

Belly jutting, his wife erupted with her usual complaints, but Abraham Hersh didn't even blink an eye. He kissed the mezuzah [door-post amulet], and as he already stood on the threshold, he wished her an easy delivery. He suddenly reminded himself.

"If, with God's help, it's a boy, he is to be named Simha Bunem after the Przysucha Rabbi, blessed be his memory. That's the way I want it, you hear?" he shouted into the room.

Chapter 3

Mistress Ashkenazi hadn't been wrong – the signs presaging the birth of a boy proved true. But instead of one son there were two.

After a night of anguish which coincided with the first Seder, a child was born at dawn. The neighbor women in attendance slapped the infant's rump to make it cry and held it up to the lamp.

"Congratulations, it's a boy!" they announced to the mother.

But she didn't stop screaming. The women stroked her sweating face. "Enough already. It's all over."

Sarah Leah, who was an experienced midwife, saw that it was far from over. "Grab hold of the headboard, mistress darling," she advised. "It'll make things easier."

After a number of minutes another infant emerged, a big, heavy baby that needed no slap to make it bawl.

Sarah Leah took it and held it to the light. "Another boy! A real buster this time, the evil eye spare him."

The women found two different colored ribbons to tie around the boys' wrists, but it wasn't necessary since only a fool could have mistaken the two. The elder was slight, scrawny, with sparse fair hair over a narrow skull, while the younger was long and robust with a huge head of black curly hair. The elder piped in a shrill wail, while the younger bellowed like a bullock.

"One just like the mistress and the other a spitting image of the master," Sarah Leah said, handing the cleansed, dressed infants to their mother, who quickly clasped the elder twin to her breast.

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“Hush, don’t carry on so,” she chided the younger twin, who howled as if out of jealousy.

She sprayed a few drops of milk into the mouths of the boys to teach them how to suckle. The younger took to the nipple without a sound, but the elder could only scream in frustration.

For the whole eight days preceding the circumcision the mother fretted against her mound of pillows about the problem of naming the babies. She had mentioned to her husband that if it turned out a boy, she would have liked to name it after her grandfather Jacob Meir, the Rabbi of Wodzislaw, but Abraham Hersh wouldn’t hear of it. He insisted it be called Simha Bunem after the Przysucha Rabbi.

“You can name girls after whomever you want, but the boys belong to me,” he told her.

Now that he was away, the responsibility lay upon her. Having had twins, she had the latitude of apportioning four names, but for all that, she was uneasy. She knew how unreasonable her husband could be, and she knew that whatever she decided would displease him – he wouldn’t tolerate even one name from her side of the family.

Women advised her to send a messenger to her husband asking him to come home, but she wouldn’t. She was furious with him. She hadn’t enjoyed a happy moment since their wedding. He was either away on business or at his rabbi’s. When he was home, he was either with his hasidic cronies at the studyhouse or poring over the books in his study.

Not that she demanded much. She herself came from a hasidic family, her own father behaved no differently, and she knew that a learned Jew had nothing to say to a female, who wasn’t even allowed to make her presence known in her own home when strange men came to call. That was the woman’s lot, and she accepted it. Each morning she thanked God for having created her a female according to His will. Still, she chafed under the conditions.

True, she was well-off and fecund, providing her husband with a child each year, and bright, healthy children at that, for which she was envied. He brought her gifts from Danzig – a Turkish shawl or a piece

of jewelry – but he paid no attention to her. They couldn't even share a Sabbath meal together since he always brought some pauper home and she was forced to eat in the kitchen with the maid after a single sip of the benediction wine and a slice of the ceremonial Sabbath loaf.

Nor could they go anywhere together since neither was allowed to mix with the opposite sex. On the rare occasions when they visited relatives, he always walked in front while she followed a few paces behind. The moment they entered the house, they quickly parted, each to his own gender. On Sabbaths, he lingered so long at the services that she almost fainted from hunger until the meal could be served.

