

XVIII

MAYOFES YIDDEN

I.

WARSAW AND ROVNO SEEMED TO BELONG TO DIFFERENT worlds. The atmosphere in the capital of Poland was so much more congenial; the spirit more tolerant. It was a relief to get away from the *Kresy*.

Warsaw is the most beautiful city in Poland. It is an elegant city—a city of pleasures. It abounds in theatres, museums, and has one of the most remarkable music halls—the Filarmonja—that I have ever seen. Its parks are renowned throughout Europe. So is the picturesque *Stare Miasto*—Old City—which has been preserved all these centuries, motley colors and all (particularly the wine cellars), just as it was on the day when the first wine-drinking Polish *shliachta* settled there. No wonder the Poles refer to Warsaw as the “Little Paris.”

What impressed me most in that city, however, were its numerous cafés. The whole soul of Warsaw seems to be expressed in these cafés. They are brightly lit and glittering, always crowded with smartly dressed officers, merchants and landowners who sip wine and sway to the rhythm of Polish patriotic

songs. The Polish *shliachta* may have died more than a century ago but its spirit still lives.

All this is true, of course, if you never venture—the majority of visitors and tourists never do—farther than Warsaw's main street, Marshalkovska, or the exotic Aleja Jerozolimaska. Should you, however, decide to visit Novolpki street, Dzika, or the Nalevki—Warsaw's notorious ghetto—an entirely different picture will present itself.

Take the Nalevki, for instance: It is filthy and crowded. The smell of herring blended with the odor of cheap perfumes that emanates from unemployed Jewish girls, now walking the streets as prostitutes, is unbearable. And the men: young boys and bearded Jews dressed in long cassocks and little caps from which extend the traditional side-curls, seem like relics of the middle ages, relics of the past.

These Nalevki Jews move busily about in the crowded ghetto like bees in a hive. They pull push-carts, carry enormous loads on their backs and generally substitute for horses. (Their labor is bought cheaper than that of a horse.) Some of the Nalevki Jews sell herring, others holy scrolls or a bit of earth from the "holy" land. Their cries of *handel, handel*—I buy and sell—resound throughout the courtyards of Warsaw's ghetto. No one, of course, buys anything for no one has any money to buy with. Nor does any one sell, for if there was anything to be sold, it had already been sold long, long ago. The cry of *handel, handel* is merely a cry of desperation.

The inhabitants of the Nalevki also work in the

numerous dress shops or textile factories that are scattered throughout the ghetto. The factories or the shops are usually combined with the owner's residence. They are stuffy, filthy and smell of human perspiration, while "architecturally" they remind one of ancient dungeons.

Last but not least these Jews are the chief manipulators on Warsaw's "black" bourse. They buy and sell false dollars, franks, gold, silver and rubles smuggled out of Soviet Russia.

Quite frequently the "black" bourse is raided by the Polish police. On such occasions one witnesses a human stampede. Jews with long beards, their long cassocks flopping in the wind, flee in all directions. The Police! . . . The Canaries! . . . Some of them get killed in this stampede while others wish that they had been killed, for once caught, their last *grosz* is taken away from them.

Such Jewish stampedes are a frequent occurrence in various parts of Poland.

2.

Most of the Nalevski Jews are Chassidim. Outside of Poland it is usually assumed that the Chassidim are a small Jewish sect. In reality, however, the majority of Polish Jews are Chassidim. They are simply the Jewish population of the country: merchants, workers, tradesmen and beggars. According to Ilya Ehrenbourg, in Western Poland or Galicia, any Jew

who is not a Chassid is considered a foreigner—a "Litvak."

The Chassidim are usually divided into various groups: the Brazlaw Chassidim, the Mesricher Chassidim, the Orliker Chassidim, depending upon the city from which they come originally and where their chief Chassid, the Tsadik, to whom they pay their allegiance, resides. It is the Tsadikim, the "good and virtuous men," the religious guides and inspirers, who rule over this mass of misery and poverty. They are also the Chassidim's spokesmen before the Polish government and before the Gentile world in general.

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In an earlier chapter of this book I refer to "those marvelous tales of the Chassidim that I had heard as a child"; about the fact that Chassidism was "a sort of revolutionary movement among the Jews in the seventeenth century" and that the Chassidim were a "Jewish sect of pantheists who revolted against the bigotry and dogmatism of the Jewish law . . ." But this was true three centuries ago. Chassidism has long since lost its original meaning. The contemporary Polish Chassidim, far from revolting against the dogmatism and bigotry of the Jewish law, are the most fanatical and zealous guardians of this law. They are ignorant and bigoted. The same is also true of the Tsadikim.