But what irked her most was the air of superiority he adopted toward her. He never asked her advice, never reported how his business affairs were going, never confided in her when he was troubled. He would open his heavy purse and dole out the money she needed for household expenses, and that was the extent of their relationship. He never even addressed her by name but called her "thou" in the manner of the fanatics. When he came home from a trip, he never told her about it but merely kissed the mezuza and grunted, "How are things in the house?" while he held out her present. If she took it from his hand, it was a sign that she was available for marital relations. If not, he only glanced at her darkly and went off to his Hasidim to hear news of their rabbi.

She feared him, his brooding silences, his booming chant as he studied the Gemara, his burly masculinity, his grim face. She didn't ask much – a kind word or a loving smile as compensation for her empty existence that was little better than a servant's, but even this he denied her. If he loved her in his own fashion, he showed it only in their bed, as the Law prescribed. Otherwise, he was quite rigid about a woman's role in life. She was to bear children, rear them, observe the laws of Yiddishkeit, run a household, and obey her husband blindly. If his friends chose to drop in for a late get-together, he expected her to serve them refreshments regardless of the hour. "Woman," he shouted into the kitchen, where she had to sit with the

maid, “whip up a mess of groats for us men!” And she had to stay up preparing the food.

He was away on all holidays, even on Passover when the humblest Jewish women joined their husbands and families at the table, while she had to be alone like some widow, God forbid. All these indignities she had borne in silence, but this time he had gone too far. She had begged and pleaded with him to be with her for the birth, but as usual he had ignored her, and a sense of deep outrage, built up over years of gray, unfulfilled existence, consumed her. She disregarded the women’s advice and determined not to send a messenger after him. Actually she wasn’t all that sure that he would heed her plea.

All the female pride that her husband had so long trampled underfoot now emerged full-blown. She lay in her bed, cordoned off with sheets and draped with amulets to guard against the evil forces. Responding with firm “amens” to the traditional prayers recited by *heder* boys on the other side of the sheets, bolstered by a sense of pride in her maternal accomplishments, she took it upon herself to arrange for the circumcision. Issuing orders like any imperious male, she decided on the names she would give her sons in defiance of her husband’s wishes. She didn’t feel bold enough to cross him completely, and she effected a kind of compromise. She named the elder twin Simha after the Przysucha Rabbi, but added Meir after her grandfather, and gave the remaining two names to the younger – Jacob Bunem.

The moment Abraham Hersh returned from Warka, he asked to see his newborn son. He was amazed to learn that there were two, and he gazed in bewilderment at the tightly swaddled infants.

“Which is the older?” he asked brusquely.

“The smaller one,” his wife said, lowering her eyes under his burning gaze.

“What’s he called?”

“Simha.”

“Just one name?”

“No. Meir, too. After my grandfather, the Wodzislav Rabbi, blessed be his memory,” she whispered, trembling at her audacity.

“Here, take him!” Abraham Hersh growled.

Sarah Leah brought the other infant.

“Go to your daddy, Jacob Bunem,” she crooned with sly innocence.

Abraham Hersh glared at the infant, who looked back at him with open, shining eyes, and some of his anger dissipated. The knowledge that both of the Przysucha’s Rabbi’s names had been used mollified him somewhat, but the fact that they had been joined with that of some worthless nobody was hard to swallow.

“The image of the master ... a shining light, may the evil eye spare him,” Sarah Leah said.

“Pshaw! Take him away,” the father growled in a fit of pique.

Eyes tearing, the mother clapped a son to each breast. “Suck, Meir darling,” she urged the older, omitting the child’s other name that her husband had forced upon her, but he only clamped his gums around her nipple and held it in a fierce grip.

She screamed in pain, and Sarah Leah came running. She plucked the infant from the breast and regarded him angrily. “Rascal, a baby mustn’t pinch his mother’s breast. Nurse like Jacob Bunem ... so ...”

The baby emitted a howl of such indignation that Abraham Hersh shouted from his study, “Close the door! How can a man concentrate in all this tumult?”

He gathered scant joy from his sons’ birth. He envisioned the time when he would present them to his rabbi and his shame would become public knowledge. He tried saying their names aloud, but they rang false to him. He wouldn’t forgive his wife for defiling the rabbi’s name, and he didn’t go in to see her, even though she was still not fully recovered. To muffle the disgrace, he threw himself into his work. He no longer planned to go to Danzig since there was sufficient local business to keep him busy.

The town of Lodz grew from day to day. The first Jews to be granted the right to open weaving workshops had achieved this by adopting gentile ways and toadying to the authorities. But inevitably, ordinary observant Jews followed suit. The Russian officials who descended upon the country following the suppression of the Polish

uprising were most eager for the bribes and gifts of Jews who sought permission to live and do business in prohibited areas, and soon Jewish looms clacked away in the old section of Lodz, even though the Germans still barred Jews from their guild.

At first, the Jews confined themselves to their own quarter. Seemingly overnight the houses already standing sprouted additional stories, annexes, wings, extensions, ells, attics, and garrets to accommodate the flow of newcomers converging upon Lodz from surrounding areas. Lacking legitimate sanction and permits, the construction was effected at night and proceeded helter-skelter, without order or plan. Buildings came down; buildings went up; buildings emerged slanted, top-heavy, leaning this way or that – all symmetry sacrificed to expediency. There was no time to do otherwise as the town grew by leaps and bounds.

Gradually the Jews began to spill out of their congested area into Wilki, which was officially closed to them. The first to stick a toe inside the restricted area were the more affluent, audacious Jews; presently the more timorous followed.

Then, like a torrent overflowing its banks, the Jews smashed down all barriers set up to exclude them. Thousands of rural leaseholders and innkeepers who had been dependent on the Polish nobility were now forced to seek their livelihoods in towns and cities. They opened dry goods stores by the hundred, but since the liberated serfs were starving, there were no customers, and the Jews turned to weaving. They set up their wooden handlooms wherever they could, but mostly they flocked to the city of Lodz. Having endured the irrational cruelty of their blue-blooded former masters, they wouldn't be turned back by mere bans or decrees fashioned against them; they opened their workshops just as the German immigrants had done before them.

At first, they hired German weavers who couldn't afford to go out on their own and who preferred a Jewish master to a German, who would force them to kiss his hand twice a day. If a Jewish boss caught them with a snippet of wool in their pocket, he didn't beat them but merely reclaimed the wool and threw it back in the pile. As the

Sabbath drew to a close, the German workers sat in their employers' kitchens, smoking pipes and conversing with their bosses' wives and daughters in flawless Yiddish.

"Hey, boss," they ragged their masters, who were reluctant to let go of the waning Sabbath, "let's have the few guldens already before the taverns close...."

Gradually young Jewish men, both married and single, began to learn the trade. Down the sandy roads leading to Lodz, fathers accompanied by sons who had no heads for books walked barefoot and waved sticks to keep off the village dogs. On the outskirts of town they put on their boots and admonished their sons before apprenticing them for three years to Jewish master weavers.

"Act like an adult, obey your employer, be kind to God and man, be honest and respectful, and you will reap the benefits of this world and the world to come."

They dug down deep into the pockets of their sheepskins and took out purses, from which they drew the greasy, hard-earned bills with which to pay the master weavers for agreeing to feed and board their sons while they taught them their trade.

The skullcapped youths stood before the looms with tzitzit dangling over grimy trousers, lint clinging to curly thatches and sprouting beards, fingers deftly weaving wool and cotton cloth or ladies' kerchiefs from dawn to midnight. As they worked, they chanted cantorial pieces, trilling and quavering over selected passages. The bosses passed to and fro, making sure nothing was stolen, checking the output and prodding the worker who paused to wipe his brow or roll a cigarette.

The bosses' wives and daughters peeled potatoes, fried onions, and stirred soups in huge kettles while apprentices wound yarn onto spools, rocking cradles with their feet.