In the seventeenth and even in the early part of the eighteenth century, the Tsadikim were rebels,

poets, philosophers and true leaders of oppressed Jewry. Today, however, under the stress of modern economic life, having long forgotten the words of *Baal Shem Tov*, the Tsadikim are either, as Ehrenbourg puts it, "zealous dogmatists or clever fakers. Some of them are engaged in politics and before elections sell the votes of their followers. Others arrange lotteries for themselves, forcing their Chassidim to buy tickets. Or they enter into agreements with doctors, and when a sick Chassid comes trembling to his Tsadik to ask for advice: 'Rabbi, what shall I do?' he is given the address of a doctor—fee, fifty-fifty. To be a Tsadik today is much more profitable than to sell herring."

The Tsadikim also perform the function of *Mayofes Yidden*. As a matter of fact the Polish Government prefers to "do business" with these old-fashioned Yidden rather than with those dressed in modern garb. The Tsadikim demand less for their services. Besides, the Government has always catered to medieval Jewish orthodoxy rather than to progressive Judaism. Through cleverly manipulating between the various warring Jewish political parties in Poland, it has vested the authority of the Kahals (semi-official Jewish administrative bodies) largely in the hands of *Agudath Israel*, the party of the orthodox Jews. These *Agudath Israel* Jews are rabid supporters of the administration. They oppose with all the means at their disposal any liberal or progressive thought or action on the part of the Polish Jews. Thus, although the Kahals are sustained through

forcible taxation of the Jewish population, they are really an effective instrument in the hands of the Government against thinking Jews. And, of course, the *Agudath Israel* Jews and the Tsadikim are birds of one feather and usually work hand in hand.

3.

I once visited a Tsadik in Warsaw. I regretted it forever after. This visit destroyed all those wonderful illusions that I had built up about the Tsadikim.

This Tsadik was a middle-aged man of about forty-five, with a neatly trimmed beard and furtive eyes that for some reason reminded me of the notorious Warsaw charlatans. He was dressed in a silk cassock and silk round cap, trimmed with a border of yellow fur.

When I met him he was sitting at the head of a long table, surrounded by his Chassidim. It was in the house of a well-to-do Warsaw *Mayofes Yid*. I was a little late and when I entered the room the Tsadik was already holding forth. The Chassidim listened enraptured.

"Sh-h . . .," someone cautioned me, "don't stamp so loudly with your feet, the Tsadik is teaching the Torah . . ."

A beadle led me to an empty seat near the Tsadik. Usually, I was told, people fight for the privilege of sitting near the *güter Yid*, and the man who "contributes" most gets the honor. But I was a guest and

besides they all thought—as they think of every American—that I had lots of dollars.

When the Tsadik finished his "lesson," a general murmur broke out in the room. The hostess was bringing in the traditional fish and whiskey. I decided that this was the time to say a few words to the Tsadik. The misery that I had encountered in the Kresy was still fresh in my mind. Surely, I thought, the Tsadik would show a keen interest in the fate of those Jews.

I had hardly spoken for about two minutes when I realized that the Tsadik wasn't listening to me. There was a blank expression on his face.

"Tell me," he suddenly asked me, "how is Yosele Rosenblatt?"

I had never seen the famous New York cantor but I replied: "Yosele Rosenblatt is all right. I wish the Jews in the Kresy were as well off . . ."

There was an annoyed look on the Tsadik's face.

"The Jews . . . the Jews . . ." he murmured in reply. "There are many heretics among them . . . Too many *Goyim* . . . But God is merciful. He will help . . ."

Again his face assumed a blank expression. I could see that the fate of the Jews in the Kresy interested him very little.

I got up to leave. The noise in the room was increasing. The Chassidim were beginning to perform their holy-roller ritual.

At the door I was stopped by one of the Tsadik's beadles.

"*Panie*," he said to me sweetly, "and how about something for the Tsadik?"

"How about it?" I replied, and walked out of the room. I had just then realized how much in common this ruin of medievalism that I had just spoken to had with the "enlightened" *Mayofes Yid* in the modern garb. Both are faithful servants of the powers that be. Both are a terrible sore on the body of Polish Jewry.