In the marketplaces Jews bought and sold piece goods and remnants. Rag pickers brought in all kinds of waste, which they sold to dealers, who reclaimed it into reusable material. Women and girls wound thread onto red wooden bobbins. Hosiers knitted coarse

colorful stockings for women. Wherever one turned, machines clacked and clattered, accompanied by the tailors' cantorial chants and the seamstresses' love ballads.

Eventually the city grew too congested to contain its rapidly growing population. As the wealthy and enterprising lease-holder Solomon David Preiss, who had made his fortune importing wheat and rye to Prussia, lay awake one night, it suddenly struck him that a suburb might be built on the infertile flats of Baluty, the Kanarski brothers' estate just outside the city. The land was too sandy even to pasture livestock, and the only people living on it were the liberated serfs who had nowhere else to go.

The following morning after services, Preiss ordered his servant to hitch up the britska and drive him to the Kanarski estate. His ostensible reason for calling on the steward was to consider a purchase of rye. As he chewed on the kernels, allegedly to test the quality of the grain, he casually asked the steward how things were going. The Pole tugged his long mustache and spat out the expected tale of woe. The masters were in debt over their heads, but their solution was to go to Paris on sprees while the burden of maintaining the estate fell entirely upon him. Before leaving, Preiss hinted that he was examining sites where sand was plentiful for a possible glass plant. If he found such a property at a cheap enough price, he might consider its purchase.

Within days he was summoned to meet with the brothers at their manor. Forgetting the fact that a Polish nobleman was obliged to address a Jew by his first name only, the Kanarskis abjured protocol and were almost civil to their visitor.

"Mr. Solomon, there is enough sand in Baluty for ten glass plants, not one," they gushed, eyes glinting with greed.

Solomon David Preiss bargained shrewdly and eventually bought the huge expanse of land for a mere 20,000 rubles cash.

When the brothers, who had gone to Paris to squander their bonanza, learned from their steward that the Jew planned to build a suburb rather than a glass plant on their former property, they rushed back in an attempt to nullify the deal on the ground that they had

been duped. The local judges and assessors, who were their friends, began to pore through the law books, seeking some technicality that would void the sale.

Solomon David Preiss had no manor in which to entertain these gentlemen and their wives, but he had an even more persuasive argument – gold imperials of which the local functionaries were consummate connoisseurs. And it happened that instead of finding for their fellow Pole and social equal, the judges found for the Jew.

When the Kanarskis saw how things were going, they appealed to the higher powers for a strict enforcement of the prohibition against Jews residing outside their appointed areas. Dignitary after dignity arrived in splendid coaches at the Kanarski manor house. They drank the brothers' wine, danced with their daughters, hunted their game, and promised a swift and fair resolution of the dispute. Briefs, precedents, writs, arguments, and interpretations began to flow back and forth between Lodz and Warsaw until no one could make sense of anything anymore.

In the meantime, streets, alleys, and buildings sprouted on the sandy flats like mushrooms after a rain. The construction was chaotic, promiscuous, slapdash. Before the lime on the walls had even dried, people moved in. Peasants brought in bricks, dug ditches, uprooted stumps, slaked lime, sawed boards, nailed roofs. Jewish carpenters, joiners, masons, tinsmiths, and glaziers bustled, sweated, cursed. While the legal documents gathered dust in the courts, there rose over the sandy flats a city that no legal decision could abolish.

Before the municipality of Baluty, which the Jews promptly shortened to Balut, could even consider official names for its streets, the workers promptly named them after the surnames or occupations of their inhabitants or after the synagogues or study houses standing there. Thus, there soon appeared a Synagogue Street, a Feiffer Lane, a Jonah Feltmaker Place, a Grossman's Alley, and so forth.

On isolated corners there still remained a peasant hut or two, complete with straw roof and livestock, but all vestiges of rusticity vanished as the city engulfed the countryfolk and transformed them

into true cosmopolites who wore ready-made clothes and earned and spent money. Their children learned Yiddish, which enabled them to earn a groschen or a slice of bread for lighting or dousing a candle in a Jewish home on the Sabbath, heating an oven, and performing other such tasks forbidden the Jew on the holy day. Poor German weavers moved into abandoned peasant huts, and recruiters went out into the country to hire peasants for the steam factories that began to appear in Lodz, their tall chimneys poking up into the murky skies.

In Wilki the German master weaver Heinz Huntze, who had grown rich from handlooms, built a huge steam plant with walls painted red and a bank of high windows. In the early dawn its whistles shattered the stillness as they summoned the men to work.

Soon after, Solomon David Preiss, who had realized a fortune from his holdings in Balut, ordered a new gabardine, a silk top hat, and an umbrella. Armed only with his Yiddish and the roll of banknotes that he had sewn into the pocket of his velvet vest and that he never removed even when he slept, he traveled to England. There he purchased machinery and hired an English engineer and a chemist, whom he brought back with him to Lodz.

On a huge lot that he bought for a song he built his own steam mill, the chimneys of which topped even Huntze's. Because his English assistants refused to take Saturdays off and work on Sundays, he hired no Jewish workers, and since it was a sin for a Jew to own a factory that operated on the Sabbath even with gentile help, Solomon David Preiss contrived a little subterfuge with his rabbi. He had him draw up a bill of sale in Hebrew and Aramaic and "sold" the factory to his Polish porter, Wojciech Smoliuch.

The terrified gentile stood trembling in the rabbi's study, his straw-colored mustache drooping, in dreadful fear of the fraud the Jews were perpetrating upon him. Even after it had all been explained to him, he still didn't understand it. "Sir, how can I buy your factory when I don't have a kopeck to my name?" he pleaded.

"Dummy! Do as you're told, and give me a ruble," Preiss insisted. "But I don't have a ruble," the frightened Pole whined.

“Here is a ruble. Now give it back to me, and the sale is completed. When you have another ruble, you can pay back the loan.”

Wojciech was sure that he was selling his soul to the devil or worse, but he was afraid to cross his boss, and he gingerly touched the tip of the red kerchief the rabbi extended to him to signify the sealing of a bargain. The rabbi then told him to sign the bill of sale, and the gentile made three crosses since he was illiterate.

Preiss and the rabbi grimaced at the sight of the despised symbols, but it was the only way. Preiss handed the bill of sale to Wojciech along with a ten-groschen tip, and the porter stuck the paper in his cap and dashed to the tavern for a badly needed drink.

Now Preiss could operate his factory on the Sabbaths with impunity and a clean conscience. Its machinery clattered away at full blast, shaking the red walls and belching black smoke into the skies. The poor German weavers gazed at the plant’s towering chimneys that dehumanized them and rendered their skills meaningless. They looked down with despair at their veiny hands that would one day be obsolete.

The German master weavers incited their workers against Preiss’s steam factory as a Jewish instrument of the devil. The workers grumbled into their beer and swore revenge.

One Saturday evening they gathered with torches, crowbars, and axes in front of the Jew’s factory. Led by their masters, who displayed the standards of their guild, they smashed the machinery, doused the walls with kerosene, and set the factory on fire. Afterward, drunk and riotous, they raced through the Jewish quarter, and with skills honed by generations, they smashed, robbed, raped, and assaulted, shouting the ancient battle cry, “*Hep, hep Jude!*”

The Cossacks herded them toward the Ludka Pond with swords bared and nagaikas flying.

But Solomon David Preiss’s chimneys soon belched even denser smoke into the skies, and his whistles shrilled with unabated fury. Acknowledging the way the wind was blowing, the German master weavers, who were swamped with orders for goods, borrowed

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from Polish banks and put up steam factories of their own, and the wealthier Jews followed.

Like strange fruit, red brick steam factories sprouted in the fields around Lodz. They emitted slimy pools of sludge and poisoned the land, air, and water. Construction of residences, stores, workshops, and factories continued at a furious pace. Jewish artisans from all over Poland poured into Lodz. Peasants with too many children and too little land flocked in to take jobs in factories. Merchants from Russia arrived to snatch up goods for their own textile-starved country.

The end was nowhere in sight, and as Lodz flourished, so did the House of Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi.