

# *War Stories*



*Avigdor Hameiri*

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Translated from the Hebrew by Moti Ben-Ari

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For the unseen Jewish soldier  
Whose blood was spilled on the lands of the seventy kingdoms

# Under the Red Skies

## Barracks Lore

Death comes absentmindedly,  
But not insensibly.

My grandfather

The summons came suddenly.

We knew that there was a war in the world, that it had already started. But it was far away, far away from us. And suddenly -- they took us, stuffed us into a train -- March!

Where to?

No one knew.

For about two days we sweated like chickens crammed into a henhouse. Two days. The train stopped at every station and whistle-stop, as if they wanted us to get slowly used to these austere trips.

But the austerities weren't really austerities. The new situation was full of interest. Actually, the whole thing was rather nice. When had we ever traveled thus in our lives? Sitting any which way, eating foul food with hands and teeth, without a knife, without a fork and even without a spoon. Sleeping one on top of another and then getting up to eat without washing our hands, smoking cigarette butts left by our gypsy friend, the carcass skinner...

And finally we arrived at a sort of small village in poverty-stricken Galicia.

Here they put us into something like a grain silo smelling of rotting potatoes and beets.

This was the barracks.

The sound of shots coming from not far away hinted that we were not far from the front.

And so: that is to say, the situation is grave, and therefore they rushed us recruits here, and here they were to teach us strategy in an instant. Here, close to where it is really happening.

A few minutes ago I removed my civilian clothes and dressed myself in His Majesty's uniform. This uniform as it hung on me did not add any majesty to His Majesty's battalion. From its size, I perceived that the girth of the one for whom they were made was thicker than my waist. When my friends put on their nice clothes, which excelled in their filth and the blood spots upon them, we looked at each other as if in an amusement park mirror, which caused us to break out in gallows humor, a monstrous laugh like some feeling of reincarnation that filled me from head to foot...

I looked at my ridiculous self...

My blouse -- a patch of clotted blood was fastened upon it lengthwise on the right, from my neck to the middle of my waist.

Whose blood was it?

I closed my eyes and asked about him...

And suddenly -- a song:

Goodbye, my pet,  
I'll break my vase  
And in the depths of hell  
I'll walk alone ...  
Alone. Alone. Alone ...

I had no time to be carried away by the song before an order cut through the air: "Outside!"

We hurried to the courtyard and stood in a rank.

A line of intellectuals, the chosen ones of Pallas Athena, spoiled with beauty and thought, who had become in one moment stage puppets, so serious that one could weep.

Without noticing it I looked around: Thank God, no one of my acquaintances was looking at me ... and suddenly a blood-curdling shout cut through the air, the shout of the First Sergeant:

"Attention!"

The whole rank froze: A wall of barren trees stripped of their leaves by the icy winter. This wall has eyes, the eyes of smoked glass, looking into the air and seeing nothing.

Thus passed a moment or two: in a stifling silence with no thought, outside the world and its inhabitants, without life.

The First Sergeant stood before us facing the middle of the rank. His two piercing, watery eyes, the eyes of a polyp, moved from one end of the rank to the other and then became pale. When he looked again at the middle of the rank, he spread his legs as if almost tearing his body in two, and from within his oiled and stiff mustache a word came out with slow and terrible emphasis, in a crescendo:

"Discipline!"

And again:

"Dis-ci-pline!"

And again his eyes moved across the rank of frozen eyeballs and snuffed out their last spark.

"At ease!"

The rank shook with a death rattle, but after understanding the meaning of this short word, recovered, stirred and came back to life. The corpses became living men, swaying and thinking, and a huge deep breath filled the autumn mist around us.

The First Sergeant lit a stinking cigarette and began to talk. He spoke moderately, in measured cadences, with the wisdom of supreme intelligence, though with phrasing a bit too fitting the elderly.

"I," he began, wrinkling his brow, "I -- I desire to talk to you, gentlemen, about a few issues. A few issues without which you will never be respectable citizens for as long as you live ... I don't know how to talk at length. I am neither an orator nor a foolish philosopher, neither a university professor nor a fortune-telling gypsy, neither a dentist nor a journalist, and certainly not one of those riff-raff who are gluttons for mist and gorge on air, who speak the flowery talk of leaders of the hunt and desert chiefs! I myself am a soldier, a man of arms, a warrior, a soldier of his His Majestic Highness who is the most Supreme Commander His Majesty Emperor Franz Joseph the First, Salute! -- Rabble, rotten and insignificant!"

The rank froze.

This satisfied him:

"At ease!"

The rank stood at ease again.

"That's it, slackers. I, myself, don't mistake me, I love you all. Even though you are only intellectuals. Damned intellectuals. But, if you make an effort to be respectable citizens, soldiers, you can be sure that I will not withhold what you deserve. I will try to make you into men, worthy of being called men."

"What are you?" he asked the first one in the rank.

The miserable one was shaking:

"I -- am a bookkeeper in a bank."

The First Sergeant smiled through his mustache.

"And you?" he turned to the second one.

"I am an engineer."

The First Sergeant smirked.

"And you?"

"A performer."

The First Sergeant laughed out loud, as if already tired of the game:

"A tightrope walker? What? Ha-ha-ha. Hah-hah-hah. And you?"

"A doctor."

The First Sergeant seemed lost in thought a while.

"And you?"

"A professor of mathematics."

The First Sergeant suddenly become very serious and stopped talking. Then he emphasized in a measured cadence, "laying down the law":

"Yes, mathematics -- I know what that is. I once had an acquaintance, also a mathematician, the poor fellow, and too bad, the miserable one was not granted a long life. He hanged himself on a telegraph pole and a raven pecked out one of his eyes. -- Too bad."

"And you?" he turned to me.

"An editor," I said without embarrassment -- and I waited for the sky to come crashing down.

The First Sergeant seemed taken aback, creased his eyebrows and stared at me with suspicion mixed with fear, then he tightened his lips and growled through his teeth:

"Oh-ho, a editor! -- An editor! Well, that's enough. Enough. I don't need to know any more. From what I see I already know you all. A privileged family. A family of honorable intellectuals who are called 'volunteers'. You gentlemen are all volunteers, future officers. Well, you'll have to go through all sorts of hell before you'll achieve the status of officer. We're not in peacetime now, no honorable 'volunteer' gentlemen. Now -- down to business. I would like ..."

While he was speaking a nearby shot was suddenly heard. The sound of a heavy artillery shell whose rumble came flying ever closer to us ...

The shell exploded about two hundred paces from us.

This incident somewhat cooled off the First Sergeant's hot temperament. He likely already knew the meaning of the shot. We recruits didn't even know enough to be properly scared. His face paled and after he managed to get the blood flowing again, he turned to us and said:

"Well, why are you staring like slaughtered calves? ... Well, honorable intellectual gentlemen, do you already feel the smell of battle? ... This is a welcoming note, gentlemen, a welcome and greeting from His Honor, Death himself... "

"Ze-e-e..."

The shot exploded further away than the first one; nevertheless, it caused the First Sergeant to speed up his important lecture:

"Well, gentlemen, I'll have to get a move on, for the hour is growing late. What you are required to know is this: First, you will train here in this small town for three or four weeks. You will learn a simple and great thing: how to use a rifle. You will finally learn that the rifle is not a walking stick nor a golden chain nor a prayer book nor a fork nor your dear wife nor even a cigarette to blow smoke with. No, gentlemen. The rifle is all of these together! -- The rifle is the end all and be all of life. Without a rifle you can't walk nor can you dress up nor pray nor eat nor kiss nor even smoke. The rifle, my friend, is this: a gift of God from above who sits in his seventh heaven, and scorns us with this war of his that the despicable enemy suddenly desired to waltz out with; and we have to chop off his legs and spoil his desire and the desire of his fathers and ancestors and his great-grandchildren, seventy-seven generations backwards and forwards and in all directions! ... That's the way it is! -- This you will learn here for three or four weeks. And then, when we have managed to chase the horned rabbit in our garden and through seven countries -- then we'll sent you home, to the training cadre, to train there to become officers.

"However, now, before you begin to train there, there are a few things you have to know. Yes. You have to know those things without which no man can be a soldier, certainly not a soldier in the regiments of His Majesty. Because, you gentlemen, aren't you -- aren't you all -- hm, you are all spoiled, soft, clean-cut, nicely curled and rotten! ... Aren't you engineers, performers, a mathematician and an editor. From a family of sissies who never did a lick of real work that benefited anyone. Therefore -- I'll keep it short. Do you know, gentlemen, what the meaning of the word 'soldier' is? -- No, you don't know! Well, I'll tell you: the soldier is that superior man in various decaying societies, who does the will of the supreme exalted command without asking questions, having qualms or doubts or second thoughts or comments or complaints or idle words! And if not, if he doesn't do it, then -- then I'll rip him like a stinking fish and make him miserable like damp earth and send him to a worm farmer to become the bottom of the lowest of the low hells! Understand this!"

These last words he didn't say, but rather ground his teeth causing screeching in our ears.

Then he rested from his rage and continued perfectly relaxed:

"That is a soldier!... And now: What does a soldier need to know? What must he know? -- The soldier needs to forget! The soldier must forget everything he knows; everything he knows about wisdom, judgment, science, mathematics, editing and all other sorts of idle things, and about family and his home and his wife and his lover and everything! -- War is not an amusement thought up by some

empty mind filled with books and art and music and decrepit rags. War is the Fatherland and the Fatherland is the soldier, that is: it is His Majesty the Supreme Commander -- and I am his First Sergeant standing in for him; after all, His Exalted Majesty won't come to talk with suspicious shapes like you!... That is why I am here!"

He looked into our eyes for a long while and then added:

"As far as the war is concerned, this is the thing: the soldier who stands in battle and fights for His Exalted Majesty is a soldier and nothing more! -- Nothing more! Understand! -- Nothing more, I'm telling you! Nothing more, and nothing at all! -- And now I have to tell you, are you supposed to *live*? The soldier is supposed to *die* for His Exalted Majesty! To die, to die a thousand times if need be! Like a dog! -- Do you know what a dog is? A dog is a soldier! The soldier: he dies like a dog, and his name and memory will be wiped out for all generations!... Until he is *deserving* to die like a dog, until he is deserving to die a hero's death, my friend! -- No, gentlemen, do you suppose that a hero's death is sold in a Jews' market?"

He fell silent for a moment with the question on his lips, looked at us and asked us again:

"Are any of you Jews?"

Almost all of us were Jews -- and the question surprised us. We weren't used to it, inquiring into these things so suddenly. We were all silent.

The First Sergeant smiled beneath his mustache and added:

Well, alright, you are all Jews. God forbid I don't hate Jews. On the contrary. I am a Christian and the Messiah was Jewish. I know that. Even though I never learned mathematics and editing. I'm not asking this out of hatred of Jews. Not at all. For us, it is forbidden to hate any people and any religion and any profession. That is an order from our Supreme Command and an order from the Supreme Command is holy! In my company there are many Jews. Among them are many repulsive, lazy bastards, cunning con-men and all sorts of trouble-makers. And not only that, but among them is a Jew who in peacetime was a land-owner in the village for whom I worked as a tenant, and he would swear at me and curse me time and time again for beating his laggard horses -- and now I treat him with grace and love; instead of letting him bear the full weight of a rifle and a pack and all the rest, instead of having him go to the parade ground twice a day to sweat in his clumsy, fat belly -- I allow him to scrub the floor in my room and polish my boots even though he is a Jew and even though I hate him like a green frog! ... A Supreme Command, my friend, is not a prayer or your 'Talmud' that can be interpreted as you wish, respected gentlemen, and if the Command says: 'love the Jews as thyself' -- well, then we must love you, gentlemen, love without reservation -- that's all! But I must warn you that you were not sent here just to receive love, no, gentlemen, you were sent here to die a hero's death! But to die a hero's death is not a matter of commerce that can be bought for a few rags in the market. No. To die a hero's death you must first suffer. Suffer a life of poverty and affliction and torments and severe beatings and disease and hunger and sleepless nights and endless days and afflictions and plague and decay and decay and decay! ... All this is known as -- do you know, what it is called? It is called discipline -- dis-ci-pline! Attention! You bunch of slackers!"

The men in the line froze as one.

The First Sergeant was pleased with his work and added peacefully:

"At ease."

The lines returned to life. The First Sergeant continued:

"So, gentlemen. You still have a lot of suffering ahead of you, if you wish to be called soldiers of His Exalted Majesty! Torments, my friend, torments. Torments are first of all discipline and discipline is first of all torments. Torments, cursed torments, cursed, cursed torments. First of all you have to get used to living without any sleep. Simply: not sleeping at all. Marching, fighting, rolling over, crawling in the dirt, charging the enemy, climbing hills, in the dark, in steady rain, in the snow, in cold, in mud, in filth and God-forsaken plagues!... Your feet will swell and crack, your hands will fall from weakness, your teeth will chatter, your eyes will bulge, your stomach will be as empty as a drum, your tongue will swell and hang out of your mouth like a rag down to your knees, your spine will cry out in pain, your head will ring like a kettle, your wife will prance around with idle strangers and traitors, your mother will walk about like a shadow, your fields will become deserts, your livestock will die of starvation, your dog will get chewed up -- and you here will fight and struggle, run and fall, hungry, dried up, crushed, shocked, squashed, once a week eating shit-bread that is hard as glass and devouring roasted rats. Later, when your most-holy God ensconced in his heaven lets you rest for while -- you will fall down somewhere, collapse into puddles of rain, melting snow, pig slops, horse filth, and thus you will sleep sweetly and dream beautiful, multicolored dreams, happy, quiet, anguished bastards and rotters, cursed! -- cursed! ...

"This, gentlemen, intellectuals, is the life of a soldier in war. Eating crushed frogs when the rations are late to arrive, that is your duty, the duty of a dog to its master, to suffer, to abstain and to attack the enemy, the lepers, the bastards, until they are wiped out... Yes, to attack him, and not to think disgusting thoughts, professors and editors, gentlemen, not to deliberate and consider and marshal arguments pro and con, yes or no, and so on and so forth, the soul of man, the living breathing animal, cruelty to animals, mercy, integrity, bland hallucinations and dreams; -- no, gentlemen, you will not engage in philosophy, but you will attack, stab, tear, kill, split his head into seven pieces, crush -- cr-u-sh! -- stamp him into crumbling dirt, filth, garbage!... You will say: My life -- is it mine? My soul -- is it mine? -- No way; to hell with your soul. There is no soul and no life, no thought and no feeling, but there is one thing only, despicable gentlemen, gentle cowards -- and that is death!... The death!... The de-a-th!... Do you know what is the ..."

The sound of a heavy gun stopped him again for a moment...

The First Sergeant hurried to finish:

"Do you know what is death?..."

The gun again sounded: bo-om...

A terrible, massive explosion deafened us and amazed us. We recruits scattered in all directions -- the "shell" exploded in our midst and we were blown like chaff on the wind -- and from afar we heard the voice of the First Sergeant as if it came from a deep chasm, in a hoarse and dying groan saying: This is de-a-th...

When silence reigned again we returned immediately to our places -- and found our teacher bogged down in blood and dirt. There were several wounds in his head, his clothes were torn to shreds and his guts twisted out of his belly, crushed serpents, red-green-gray... He lived a bit longer and from the blood-soaked throat still groaned his terrible, severe voice:

"Th-i-s is de-a-th!..."



## A Pinch of Earth

We have only two parents:  
The idea and the earth

My grandfather

This is the fourth day that we are marching, marching, without regular meals, without a moment's rest and with no sleep at all. Marching, marching, marching. This marching is called a "forced march" in army jargon; there is only one purpose in a forced march: to get to the specified place at the specified time, exactly, exactly, and nothing more. The amount of time available is not relevant nor is the quality of the marching, but we march, obeying the command to the utmost on pain of death.

At the beginning, during the first few hours, you march like a human being, erect, striving, at a rapid pace, suffering, but hoping for rest. As the day wears on, you are already quite tired and your body is breaking, but the pieces hold together, and your thinking brain encourages you and entices you with words: never mind, a little bit longer, tomorrow, you'll get there, you'll rest and relax, eat and lie down. On the third day you no longer know anything. You know neither time nor distance nor thought, only the dull swing of legs, the movement of the legs of the comrade marching in front of you in the file, and the loathsome mire that your eyes focus upon, heavy and sticking. And you march, march, march. The rains have been bothersome for a full week. Now it is late at night. A choking fog surrounds you on all sides, the night is inky black and the villages that you sense around you are in a deathly sleep, or totally empty. No noise, no flash of light, no star above, and you march and march. Your feet flounder in mud -- oh, the mud of the Galician soil that engulfs you! -- you pull them from the swamp in order to sink them in again, dozens and hundreds of times. The silence of the night, damp and stinging with its raindrops, blankets the hills and the invisible trees, and in this silence you hear but one sound: the sound of many pairs of feet churning, sinking and extracting, and sinking again in the muddy dough, blacker than the night; this noise is muffling, caring, rubbing and mind-numbing, one after another and all together, in a despicable harmony, tired, exhausted and cursed, mixed with heavy sighs, grunts, and hopeless sobs, with no strength, no ...

The rains, aided by a light and fresh wind, pelted, dripped, sprayed and dissolved your clothes, your skin and your flesh to the bone. At first you turn your face to the other side, but then the light wind cruelly teases that side of your face. Then, when you realize that there is no way to save yourself, you bless the Lord of Heaven and Earth and all the Hosts, and abandon yourself, your face and your wet hands clenched and frozen: whatever will be will be! -- The legs in front of you, behind you and on your sides hesitate, drag, knead and falter. The clothes on your body are drenched with water and sweat, on your back the full heavy pack, oppressive, fatiguing, cutting and twisting you into two; on your shoulder the rifle barrel, and on your hips the belt full of lead bullets -- and all of them together adding weight from minute to minute, becoming ever heavier, becoming more and more oppressive. Your head is bent into your chest, your hands dangle as if wasted with no muscles and reach down to your ankles, heavy drops dripping from your face, yet you pay them no attention; your spine hurts, sealing off the breath in the airways of your lungs and forcing your throat to grunt. Occasionally, you stand up straight moving the heavy weight upon you -- and you are relieved for a short while, but then again you are bent in two and suffer. In the meantime you remember that there in the city, buzzing with life, lighted by large lampposts, people are sitting in cafes and theaters and enjoying jokes ... You

want to cry, but you bite your lips and the tears are choked in your breast. You accept the torment with hatred, cursing and gnashing your teeth; your head is swollen and can't feel a thing except that which comes from your spine. Your feet are dead, marching through habit, and you feel a terrible, horrible pain, sawing, bursting, tearing, stinging, cutting upward to your miserable brain.

Occasionally, you are shocked into some sort of coma and dream. An unclear dream of a city, a theater ... and from this dream your feet awaken you as they stumble over a stone in the mud until you start to fall, and then a cold chill goes through your body, your limbs, a pleasant shock, shaking the blood and freeing you from all pain and burden -- and then: everything is back as usual, the marching, the churning, the stupidity, the pain, the burden, the crushed limbs, the rain, cursed ... .

I look at my friend struggling at my side, a Jew of about forty, bent double and groaning with a deep and heavy groan.

"Isn't the load too heavy, old man?"

"What can we do?... "

Thus. "What can we do." In all of time and space within the universe there is not a hint of a moment's rest, there is no way out. And suddenly -- a strange thought flashes through my mind: to throw away some of the load -- a terrible thought. I will be in mortal danger; death by court-martial. However, after all, it is dark around me. But -- what shall I throw away? In my pack are two pairs of boots, one spare pair I'll throw away, one movement and I'll throw ... I will make an innocent movement, searching for something in my pack, I'll find the boots and drop them on the ground. My comrade behind me will stumble on them! -- Never mind, but the heavy load did not notice that it was lightened. What else? The bread? What will happen then? Whatever, they will give us more bread. And if not? Whatever, it is better that I not eat ... the bread is soon thrown in the mud. Yet the load becomes heavier as if to spite me. Going on: the blanket, really? And what will I cover myself with? Whatever!... The blanket is so heavy! I loosen it and throw it to the right (because I was in the rightmost file), and thus -- the load was lightened. A pleasant feeling went through my body. I took a deep breath, relieved. A few minutes later all was as oppressive as before. I had already thrown away the bread. The second pair of boots? Yes, the boots were the most oppressive, to hell with them! -- Yes, now everything was like new, a new situation -- now I could finally march erect, if it weren't for the damned bullets. They were rubbing my skin above my hips. To throw them away? -- A swift firing squad ... no. To die a traitor? No. There are other useless things in my pack. Boxes of chocolate, tins of sardines, delicacies ... My heart stops. These were given me by the dearest and fondest hands. The sardines were from my dear sister; the chocolate from that wild orphan who never loved me more than when she placed these trifles in my pack. But my spine hurts, my breathing is labored and my neck screams its pain. So, whose shall I throw away? Hers? My sister's? From such a sister who rejected all human contact for as long as I suffer in the campaign, and who abjured all worldly and spiritual pleasures on my behalf? If I throw away her gifts, I deserve a horrific death. -- Yes, a horrific death. -- But not the current suffering. My legs no longer hurt, they are rotting away as I live -- and already my pack is empty of all luxuries. My heart cries: Dear Sister! Forgive me, forgive me both of you, the two souls dearest to me, but I know that you will forgive me. For now things are wonderful, I am walking erect, I am not suffering, I'm not ... The pack? The bullets? They can go to hell! ...

The bullets fall by fives, secretly, with feline movements, stealthily, sneaking away ... I am ashamed ... but now I can walk as I please. In a few hours, rest will certainly come, followed by food, sleep, smoking ... The rains stopped ...

When the morning dawned I saw that all my worthy guys had done as I had! -- The packs were

wrinkled, half-empty. So, guys, I was responsible for you too. What's going to happen? Suddenly: the pleasant, blessed command: "Halt!" and then "Fall out."

The entire battalion dropped down at once and lay there like a row of trees that are suddenly uprooted. After a few moments came another command, not pleasant, not at all.

"Inspection!"

Oh no, we started to shiver. The First Sergeant glanced at the row of packs, lying at the feet of each of us, opened his eyes as wide as saucers and a terrible smirk came over his face. He swallowed once, then again, and said: "A no-good band of thieves: I'll soon set you right! Open your packs!"

The packs were opened, and not one was according to the regulations. Fire and brimstone filled the eyes of the First Sergeant. He ground his teeth, spat in front of the whole group, and then turned to me and said:

"Your people, too! Your guys, too! In one hour have them all report to the company commander, all of them! Do you understand?"

I understood that there was a God in heaven who blinded the eyes of the First Sergeant from seeing my pack ... except that in the meantime he was standing by one pack and looking into it. What was this? It was the only pack that complied with the regulations. It was fully loaded, exactly as prescribed, with not one thing missing. The owner of the pack was my groaning old man who had marched the whole way next to me. The First Sergeant looked into the full pack, then at its owner, and again into the pack...

"You see this, you bunch of bastards," the First Sergeant said to the soldiers. "You see this! This old man (the old man coughed with a sickly, hoarse cough), this sick old man could bear the whole load, while you, you frisky colts!"

But there, in the middle of the pack, the First Sergeant saw something strange.

"What is this?" he asked nonchalantly.

The old man kept silent.

"This, this, what is it?"

The old man coughed and spat behind himself. Then he shrugged his shoulders and grimaced; but he made an effort to pretend to be calm. The First Sergeant noticed this.

"What are you scratching for? Don't you delouse your kit as you should?"

The old man remained silent, coughed and again spat behind himself, as if he were hiding something. The First Sergeant was now angry:

"Speak, you old fool! What's in that little bag, what earth is that? Open the little bag!"

The old man opened the little bag, and truly there was earth there; soft, crumbling earth, yellow and dry.

"What type of earth is that? -- Speak!"

The old man coughed, shrugged his shoulders, and cleared his throat and said in a low voice: "It's -- it's -- First Sergeant, Sir, it is earth."

The First Sergeant was tired from anger and impatience:

"I know, Honored Sir, that it is not soup and not pure gold!"

Suddenly he looked into the face of the old man and a shadow of suspicion appeared on his face, and as if he had divined the secret of the old man, he said:

"Ah-hah, old Jew! I understand you, now! -- Your cunning scheme has been discovered! Is that how it is? Are you trying to be clever? The load is not heavy enough for you, so you want to malingering a bit, to fall into the hands of the doctors and the hospitals, to be rid of the war? ... Is that how it is? How many other stones do you have in your pack? -- Empty all your things!"

The old man emptied out everything, but nothing inessential was found except for the small bag of earth. The First Sergeant no longer understood what was going on and had no idea what to do.

"You, too, will face disciplinary action! Do you understand?"

At that moment the company commander himself appeared and approached us. The First Sergeant reported the entire scandal to him: the entire company had been caught red-handed. Only this old man -- the devil only knows what his stupid brain was thinking: he was carrying a small bag filled with earth, weighing about four pounds, in order to malingering, he loaded up extra weight so that he would be sick ... and aside from that ...

The company commander went up to the old man.

"What is there in the bag? What exactly is that yellow earth?"

The old man coughed, swallowed once, and then in a hoarse voice wheezing from his chest like a broken flute, said:

"Company Commander, Sir -- I am honored to report ... that ... that is an inheritance from my forefathers."

The entire company broke out in unintentional laughter.

"Attention!" shouted the First Sergeant and ground his teeth. The ranks stood to attention and the company commander gently encouraged the old man:

"Speak, speak, old man!"

The old man coughed once more, spat behind himself and added:

"This, this -- inher... This is earth from the Land of Israel ... it is a custom that we Jews have, a religious custom ... when a man dies -- before he dies -- here in exile -- some earth from the Land of Israel is placed under his head."

A terrible cough, wheezing from deep within, stopped his words; the cough continued for two long minutes, then he spat much red-green mucus and then a gob of red blood. He turned around and scratched between his shoulders.

The company commander blanched, his face drained of color and over his eyes appeared a shadow of compassion and great mercy.

"Why are you scratching?"

The old man remained silent. The company commander thought for while and sank into a reflective mood. He sighed deeply and asked again:

"Why are you scratching your shoulders? Speak! -- Get undressed!"

The old man got undressed. When he was down to his shirt we saw that his whole back was covered in blood. When he took off his shirt his skin appeared; his shoulders were mangled to the flesh and his

skin dangled in pieces, their redness mixed with the dirty gray color of the damp clothes. The heavy load had flayed his shoulders.

The company commander looked and looked again at the plucked shoulders and into the face of the old Jew. Then he turned suddenly to the First Sergeant:

"If the old man dies: place the earth under his head. Do you understand?!"

And he walked off.

The old man turned to me and whispered:

"He won't get the chance, damn him!"

## Hannale

You I shall kill a thousand times,  
but the sweetness of your kisses shall kill me as a dog.

The time was half an hour before midnight.

We stood on guard, myself and two of my men, in a listening post.

In this mission every hair on your head is listening. The fog freezes right on our faces. I couldn't see my buddy even though he was standing next to me, jostling me. On the contrary. This fog facilitates hearing every movement, every rustle, even the gentlest sound. That is the way of fog: the eyes it blinds, but it sharpens the ears to the same degree.

For the past five minutes, some sound arouses the ears of us all. A muffled weeping striving to hide itself focuses attention on itself. And the one who is crying is not far from us. Here -- not more than a few paces. The two front lines almost touch each other, about two hundred and fifty paces between them, and, on the right, almost exactly in the middle, lies a Jewish cemetery: the voice comes from there.

"Corporal Gali!" I said to one of my men. "Go to the first lieutenant and ask permission to look into that sound."

Gali, a Hungarian corporal with the heart of a lion and loyal as a dog, returned and reported:

The first lieutenant says: "Go, if you really want to."

I stationed one man on guard and took another with me, and we went towards the enemy lines in the direction of the voice. The fog was thick, murky, almost like a drizzle. We walked holding hands so as not to lose each other in this mind-numbing darkness.

The front had been quiet for the past three days. Not even one stray shot had been heard. This silence is suspicious. It usually brings a surprise. The silence before the storm. And at this moment, the silence was doubled. As if we were being ambushed. The voice penetrated towards us; it was the voice of a woman.

The voice of a woman? In no-man's land? Where even a bird fears to tread? And now? At midnight?

In a cemetery?

Whatever. On the contrary. The stranger it is, the more important it is for us. But the silence penetrated the very fiber of our beings.

"Perhaps we should return?" I asked my comrades.

Corporal Gali:

No, no way. First: it would be a disgrace. Second: return at a time when one can pursue a woman? One woman is more important than all the alliances put together...!

We go on further, stealthily, on tiptoe. Every instant we are prepared to throw ourselves on the ground, because at any moment the enemy could send up a flare to illuminate us and then -- we would be lost!

The voice continues, sometimes sobbing, sometimes controlled for a few moments.

"Perhaps we will be favored with a real duel," Corporal Gali whispers to me, a proper duel, over the fair sex ..."

Silence.

The voice ceases completely. Then, again, a whispered sobbing, deep and full of sadness. Like a mother who at midnight laments her sons, lost in the prime of their lives.

Strange: as you approach a Jewish cemetery at night, you become a coward ... Thousands of deaths await you on the front line, thousands of rifle barrels gaping at you just a few steps away, and this voice that came from a Jewish cemetery causes your teeth to chatter.

We are coming close to the unknown crying man or woman ... already I see her dark shape ... she is not moving ... to light a match is impossible: I would be illuminating myself.

I approach the dark shadow and it continues to lie, not moving ... lying as if dead: silently ... I crawl a few more paces -- touch it -- the shadow shudders and suddenly grasps my hand.

"Bloody hell! Who are you?" I whisper as a coldness courses through every fiber of my body.

"A Jewish maiden."

"A Jewish maiden," that is a nice assignment to hold on a battlefield in Galicia. Jewish maidens never cause harm.

I didn't get a chance to ask her what she was doing here before she stood up, fumbled beneath the breast of her apron, took out a piece of paper, shoved it into my hand, and without letting go of my hand, suddenly began to run towards our lines together with me.

At that moment: a volley of fire from rifles whistled over our heads. They had noticed what was happening. The bullet missed its target by a hair's breadth. My friend's helmet was pierced simultaneously by two bullets.

"Those bastards, they're good shots," said Corporal Gali as he jumped away. "The head may not be worth anything, but the helmet is worth a lot of money, damn them."

When we returned to our lines and got our wind back, I looked at the piece of paper -- and blanched: it was a Russian military map that had been drawn very recently. A complete and accurate record of the enemy order of battle in front of us. All the important positions with the units holding them, the quarters of all the high officers, with the stables, the commissaries, the headquarters, the artillery, in great detail.

The order of battle for an entire division.

My heart pounded in alarm (oh, the heart of a soldier).

I looked at the honored guest: a young Jewish maiden, dark-complexioned, gentle, fresh, round, with a white face and hair as black as coal. The remnants of tears still glistened in her eyes.

She was exhausted.

My hand that held the map actually shook. Such a catch! ... A real find! ... Corporal Gali was right: what is a foolish king worth when compared with this piece of paper!

Again, I looked at her and ask: "What is your name, dear?"

"Hannale," she whispered with the bashfulness of shame.

"Hannale, dear, come with me to the battalion commander."

When I was received by the battalion commander and gave him the map, after notifying him that I had brought a distinguished visitor -- his face, a bit flushed with wine, went pale: he looked at the paper, then at the maiden and again at the paper and said warmly:

"Thank you."

Then he turned to the uninvited, yet pleasant, guest:

"Where did you get this, little sister?"

Hannale was drained and exhausted; she sat and had not the strength to answer right away. The battalion commander turned to me:

"Where did the little one come from?"

"From the Jewish cemetery!"

The battalion commander fingered the map, examined it closely and a visible tremor shook his whole body. The effect of the wine was diminishing and he was a bit ashamed that the incident had made such an impression on him. With an effort he tried to gain control of himself.

"What is your name, my dove?"

"Hannale," she answered, almost melodiously.

"Dear Hannale, please, tell me the whole story, tell me, calmly, yes, simply, just the way you are. Everything."

Hannale gathered her meager strength and with a voice still trembling with fear and nervousness, but with a soft, graceful tone, began to tell the story:

"My aunt and I were hiding. My parents are no longer living. The Cossacks had already killed them last year. Now, when they came again and captured our village, we hid from them in the attic. But we had no food and we no longer had the strength to stay there. Hunger forced me to come down and the Cossack officer saw me as I stepped down and tried to flee. He didn't let me leave, but he didn't harm me either. On the contrary, he always made an effort to treat me with respect and dignity; then he began to tell me how much he loved me. He was always chatting such things, about how he loved me very much. I wouldn't have answered him -- except that recently he began to brag that in a few days, he had leave due and then he would take me with him to his home. I told him that I wouldn't go with him. He continued to chat on: that he is the son of a rich landowner -- so he told me -- and that there, in his house, they would respect me. There, they would forget that I am a Jewess ... and I began to feel a repulsiveness, an internal disgust ... that he would take me ... who heard of such a thing? -- And there they would forget that I am Jewish ... thank you: forget that I am Jewish! Furthermore, he would take me, he would take me! Am I some sort of chattel to be taken? That I would be his wife ... the wife of a Cossack ... and aside from that: I already have a fiancé of my own."

"You? A fiancé? -- Where is he?" asked the battalion commander with a smile.

"He works in the army. Somewhere at the front. I don't know exactly where, somewhere with you in the Austrian army. If I recall correctly in the Sixty-sixth Regiment."

This regiment held the line near us.

"What is his name?"

"Moshe Yosef Margalit."

The battalion commander hinted that I should call them and ask. I requested that he allow me to send someone else.

Hannale continued her story:

"I have been his fiancée for over a year. The engagement took place a few days before the war began, before he was taken to work for the army. Oh -- who could have known? -- We even set a date for the wedding -- who could have known? ... "

Heavy tears fell from her eyelashes that were as dusky as an evening in springtime. The battalion commander calmed her: "Don't worry. God willing, the wedding will take place. When was the wedding supposed to be?"

"On the 24th of this month. That was yesterday. I used to think often of that day: and now ..."

She burst into bitter tears again.

"Now this beast has come. Not only that, but he was always bragging to me that he will take me on that day. ... My blood ignited like burning pitch. No! I thought: this won't be! He won't get me! An animal in the form of a man! -- No! Even if a thousand strange deaths await me! Those were the thoughts in my heart, but to him I said something different, because there was no other way to get rid of him. I said to him that I didn't hate him. But he was somewhat repulsive to me because -- the Russians devour Jews. He laughed, he was happy that I didn't dodge away from him, that I was coming closer. Suddenly he stood up, grabbed me, and began to kiss me. No one was in the house, I screamed. The beast ... "

Hannale fell silent and licked her tears; she hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"A terrible feeling of repulsion assailed my entire body, I beat him with my hands, my feet, and he -- laughed. Later he told me that my efforts were in vain, for in any case I belonged to him. Because the day after tomorrow he was going home and it would be better for me to prepare myself ... I began to cry that I have a fiancé. At this he said: silly one, your fiancé is either dead in the war, or still alive, but in three or four days he won't be alive, because the Russians are planning a large assault on a wide sector of the Austrian front.... In this assault no Austrian will remain alive, not a single one ..."

All at once we looked at one another.

"That is what he told me. My face paled but I struggled to show him a placid face. In the meantime I thought of my fiancé and of my parents and of the defiling kiss that burned on my face, searing like the fire of hell. Shame and revenge welled up within me and then ... I swore in my heart that I would flee. I knew that it would not be at all easy. Guards encircled the entire village. But I felt that it would be better to die a strange death! ... And as long as I am escaping, it would be best if I came here, to my fiancé. This morning I saw him sitting at his table doing some sort of work. He was drawing something; I went up to him and asked, what are you drawing? My fearless approach surprised and pleased him. He answered with emphasis and pride: this is a war map; it is a very important thing. This sort of thing is never given except to an important man, an intelligent man. He wanted to make sure that I knew that he was an important man, so I wouldn't regret later on ... My heart began to pound. Suddenly I began to cry -- why are you crying? he asked. I myself had no idea why I was crying, but in the meantime an idea popped into my head... How shall I not cry -- I told him -- when tomorrow I am traveling to a foreign country and I haven't even received a farewell blessing from my mother! Where is your mother? he asked. There, in the cemetery -- I answered him. He shook his

head: no, my dear, that is impossible, under no circumstances! The cemetery is between the two front lines and it is forbidden to go there -- even for me! Besides -- he said -- what is so important about your mother? You have to forget that Jewess!... At this moment it was as if he had stabbed me with a dull, rusty knife. 'You are the same Jewess', he said. I burst into tears and he began to comfort me, because he saw that I loved him, that finally I had gotten used to him and that he will make an effort to see if it would somehow -- be possible. I know -- I told him that if you want something, you can make it happen! I know -- and I can't leave without my mother's farewell blessing. He placated me and promised me that that evening he would take me there. That evening he was supposed to be the commander of the watch ... But only tonight could he do this for me, that is, if I were not afraid. In the meantime I thought of the kiss and of 'that Jewess' and I swore that I would take revenge on him!... I stole one copy of the paper with the drawing and that night he opened the way for me. I ran like crazy. I wanted to run directly here, but my feet guided me to the cemetery, to my mother. A terrible fear assailed me and without knowing I ran there -- to my dear mother. There, fearless, I threw myself upon her grave. I asked her forgiveness for the tainted kiss, for the kiss that unclean one forced upon me -- by my soul, it was forced upon me, not willingly...!"

Here Hannale burst into bitter sobbing and her eyes overflowed with tears.

"What do you want as a reward for this, Hannale?" asked the battalion commander.

Hannale wiped away her tears, thought a moment, blushed and said: "I don't want anything. Please I would like to see my fiancé."

Meanwhile the soldier returned from the telephone and reported that it was accurate: Moshe Yosef Margalit is a signaler in the Sixty-sixth Regiment.

A few minutes later they brought a young soldier with the visage of a typical yeshiva student. When the maiden saw him, she closed her eyes. A stillness full of nerve-racking anticipation took over -- then she raised her damp eyes and her mouth blurted out just two words: Moshe Yosef...

The two souls stood astonished, looked at each other, two lovers frozen and as pale as wax.

The scene shook even this experienced battalion commander; from his eyes too glistened tears.

"Well," said the battalion commander. "Hug each other!"

Hannale stood up suddenly, prostrated herself at the feet of the battalion commander and began to kiss his hands -- then she collapsed on the ground and cried and cried...

A few moments later began the roar of thousands of guns cutting through the thick fog, and from the village arose and flickered a red-black bonfire that colored the horizon red for a radius of many kilometers around the village. From within the fire and the stunning noise that split the sky asunder, the intermittent cries of the dead and the screams of the dying were heard, then tens of thousands of explosions mixed in to an awful roar, one that makes your hair stand on end and deafens your ears. We all stood and watched the terrible pillars of flame, quietly, without saying a word. Suddenly, we heard amongst us a quiet voice of internal sobbing: Hannale collapsed and cried her eyes out. What is going on?...

At that moment something happened that none of us expected: Hannale rose to her feet, walked a few paces towards the enemy's front line in the direction of the bonfire and the thousands of bullets that were blowing up everything in the vicinity to fragments; she looked for a moment with open eyes, round and frozen -- and suddenly, as if she were being called, began to run with all her might, shouting in a hoarse and terrified voice:

"Dmitri Ivanovich! Dmitri Ivanovich! I'm on my way, I'm coming! Dmitri Ivanovich! ..."

She was lost in the red bonfire and among the thousands of explosions throwing up dust to the heavens. We were all compelled to stand, our feet rooted to the ground below us ...

Moshe Yosef Margalit looked this way and that, and then began to run after her -- he ran a few paces in the reddened darkness, tripped on a stone and fell on his face, crying like a baby. Then he got up and ran after her as fast as he could, crying:

"Hannale, Hannale!"

He, too, was lost in the terrible destructive noise.

The shooting began to die down, the noise abating, gradually weakening, the sky burning like a great red and scorching plague, and from within the red fog, shimmering like a curtain, the form of a walking man came closer: Moshe Yosef Margalit. He came closer, dragging his feet like a cripple and groaning with muffled sobs. As he approached us, he burst into a strange and distorted cry:

"Here, here," he bleated like a miserable madman, as he thrust towards us some object. "Here ... Hannale ... the ring, oh woe is me, woe is me, Hannale!"

He threw himself flat on the ground and began to bite his hands, biting, tearing at his skin until it bled. Convulsing, groaning and reeling, shouting and cursing: Franz Josef I! War! Bastard! Hannale!

"He's gone mad!" said the battalion commander and shot him.

I went to the corpse, he held in his clenched hand an arm amputated at the armpit that he held to his mouth. A small hand amputated by a shell, and on the finger a small golden ring: an engagement ring. I removed the ring and read the engraving on the inside ... and I placed the hand into the hand of the dead bridegroom...

To this day the engraved lettering flashes before my eyes:

"Hannale -- Moshe Yosef, 24th of Av, 5674 [16 August 1914], Mazal Tov!"

## Ten Bums

A man should only be shown  
the musings of his heart.

### The Sages

The strange rumor of the ten bums and the Russian general filtered through the two front lines to reach us. How, in what manner, did the rumor penetrate the densest and most fortified barrier in the world that can be crossed only by one sound, the sound gunfire? -- This I do not know. No prisoner of war had come over to us. But the fact was that every battalion busied itself with the rumor: the terrible and cruel Russian general Trybov had committed suicide. He had hanged himself on a beam in his quarters. Ten bums had caused him to do it ...

Thus went the rumor -- and we received it with a nod: strange. However, every rumor loses its bite as time passes. There are more bitter things in life on the front line that dull the spice of every rumor in the world.

Some days later we took a few prisoners, including one small Jew who had not lost his wits even as a prisoner; and among the answers that he had to give to our important questions, he did not forget to ask us:

"Did you hear about the general? About the general and the ten bums?..."

Of course we jumped at the opportunity and requested that he tell us the story in full detail. The little Jew took a sip of the drink we had offered him, lit a cigarette and began his story:

"With my own eyes and ears I was a witness to the whole story," he said as if chanting the Torah. "I, myself. This is what happened: The General Trybov had a adjutant, Poruchik Alexander Leibovich Ganivich. Poruchik in your language: first lieutenant, and I was the adjutant's batman. It was unusual for me, a Jew, to be an officer's batman. This is an easy and good job, so, of course, in our army Jews don't get to do it, but the Poruchik -- that is, the adjutant of the general -- was also -- a Jewish convert, so he took me, of course covering up my Judaism ... no one knew that I was a Jew. I worked for him for a year and a half, almost from the beginning of the war, and frequently I would also serve the general. The general was a good man at heart, but a bit strange -- a bit crazy. First: he was a God-fearing Christian to the depths of his soul. He wouldn't take a step without crossing himself and mumbling a prayer. But he had a terrible hatred for Jews. This hatred was of a special sort and nature, for us too. The mere mention of a Jewish name was sufficient to cause him to lose his composure. Nevertheless, he did not beat the Jews in his battalion, he admitted their importance as soldiers and treated them like the other soldiers. Decorations, of course, he never gave to Jews, even for amazing feats, but he did them no harm. Not so with the Jews who lived in the towns and villages that we captured. There, the general would do hair-raising acts. I won't go into detail of the what and the how of his deeds; it will be sufficient if I mention that when we entered a village or town, he would kill, slaughter, burn and beat the Jews in a frenzy, and above all he would perpetrate cruelties on small children. This was an obsession with him: having Cossacks and Circassians slaughter Jewish children. It got to the point that once, before he entered a small Galician town that we had captured, he gave an order to bring him the head of a Jewish child as a sacrifice, as penance for the sin 'that the Jews sold

out a Russian battalion to the Austrians'. When things like this happened it was forbidden to speak with him ... his adjutant -- that is, my officer -- would, at these times, pace like a closet madman. When the wild Cossacks were bringing the 'victim' -- he would run away, disappear, so as not to see ... what was he to do with this terrible scourge? In his defiling cruelty, the madman had another habit: in every place we visited, he would burn the Torah scrolls in the synagogues and seminaries. Sometimes he would wrap the scrolls around people, Jews of course, and then burn them. For several months he would do these horrible things, standing around and observing them with pleasure. He would rub his hands together and say to the adjutant whom he often commanded to watch the burnings:

"Well, Alexander Leibovich, well, is there a more beautiful and fitting sacrifice than this? -- Is there? ... It seems to me: no! There is no more fitting sacrifice than this ... Blood, smoke, the sweet smell ... well, what do you think, Alexander Leibovich ... It will certainly be accepted ... '

"His eyes sparkled with joy and great pleasure, and the adjutant would look, or close his eyes and be silent, and many times left him, just ran away ... I, too, looked once ... I was nauseated ... and God helped me not to go out of my mind.

"For several months he was a rabid beast totally engaged in killing, slaughtering, burning, scourging and torturing the miserable Jews and no one protested. Lately -- as if a devil suddenly turned him around, he stopped carrying out these actions. Even the adjutant, my officer, knew not the meaning of this change, had he suddenly repented? But once I heard him talking to the adjutant and saying:

"Alexander Leibovich, do you know? These damned Jews are driving me crazy ... yes, they are really driving me crazy ... First, the Jews whom I burned came and appeared in my dreams and now, lately, they come to me when I'm awake and present their complaints ... For example, yesterday, as I lay down on the couch after lunch, one of them came to me and said: General, Sir, ... the piece of my tongue that you cut off, that you yourself cut off, that same piece did not die ... No organ of a man dies when it is cut off ... it lives still, alive, General, Sir, and prays ... When it was in my mouth, it was always praying ... it is saying Kaddish for you ... Do you know what the Kaddish is? ... Of course you know, said the Jew, of course you know ... of course you know what the Kaddish is ... stammered the Jew in his truncated tongue.'

"I heard the adjutant say to him: 'Enlightened Sir ... that is impossible ... nonsense, Enlightened Sir, a mirage! -- You must have dreamed it! ...'

"The General cut him off: 'No, Alexander Leibovich, no, I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't sleeping at all ... That is what the Jew said: he talked to me face-to-face, as one man talks to another ... When I asked him: Who gave you permission to enter into my presence? -- 'You yourself, General Sir, called to me to enter,' he answered ... Thus spoke the damned Jew with his half of a tongue, stammering ... No, I wasn't dreaming, no, Alexander Leibovich, I swear it, no, on my honor, no ... I wasn't sleeping, not at all ...'

"The adjutant looked at him and kept silent; he added:

"Do you know, Alexander Leibovich, that I fear them -- these damned ones. I know what the Kaddish is. The prayer for the dead... Perhaps, Alexander Leibovich -- perhaps it is better that we don't harm them?...'

"Perhaps,' said the adjutant in a cautious voice.

"Well,' said the general, 'from this day forth I won't harm them, Alexander Leibovich. No, I won't,' he said with total conviction.

"He really did cease his terrible deeds. For two weeks he caused no harm to the Jews. But a month ago we entered Krasnovka, a small village, not far from here, and there the following happened: The general, on foot, as usual, passed by a seminary. It was just after darkness had fallen that he passed the seminary, and suddenly he pulled up, listened a bit, as if he could hear something, then he took a step or two ... listened again and said:

"Do you hear that, Alexander Leibovich? ... Can you hear? ... The Jews are praying for me, they are mentioning my name. Listen! ... My name...! Can't you hear?"

"No, Enlightened Sir,' said the adjutant, my officer, 'No; I hear them and their voices. They are praying, but I can't hear you name, Enlightened Sir.'

"That's impossible! Impossible, Alexander Leibovich! It is impossible not to hear ... isn't it -- just listen!... They are pronouncing the words, my name: Fyodor -- Ivanovich -- Trybov ... Who permitted them to mention my name? ... Alexander Leibovich,' he said suddenly stifling his anger, 'Go and tell them that they are to leave the seminary at once! Right away! I'll wait for you here!'

"The adjutant left and called me, too. We entered the seminary. The prayers had already finished. There were only ten Jews there, ten bums sitting around a table learning as usual, in secret ... ten bums that are found by tradition in Galician seminaries. The adjutant delivered the general's command and they immediately left the seminary, without a word, without a question, in silence. When the general saw them go, he cooled off. We walked on about twenty or thirty paces -- and suddenly ... the general stopped again ... went back and pointed to the seminary:

"Do you see? ... There is light coming from their seminary ... They haven't gone! ... They are still praying ... my name ...'

"We calmed him: 'That's impossible for we saw them going.' But the general stamped his feet angrily and said:

"Alexander Leibovich! Go there and tell them ... chase them the hell out of there and take the key from them, close their prayer house and put the key into my hand!"

"We returned once again and entered the seminary. It was amazing: the ten bums sat there as before, studying, as if they hadn't gone just a moment before. The adjutant foamed:

"Why did you come back again?' he shouted at them, 'The general will hang you on a tree. Get out right now and give me the key!'

"The bums got up without the slightest murmur, left the table with the books open and went out. The key they left on the table. We took the key, blew out the candle, went out and locked the door behind us. When we gave the general the key he was satisfied. We went to the command post. The general did his work and after a few minutes we returned to our quarters the same way we had come. When we got to the seminary -- we stood astounded: through the high window of the seminary we saw a dark flashing light. We looked at each other -- how could this be?... Now the adjutant too became angry, took out his handgun and, without an order from the general who stood shocked and gave him the key with shaking hands as if forced by devil, went and opened the door...

"Damn them,' said the adjutant meanwhile. 'Those miserable ones -- they have another key ...'

"We went in and found them sitting and studying... For a couple of minutes we stood at the entrance and listened to them... One of them, the one who stood in front of them, reciting, stammered a bit, and I absentmindedly remembered the general's dream... My skin began to shudder ... it is possible, gentlemen, you may not believe me... but, it really happened, as I am telling you. They were sitting

there and studying in all innocence, as if nothing had happened. The adjutant raised his gun, gnashed his teeth in his terrible anger and shot one bullet into the air. The sound of the shot shook the windows and the light fixtures, but the bums did not panic ... they stood still. As if they had heard nothing. The adjutant boiled over with rage ... I pulled myself together, went over to them and talked to them in Yiddish: Jews, I said to them, this is not nice on your part; you know the general, you must have heard of him -- so why are you doing this? You are bringing bad times on all of Israel ... Give us the second key and go home...

"The bums were silent. Are you speaking here? -- That is the way they were speaking!... Not a word they uttered. They rose and left. The second key was left lying on the table. I took it and we went out. When we went to the general, he asked for both keys; we gave them to him and he said:

"Alexander Leibovich! Give the order right away, I want two armed guards in front of this door.'

"The order was carried out. A few minutes later two armed guards stood in front of the door of the seminary.

"If a Jew approaches and wants to enter,' said the general to the guards, 'bring him to me on your bayonets!...'

"The general gazed intently into the faces of the guards -- and we went away to the general's quarters. But this is what happened: the town of Krasnovka was built like a horseshoe and the general's quarters were at the far end. There were two ways to get there: either go the whole way through the town, which was too long, or go straight -- that is, to go through the gardens and fields, from one end to the next -- and this was, of course, the shorter way. We decided to take the shorter route. At this moment we met the battalion commander, the general's best friend. The battalion commander asked the general for the honor of inviting him for a drink. The battalion commander's quarters were nearby, the general agreed and we went there. The general told the battalion commander the story of the ten bums, while his faced showed both dreadful anger and hidden fear. The battalion commander laughed:

"Yes. The Jews. They're a strange people,' he said, laughing. 'I don't like them, but I don't hate them either. They are miserable, Enlightened Sir, miserable -- but no one knows how to pray like they do ... Yes. They know how to pray. And their prayers are answered. I know it ... for a fact. But -- what have we to do with the Jews? ... Please take a seat, Enlightened Sir; I have some excellent wine; the absolute best -- it was sent to me from home today ...'

"The general said nothing; the battalion commander offered him a glass of wine and he drank. On his face you could see that the wine seemed to give him a bit of renewed energy.

"Well, Enlightened Sir?' the battalion commander asked. 'Excellent wine, isn't it?'

"Yes, without a doubt,' the General said. 'Excellent wine.'

"My eldest daughter sent it to me. I don't know where she got it from. I believe it is the best wine I have tasted for a long time.'

"And he filled up the glasses again.

"Please, Enlightened Sir, please... And you, Alexander Leibovich, please...!' The General raised his glass, then looked at it a while and said: 'Excellent wine; it's wonderful.'

"Meanwhile the battalion commander added with a flattering smile:

"This is wine for the highest class of people, for a general, Enlightened Sir... This is not wine, it truly is the blood of our Christ who takes our sins upon himself... And it is only because of you,

Enlightened Sir, that we too are drinking it -- your health!

"The general's face blanched... The glass seemed as if it were about to fall from his hand as he drank. The battalion commander saw this and was amazed:

"What is this, Enlightened Sir?"

"Nothing ... my nerves are a bit on edge today.'

"All the while I stood by the door -- and understood all. The adjutant said:

"The Enlightened Sir is a bit annoyed... from too much work... we had best go home -- some rest wouldn't hurt.'

"The general did not finish his drink, his hands visibly shook... and the adjutant added: 'Can we, it's better, if we take the carriage?'

"Yes, yes,' the general said. 'Please harness the carriage.'

"At that moment a soldier entered and reported:

"Enlightened Sir! -- Respectfully reporting -- those Jews there... they are praying again in their prayer house!"

"Now, not just the general, but also the rest of us stood frozen as gravestones... The general's weak colorless eyes bulged, he clenched his fist and shouted in a shocking voice:

"To the gallows! -- On one tree, all of them! -- Immediately!... Alexander Leibovich! Go and hang them! -- Right away!"

"At your command, Enlightened Sir!"

"I'll wait here', the general added in a hoarse voice, 'until you return and report to me that their souls have left their damned bodies.'

"I went together with the adjutant -- but the general suddenly ran after us and blocked our way:

"Wait...' he said in a low voice. 'Wait, Alexander Leibovich! -- No, no! I won't hang them... Alexander Leibovich...' he added in a trembling voice full of sadness and resignation that does not suit him at all. 'Alexander Leibovich -- go and tell them: General Trybov orders them not to pray... they should go to their homes. I order them... No, Alexander Leibovich, no, no... tell them thus: I am requesting that they stop praying -- I've done them no harm... But don't pray any more... I beg of you don't pray...' he finished in a truly supplicating voice. 'Please don't... and the guards -- the villainous guards shall die, they shall die immediately!' he voice suddenly changing. 'Those lazy, thieving traitors!...'

"We went to the seminary. The door was closed so we opened it and went in... and again the same picture: the bums were sitting and studying Torah. The adjutant was no longer angry, but delivered the general's message word for word. Meanwhile, I saw a glimmer of a smile on his lips. As he was speaking, he was enjoying the situation. But his face was pale, yellow as wax. The bums rose and without saying a word left. I looked on the table -- the key wasn't there... As we left, the adjutant asked the guards in a merciful voice: 'How is it possible, that you didn't stop them? You placed your lives on the line!'

"It's not our fault, Sir', said one of them on the verge of tears. 'I swear on my life, we're not guilty -- we didn't see them go in. It's possible that they didn't even leave...'

"'You miserable ones,' the adjutant shook his head. 'Miserable ones... how is it possible that they never left? -- I myself left with them. Well, I will try to pacify the general. Tomorrow morning you will be court-martialed... Do you understand?'

"The poor guards stood in a state of shock and said nothing... We returned to the battalion commander's quarters. Meanwhile my officer said with a smile:

"'Strange... it's a weird thing... I think that the general will repent as a result of the events of today... strange... do you know the guards?' he asked me. 'Are there any Jews among them? -- strange...'

"We went in and the adjutant reported to the general. The eyes of the general glistened moistly -- perhaps there was a tear there -- but that was impossible to believe.

"We harnessed the carriage and rode back to our quarters. The way passed through the fields, and in the middle of the trip something happened which to this day I cannot explain. Something strange and terrible that even now causes me to tremble when I think of it. What happened was this: in the middle of the trip, between the two ends of the village, there was a small forest, a small grove. The woods were not thick. I was intimately familiar with these woods, because I passed through them two or three times every day. The way we traveled was not far from the woods, about thirty paces. When we were opposite the woods -- the general suddenly stood up in the carriage, grasped the adjutant by the shoulder and said in deathly voice as he stared at the woods:

"'Alexander Leibovich! Do you see? You see, don't you?... There in the woods... Don't you all see?... They are praying... they... the Jews... Don't you hear?... My name', he mumbled anxiously and dropped down into his seat.

"We looked at the woods with bulging eyes and saw nothing. The night wasn't totally dark, the moon cast a dark light through the clouds and we could make out the trees. Meanwhile, the general ordered the driver to halt. The carriage halted. It was quiet. And through the quiet we too heard the voices of prayer. Yes, we heard... We looked at each other and listened. Gentlemen, do you doubt it? -- As I wish to see my wife and dear children again! No one was there, it is true, but the voices of prayer emanated from the woods. Stealthily, in a whisper, restfully, as during the prayer on the appearance of the new moon... Later we could discern the shadows of men, but I might be mistaken, perhaps those were shadows of the trees... But perhaps there really were Jews who sanctified the appearance of the new moon, as tradition requires; I don't know for sure, but we all heard the voices... we stood and shivered in the cold. The general stood up again in the carriage, grasped the adjutant's shoulder with one hand and the back of my neck with his other, and an icy feeling rasped throughout my body... The moon drifted through the clouds and appeared for a moment, as did the voices of prayer, the prayers... You are looking at me, Sir. It is possible that the general's madness was affecting us all -- it is possible. But, I explicitly heard... as did the adjutant. -- The general listened, listened, and then turned to the adjutant begging:

"'Alexander Leibovich -- please, both of you go and beg them, in my name and yours. Perhaps they will listen to you... after all you are... ask them to stop praying. I recognize them... they are the same Jews that we burned... yes, I recognize them...', he added while his eyes remained fixed on the forest. 'Yes, they are there, the same Jews... ask them with deference... I will give the order -- tomorrow, today, to have something good done for their wives and children. Go now and ask...'"

"Truth be told," the little Jew added, "my teeth were clattering. Drumming out loud. The adjutant absentmindedly took out his handgun, we got out of the carriage and went into the woods. We found no one there, but in order to soothe the general I began to speak as if I were talking to the Jews... I

asked their pardon...

"Now I was no longer afraid that the general should know that I am a Jew -- on the contrary... I talked to them, as one who is being answered, for a few minutes -- and then we returned to the carriage. The general thanked us with kind words, full of fondness and sadness.

"When we reached the general's quarters, he didn't let us go to sleep. He asked the adjutant to stay there with him and play cards, so that he might calm down a bit. They sat and played for about an hour, the general calmed down, sat and played peaceably as if his mind were at ease. Meanwhile he said nothing about what had happened except for a few words:

"'Yes, I know Alexander Leibovich,' he said completely at peace but in despair, 'I am a bit tired -- there is so much work, the responsibility is so great. A fantasy of an overworked mind... one more hand and we'll go to sleep.'

"They continued to play.

"Suddenly, in the middle of a game, the cards fell from his hands. His eyes turned to the window, his mouth fell open and he stood up.

"'Alexander Leibovich!' he said in a whisper that came from deep inside him. 'Alexander Leibovich -- do you hear... out there, in the yard, in front of the window... Alexander Leibovich -- they are praying... Alexander Leibovich! he shouted with a terrible groan. 'Those damned ones! They don't forgive me!.. They are praying!'

"He clenched his left fist and with his right hand took out his handgun and began to fire, firing through one window, then another, as his teeth bit his lower lip bloody and large tears flowed from his heavy clouded eyes. He fired again and again until there were no more rounds in his handgun. Then he fell flat and groaned a choking, stifled groan, the hair on his forehead damp with sweat. We were stunned by the wild shots and pressed ourselves against the wall holding our breaths. Then we ran into the yard; the adjutant sent me to bring the doctor as quickly as possible while he stayed with the frightened servants in the yard. When I returned with the doctor and we went into the house -- we found the general hanging by a strap from the beam."

# The Canary

Either an angel of God, or a corrupting demon.  
No. A mortal born of woman: both of them together.

Ada Nagari

In the panic of joy, the joy of pursuit, as we chased the enemy through hills and valleys, gardens and villages -- close to Chenstokhova we encountered a deserted palace.

The doors and windows were open wide; the table in the dining room was still burdened with place-settings and utensils. The glasses were only half full and not only that but the terrified officers weren't able to take all their kit with them.

It is a serious offence for the conquerors to take even a matchbox without permission.

Suddenly I hear a voice behind me from one of the rooms. It was the voice of my batman:  
"Enlightened Sir, here is a canary in a cage. Please allow me to take it. Together with the cage. It is hungry."

"Take it."

We continued on. We had no order to stop.

After about a kilometer I see my batman stumble after me without the bird.

"Where is the canary?"

"I didn't take it. Another soldier did."

He gave me the name of the soldier, but I didn't listen to him.

We continued our pursuit for another four hours and then came the order to stop and rest.

After a half hour another order came:

"Dig in. We stay here until further orders."

We dug in and rested after a satisfying meal.

The enemy was far away and we could joke around a bit. Joke around means: to empty out our souls. Singing, playing music, cursing the world and everything in it. And even the whole war itself.

Swearing and cursing were a wonderful narcotic in the killing fields. Not only was it permitted to curse, swear and coarsely shout abuse in a manner that would put a habitual drunk to shame, but the soldiers were particularly fond of gross curses concerning their esteemed officers.

If it were not for the obscene words, we would simply burst from the nervous raw tension.

Together with the vigorous curses -- factual stories about the war, the pursuit, the murders and the victories themselves. And of course this occupation, the occupation of obscenity, brought forth true professionals. Like the murders themselves.

One of these professionals was infantry private Yoshke Bartzi, a professional at both: the cursed, enraged bayonet fighting and tales of this fighting. But Bartzi never lied, not one word. He really was a murderer, graced by the devil, as evidenced by his ears, nose and fingers. All of these were

somewhat stumped. He bit and was bitten. When the battle developed and he was tired of using the bayonet -- he threw all his weapons to hell, fell upon his adversary and bit him. This he learned from the furious Serbs. In this duel of biting, two simpletons fell upon each other, plunging their fingernails and teeth into one another until blood was drawn.

In the battalion this was known as: the pact with the devil. Or: the Serbian meal. This name came from Bartzi himself.

And he was proud of it.

"Without the tip of an ear or the joint of a finger you haven't done your duty!"

"But they also love your ears and your fingers," I said to him once. "Soon they won't have anything more to bite."

"Yes, those filthy bastards do like me," Bartzi answered. "We are close to each other, relatives really: my mother was a Slovak. That is how we eat each other."

He bandaged his torn face with a cold compress.

He began to tell the story of the murder he committed -- and everyone's ears were wide open. The questions started. Questions that more than once he eventually answered. But it was still a pleasure to hear them again and again.

"When there is no time to spit them out -- I swallow them," he said totally relaxed. "That is how they should be eaten."

Two tiny eyes like the eyes of a trench rat and a slightly crooked mouth.

Who has tobacco juice? -- Who has a wad?

They gave him wad. He didn't smoke. Everyone smoked but he used only the black liquid at the base of the pipe. He drew pleasure from placing this liquid between his jaws and the skin of his cheek. In the meantime he spat and told the story.

It appeared as if the war was started for his sake.

No one knew what he did for a living at home and no one asked. His profession? -- A soldier at war. Biting. More than once he received a beating for maltreatment of prisoners.

Even the beatings pleased him after they were over. They were a sort of "just desserts" for him.

Bartzi talked and talked and talked. How he would begin a bayonet charge when there were still more than three hundred paces between him and the enemy. Why wait? He charged with the bayonet and the rest -- after him. It was only necessary to start, the rest followed naturally. It was a wedding. The Muskovites think that war is a card game, or bowling. Why shoot from far away? In the darkness. And why does one have a bayonet hanging on one's hips?

He talked and talked. There was silence all around. Hearts were trembling; and he: his thick fat nostrils were alive and moving. These nostrils were not made for moving. But at such a time they become gentle and noble like those of a thoroughbred horse and they trembled ...

Suddenly, in the middle of the story -- the sound of a bird from the dugout.

"What is that?"

Bartzi stopped his story in the middle, listened and remembered.

"Damn you to hell!" He turned towards the inside of the dugout. "Wait a minute. You bastard! I'll be

right there."

And to us:

"What a nuisance! I saved her from starvation and she chirps and disturbs me in the middle of my story."

And he continues with the story.

The canary continues to interrupt. A wonderful, soft springtime air. In the middle of the winter.

"Please stop, Yoshke, and bring her out to us. You can tell your story tomorrow."

Bartzi was angry:

"A knife in your stomach! Right now it starts to get interesting. Do you know: I'm grabbing his throat like a vise and he is spitting in my face and snatching at my nose with his teeth! -- Is it not, aha, I told you, aren't you ..."

But the canary interrupts again.

Bartzi saw that the canary will win because everyone preferred to listen to it -- stood up in a murderous rage, left us all and went into the dugout.

The bird fell silent.

"He strangled it," I said.

When he came out I said to him:

"I'll wring your neck, if you harmed the bird!"

Bartzi looked at me reproachfully:

"How could Sir think that I am capable of such a thing?" he said. "I gave her crumbs. I brought them to the cage; she was hungry, poor thing, surely you know, Sir, that a canary never sings unless she is hungry. The song is a really a cry." He sat down, thought a while and added bitterly:

"This is how the lords and masters get their pleasure, damn them to hell. They starve the bird so that it will cry and they enjoy it! May they be cursed like Sodom and Gomorrah!"

And he continued his story.

But after a few moments the bird started chirping again.

We laughed:

"She's making a fool of you, my dear."

Bartzi returned to the dugout, but the bird didn't stop. When he came out he said in disgust:

"To hell with her! She doesn't want to eat. Let her drop dead if she doesn't want to. That's what she is used to. The lords always starved her and now she no longer wants to eat."

I got up and went in, and I saw that the bird was sick. She was trembling and her feathers bristled. Meanwhile -- her chirping was weakening and dying. I offered her some crumbs and water -- but she didn't even look at them.

When I left -- Bartzi was engulfed in a murderous excitement, his eyes glistened and his hands -- his hands were actually pale and shaking -- drumming on his knees, but the bird's song disturbed him and it took all his effort to seal his ears and continue with his story.

His excitement reached a fever pitch ...

Suddenly -- he cocked his ears and listened.

There was no voice. The bird was silent.

Now -- the silence bothered him. He did what he had never done before: he stopped telling his story and entered the dugout. For several minutes he didn't return.

We waited for him.

"Well, what have you got there, Yoshke!" yelled one of the soldiers.

There was no answer.

"What have you got there?" he yelled again.

Silence.

A few moments later -- Bartzi came out. His head was bowed and his hands dangled down and in one hand he was holding the bird by one leg.

The soldier's eyes shone with tears. He threw the bird towards us and said with deep sorrow:

"There you are. Dead."

He passed his hand over his face, as a mourner wishing to cry but ashamed to do so.

We laughed.

Bartzi turned a murderous stare at us and shouted:

"What are you laughing at, idiots!"

He gnashed his small teeth -- and fell silent.

One of the soldiers dared to say:

"Ah! -- Sit down and continue the story. You hadn't finished it."

Bartzi raised his eyes to him, as if to swallow him whole:

"Your mother's a slut!" He continued to gnash his teeth, stared at him with scorching eyes and fell silent.

Then he closed his eyes totally disgusted, his face straightened out, he went to the bird, bent over and picked up the small corpse and pressed it to his breast almost with a whimper:

"Poor worm. Stupid little thing. A man saves her and risks his life for her and she -- dies."

He went into the dugout and didn't return.

"What have you got there, Yoshke? We're waiting."

No answer came.

I went in to look for him -- he was sitting with his head between his knees.

"What is it, Yoshke? Are you crying?"

He didn't lift his face to me and answered me as if begging:

"Leave me alone, Sir, this is no joke ..."

For a long time afterwards Bartzi told no more stories.

He kept the cage for a few more days and then crushed it under his feet and threw it out, and he turned to me and said, entreating me impatiently:

"When will we attack again, Enlightened Sir?..."

## The Bleeding Bible

From a thousand stinging wounds the blood bubbles,  
Oh, painful wounds, dear and holy --

Yosef Patai

When I entered the house -- a strange and wonderful sight momentarily surprised me: the woman who greeted me talked Yiddish with a pronounced Galician accent; on the table -- for it was the eve of the Sabbath -- was spread a white cloth with two candlesticks polished until they shined, and in front of them was an embroidered napkin covering the loaves of Challah ... and hanging on the dirty walls -- were pictures of Christian saints who directed sad looks at me.

The Jewish woman discerned my amazement, her face became serious, she sat down on the chair beside the bed and convulsed in sobs.

On the bed among the threadbare gray pillows, lay a boy of about six or seven years, his head bandaged, his face pale, one hand hanging outside the covers, thin and helpless. Only his eyes, his two large, clever, veiled eyes, looked at me reassuringly, tired and calm.

The woman ceased crying and then began:

"A week ago when the Russians were on their way here, terrible tidings preceded them. Jewish refugees who came from nearby villages told in terror how the Russians are murdering us. They are searching for Jews and when they find them, man or woman, boy or old man, it doesn't matter -- they torture them, beat them mercilessly and then kill them. They say that the Jews are selling them out to the enemy."

The woman continued: "My brother told me about them. He too had fled from them. He warned me to run away, to save my life, because terrible things lay in store for me. My child here was already on his deathbed from consumption, the danger of dying had already passed, but he was still weak, very weak, and how could I run with a child as weak as this? Outside is winter, ice, terrible cold, the boy is coughing, sweating, and how shall I carry him? -- Suddenly God sent me an idea. True, it was not a beautiful and decent thought, but ... God forgive me ... we were threatened with death. In my heart, I said: This time I will deny it to them. I won't tell them that we are Jews. God forgive me, I am a weak woman and the child is ill, very ill. So -- I will deny it to them. But, it is not the easiest thing to do, Sir, as may be thought. Deny being Jewish? Just like that, deny? How is that possible? For more than thirty years a person lives as a Jew, and does what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord and of man, and suddenly, for no reason and without wanting to, I will become a Gentile! And a simple Gentile at that!... I hesitated, I was assailed with doubts and regrets... Yes, Sir, death is all-powerful. He forces a person to do strange things. And this thing, to become a Gentile just by saying so -- wasn't so simple. It is not easy to do such a thing. Well, to start with -- I changed my clothes. The maid I used to have gave me one of her sets of clothing, then -- I disarranged the house a bit, I made little messes in every corner, as is usual in their houses. On the mantle above the fireplace I placed a large, soot-blackened casserole, such as they use to cook pork, God forgive me. And finally -- to bring the lovely upheaval to perfection -- I mixed up the all the eating utensils, the meat ones with the milk ones, together ... Heaven forbid! To stand there and see this confusion!... I closed my eyes. But what

was I to do with danger hanging over our heads. Then ... then ... to my shame and disgrace, Sir, I, myself, by my own hands, I took the scissors -- God forgive me all my sins, yes, I myself sheared off my child's sidelocks. And on his head I placed a wide, filthy straw hat. You, Sir, can only imagine the face of the poor child. He cried, flailed his arms and legs in protest -- my heart almost stopped within me! Try it yourself, Sir: to shear off curly sidelocks, those that a person guards as dearest to himself! And then to throw them out as a rag! Oh -- no. It was not pleasant at all. I took them and hid them in a trunk. Then, then, Sir, one who begins threshing -- must continue, one transgression leads to another: I removed the mezzuzah from the entrance ... Tell me, Sir, please: Have you ever tried staying for days in house without a mezzuzah? A Jewish house without a mezzuzah!... I can't imagine anything more terrible than that. It's a strange thing, terribly strange, sir. A Jewish house without a mezzuzah -- it's a tent in a graveyard, God forbid. I felt myself within such a tent the whole time -- in a graveyard, God watch over me! All day I shivered from some internal cold, my shadow actually pursued me and when night came ... I said: No! no, no, whatever may come about! It is impossible! It would be better that the murderers come and take out our souls than I should sleep in a Jewish house that has become the abode of devils! In the meantime a good thought came to my mind: I went to my Christian neighbor, gave her a few silver coins -- and we exchanged homes for a few days until the danger passed. And here, in this house, everything was already fit and proper. A real pagan home. I strictly commanded my children, totally forbidding them from this day forward from speaking even one word of Yiddish! Only the Gentiles' language. The children all speak the language very well, my children, Sir, are not waifs from the marketplace, they all go to school, that is, they went to school until the war started. Well, all was in order. In the fireplace, in a filthy casserole dish, the pumpkin for the pork was boiling; on the bed -- a coarse gentile fur; the children were saying 'Mamcha' instead of 'Mama' and pictures of Christian saints hung on the walls, as you, Sir, have seen, everything, everything just as God created for a simple non-Jewish house, and thus I waited for the murderers. In addition, I bribed all my neighbors to call me 'Paulina'. God in heaven, what a person won't do to stay alive! Not for me, Sir, God help me, not for me; I would rather fall into their hands, than live this life. But the children, Sir, the children! What won't a person do for her children. Look, Sir: this poor child, for whom I did all this. For him. Do you see, Sir? This child above all, the one I did all this for, he gave it up! He was the one who uncovered the secret. It was like this: the Russians came; they were all drunk, all of them, as if they were marching straight from a drunken wake, they came in, found everything as it should be, a non-Jewish house, Gentiles, and they did us no harm. A pagan home, Sir, a simple gentile home, good. What could we do, when they hate us so! Three of them remained with us in our home, a millstone around my neck, to live with us. My entire body shook, truly feverish. They will stay with us... and the boy might make a mistake at any moment, talking Yiddish. Should he let slip one word of Yiddish -- that would be the end. I constantly bit my lips, pinched his miserable thin body, and thus was able to silence him constantly. And later -- 'once permission is given to the destroyer, he no longer distinguishes anymore between the righteous and the evildoer' -- later, Sir, later -- I'm ashamed to tell you: when evening came and the drunks began to pray, I was forced to cross myself as they did -- oy, what will become of me! Just as they did, God will forgive me all this, for he knows that I did it without intent, God forbid, and I am only a woman on her own. The children are in danger. The children, Sir, the children! I am a woman, getting along in years, an old and sinful woman who knows how to be two-faced, God forgive me, but the children -- the children cannot lie in their souls. I too suffered torments in this dastardly game, but somehow I endured my torments. But they -- they embittered my life until I almost went crazy. How much effort, God knows, how much toil and effort did I have to invest to silence them and to enforce the whole terrible secret, so that they wouldn't suddenly uncover the whole filthy tale! My girls more or less submitted to the discipline, after all they

are older and more talented at this thing, but this boy, ho, this boy! -- But he finally submitted, too. How much did this weak worm suffer; to live this life without uttering one word of Yiddish! It was terrible. However, I secretly explained to him that it wouldn't always be like this. That soon they would be taken into darkness, but for now we must do all this, out of coercion, for if not -- they will murder us, all of us at once. And thus I was able to hold him as if tied and bound. What more shall I tell you, sir? Things got worse and more dangerous day by day. The drunks began to talk about the Jews, for now they joked, told tales, and ridiculed all our saints, they laughed at us, at the Jews, imitated us with various grimaces and then told each other, boasted, how they beat up our brothers in the neighboring villages, how they tormented and tortured them and then took their lives. Sir, try to imagine: to hear these things directly in one's face and to remain silent! Not only that, but to laugh with them on occasion from the fear of death, oy, what will become of me, to be coerced to laugh with them. A laugh of devils and vermin, God in Heaven, to laugh choking on blood!... This, Sir, this was above our strength. But our Father in Heaven took pity on us, and gave us the strength to bear this too. I am not worthy even to mention the name of the Merciful. And this boy too, he also began to get used to them. Because I never stopped instructing him and warning him even for a moment. That is how they did nothing to us. But once two of them came and boasted how they had looted a synagogue... Lord of the Universe! To hear these things and to show them a laughing face -- no, we didn't laugh with them when we heard this. I told them that my head was amiss and went to and fro in the room -- and I suffered. But the boy, this poor boy, I saw that his patience was running out. Our synagogue had served as a school in the past, and this boy was already six years old, more, already studying Bible and school was to him -- everything. Well, when they began to tell about their beastly behavior in the synagogue, while I was listening to them -- my whole body began to shake. I saw that the boy -- his emaciated body became actually feverish to hear them talk, his forehead broke out in sweat and his bloodshot eyes bulged out of their sockets... He was suffering, suffering, bearing up through it, bearing the looting of the synagogue, bearing the defilement of his school, everything he bore and remained silent. He held back the tears that were about to gush forth -- and remained silent. But once, one of the murders came in holding a book, a Hebrew book -- and the boy suddenly became as pale as death. We all recognized the book: it was the boy's Bible! His new Bible, the one I had just bought him as a present. I bit my lips and whispered into his ear: Yosele, my heart, please, be silent. I'll buy you another one instead. Silence, my dear boy, for they are murderers. They shall choke on their deeds!... The boy's eyes shed hidden silent tears and he lay in bed silently. He covered his head with his blanket, stifling any sound. But a moment later he poked his head out from under the blanket and saw how one of the murderers tore a page from the book and began to fold into it a piece of lard ... At that moment -- God in Heaven -- this boy, do you see Sir? Sick worm that he is, he suddenly jumped up from this bed and like a wild lion cub pounced on the Russian who was five cubits high, snatched the torn page from his hand and the book from the table and in a hoarse voice shouted bitterly:

"To hell with it, Fania! The devil has gotten into you, accursed Pan-Muskovite! This is my Bible! Mine! It will be not be defiled by pig -- you bastard!"

"Why should I drag this story out, Sir?" the woman continued through her tears. "Look at the pale creature... that evil animal, the murderer, was bewildered for a moment, then grasped him with his two coarse hands, swung his as if swinging a log to shatter it, looked to a moment at his face and then raised him up as high as the ceiling and in front of us all, oy, what will become of me, hurled him with all his might to the ground in front of my eyes... I went to him, and he shoved me forcefully so that I too fell. The boy, I said, will find his grave here, he will dissolve in this place like a wax candle... After this deed everyone looked at me, at all of us, and at the room, and understood what was

happening. And we -- we waited for our terrible end. We waited as if frozen, without a movement, like dead marble slabs, almost with our eyes closed. What shall I tell you, Sir? If there is one person who does not believe in the living God, let him come and give me a rational explanation: I am but a woman, but I saw the living God in those moments: If God wills?... We didn't even manage to awake from our terrible fears when -- a shout outside, and after the shout a Muskovite comes in and breathlessly screams: 'Yerman! German! Herman!' -- and within a moment there is no trace of any of them in my house. It's terrible, how much they fear the Germans! We sat another moment, amazed at the deliverance by God and then I went over to the boy who I thought to be truly dead, for there was a pool of blood beneath him, and blood also flowed from his nose, God in Heaven, the boy was still breathing though his breathing was labored... I lay him upon the bed and tried to revive him a bit -- poor worm! He didn't even cry, his eyes were closed as if dead, and God bless his sick life and his dear heart -- he didn't even let go of the book. When he revived a bit and began to talk within his fever and weakness, he bitterly cried for me to heal his book. Yes, he asked that I heal his Bible. The Bible was bleeding. I told him, dear fool, its not the Bible, but you, you, my sick boy, you are bleeding... But he insisted: no, it's the Bible!... And he didn't calm down until I did as he requested and bandaged the book. What won't a person do, Sir, for his children. Now, even now, his doesn't eat and doesn't drink properly, and only guards the wounded book underneath his blanket, God of Mercy have pity on him and his dear heart ..."

The woman raised the blanket and I saw, how Yosele, sanctifying God, clutched the book to his weak heart, his new Bible, violated, torn and bleeding...

## Storm

A wind at twilight, showering colors of a far and lost repose, played over our heads within the crazy air -- and we sat, Dr. Scheier, the casualty physician, and myself in a cave and talked of peace.

Oh, peace, from which we have been orphaned. Of the beautiful quiet of humanity, dead, wonderful, civilized, lost -- forever.

We talked and we talked, at rest, in sadness, with a distant hope, our eyes closed and with sick and homesick love of life, with clenched lips.

Dr. Scheier trembled with impatience, stood up and said:

"Ah, my friend, this is not for me! To sit here and philosophize. This idleness makes the heart stupid and removes it from the world! There, at the 'aid station': tens of thousands of diseases decimate the camp -- and here I sit, talking of peace, idle things!

Dr. Scheier had arrived at the front only about two weeks ago. Until recently he had worked in the city. He had been a physician at the military hospital, totally dedicated to slaving for his patients. He had reached the ripe old age of twenty-four and already his hair had begun to gray. He was not thought to be in the pink of health, but what little strength he had was entirely dedicated to his work: to the war against those vermin, the tiny, terrible germs, a war in which the young doctor -- not even a real doctor yet, but only an intern -- was performing wonderful acts.

And yet those in the city did not look upon him favorably: the war had been going on for more than a year -- and he was still working "at home." He had stayed behind the front for too long.

"He is prancing around here," said those around him, "instead of going to war and defending the fatherland!"

Dr. Scheier had heard these whisperings more than once, but he paid no attention to them. He didn't have the time to do so. The accursed infectious diseases left him no time. Those diseases whose most dangerous enemy was Dr. Scheier.

Truth be told: Dr. Scheier's face engendered a certain amount of -- antipathy or discomfort. Perhaps it was his nose -- or perhaps the spectacles on that nose, or perhaps his lips which were a bit too thick.

Perhaps all these together caused Dr. Scheier to be liked only by his dangerously ill patients. They liked him much more than his commander, the chief physician, the exalted colonel-doctor. The exalted colonel-doctor didn't like to treat diseases, or suffering and groans, and above all he didn't like to treat infectious diseases. And one more thing that the colonel-doctor didn't like: his assistant Dr. Scheier. At every opportunity he would speak to him thus:

"If I were still a bachelor as young as you, my friend, I wouldn't be so afraid of the danger, the war and the front as you are. Furthermore: I have already been there. And you haven't. Truly strange: a young man, a bachelor and a coward..."

Dr. Scheier really was young and also a bachelor and also a bit weird -- but not necessarily a coward. The danger facing him directly into his reddened eyes was no less than that facing all his dangerously ill patients, nor that facing the tens of thousands of his comrades at the front. It was certainly no less than what had been faced by more than one of his physician colleagues who had recently been dispatched to the world of truth and honor by infectious diseases. Nevertheless, the colonel-doctor did

not look favorably upon him. And people really did say: "A soldier dressed in formal clothes, the uniform of His Majesty -- please go take part in the war against the enemy."

So Dr. Scheier was sent to the war zone, to the enemy.

Dr. Scheier regretted nothing except being forced to leave his hospital; the miserable, despised patients, covered with infectious diseases. Well, never mind. Out there there are also patients to cure. Lots of them. And there, no one would gossip about him. There he would finally be in the war. At a place where everyone is considered to be a hero.

The truth is that Dr. Scheier felt no hatred towards anyone in the world, except towards the dastardly germs, and only against them did he enjoy fighting wars with all his heart and soul. But -- with God's help, he will get used to the other war and the other hatred. He will get used to binding up wounds. Thus Dr. Scheier found himself suddenly in "the war."

By a quirk of fate, a few days later the chief physician, the honorable colonel-doctor himself, was sent to the front following his assistant, Dr. Scheier. An order from on high.

Thus they met again.

But here too the colonel-doctor did not calm down. The 'aid station' was about three kilometers behind the front in a small village, where the seriously wounded patients were brought and where the reserve battalion was stationed.

It was strange: here too the damned infectious diseases had begun to strike at the camp. Dr. Scheier arrived just in time. Again he began to fight the diseases with all his might. But here too the colonel-doctor was displeased, since he felt that Dr. Scheier was entirely unnecessary.

"Even this is not yet the real front line," he grumbled. "Even this is not war. It is not proper for a young man to fear danger. A man must have a brave heart, my friend. Cowardice is despicable in a young man and the front was created only for young men."

These attempts to persuade began to get under Dr. Scheier's skin. After all, it was a bit insulting, a bit too much.

But a moment later he had already forgotten them. He polished his big spectacles with his handkerchief, bent his head and his body over his beloved microscope -- and the rest of the world disappeared for him.

However, once even Dr. Scheier's ire was kindled. It came about that the administrative First Sergeant interfered in his work, and messed with both his mind and his affairs. Since this interference by the first sergeant cost Dr. Scheier the lives of some of the soldiers -- his quiet face burned with a fierce and slightly vocal protest. It is true that raising his voice did not suit him and, rather than achieving its goal, aroused some mirth that was a sufficient public reason to finally get rid of Dr. Scheier. Dr. Scheier was after all only an assistant officer, while the administrative First Sergeant was considered a senior commander in the hospital; not only that, but on his chest he wore a long row of medals for distinction. Therefore, the colonel-doctor said to Dr. Scheier after the incident:

"Scheier, my friend, lower your voice a bit when you talk with this man. You have only just arrived here and have yet to be at the front, while this man... look closely, look at his chest... after a while, my friend, after a while, after a few 'storms', you will be able to talk loudly, but for now bring your voice down an octave."

Dr. Scheier lowered his voice almost to complete silence, but in the meantime he began to think of the

strange incident: this First Sergeant had caused the death of many soldiers, front-line soldiers -- and still they sing his praises. Even the chief physician. Even a doctor!

As he thought about it, it occurred to Dr. Scheier that in fact he is not entirely indolent and useless; that he does things that are useful to some people, that he is seemingly human. He straightened his bent back, adjusted the spectacles on his nose, put the bottle of medicine on the table and said these words:

"Pardon me, Enlightened Sir, pardon me... it seems to me... I think... in my opinion... that death does not travel in the same places where medals for distinction and honor grow... It can't be intentionally forgotten that the damned little pests are tens of thousands more numerous than the enemy's bullets... and that I, when I care for someone with this or that infectious disease, am in danger no less than the rudest First Sergeant in the world!"

Dr. Scheier's harsh words were strange and a little ridiculous. People weren't used to hearing such words from him, nor was he in the habit of expressing himself in this way. The chief physician didn't answer but instead gave the following order: Dr. Scheier will be sent immediately to the front!

That's how it is. Let him stand at attention and talk that way if he chooses.

Again, Dr. Scheier had no regrets except for one thing: that he was forced to leave his patients suffering from cholera in the hospital in the small town behind the front. The pain of a wounded soldier: there is some comfort in it, some exalted sadness, at least that is how people think. But the life of a patient sobbing from an infectious disease -- that is a hellish punishment.

Thus Dr. Scheier was now at the front; in the trench together with us. However, he had come here at a somewhat inopportune time. There had been no fighting for several days and Dr. Scheier was unoccupied. We truly felt compassion when, with his face in ground, he said:

"One can go crazy, my friend ... At the 'aid station' uncounted thousands of germs are swarming, living it up, being fruitful and multiplying undisturbed -- and here I sit waiting until some bullet comes and injures someone."

Once Dr. Scheier leaned over to me and said:

"I will return to the 'aid station' of the reserve forces. I heard that a new epidemic is raging and killing the miserable ones."

"How will you return? Without permission or an order from your superior officer?"

"What do I care for permission or for an order from superiors or inferiors?" The young Jew suddenly became angry and the feeling of righteous justice caused his pale face to redden. Orders or permission -- there are only two doctors there, one is the chief physician, and the other -- doesn't even know what aspirin is. A first-year medical student. You know the chief physician ... a man with 'a wife and children' who does not particularly like infectious diseases. When we go visit a dangerously ill patient, he always demands that I open the door. He doesn't want to touch the door-handle..."

All my warnings were to no avail. Dr. Scheier returned to the "aid station," without permission and without an order from a superior officer.

As he entered the small town the low buildings greeted him with tears: the entire battalion teetered between life and death. Dr. Scheier found no physician except for the medical student. Only two staff members were to be found: a rabbi and a priest who were burying the dead in a row, one after the other, ceaselessly. The inhabitants of the town -- those that still had the strength -- went around with

their heads in their hands. Dr. Scheier heard only weeping and praying. Dr. Scheier's heart convulsed within his chest and he was seized with a frantic need to work.

That same evening thunder struck everyone: The division commander came -- without previous notice, unbeknown to all the officers, surprising them. He went directly to the quarantine of the sick with infectious diseases. Choking back his anger, he listened to the official report that in the entire reserve battalion there was not a single doctor, and that the chief physician gave an order ... that is: he gave permission for the reserve battalion to leave the small town and move back ... to the nearest village. The division commander jumped as if bitten by a snake:

"What? Go back?" he roared like a lion felled by a poisonous arrow. "Back? You damned pigs! I'll hang the lot of you on one scrawny tree! The whole lot of you. Pen and ink, given me pen and ink!"

He sat and wrote out a death sentence.

All this happened in a few frozen moments that to those standing around the room were like thousands of years of destruction. All the batmen stood still as gravestones and their heads spun like a spindle. There was only one person in the room who heard nothing of what went on around him: Dr. Scheier. This young, stooped man sat as he habitually did at his desk, his two eyes sunk into his microscopy as if he were in a dazed dream. He heard neither the roar of the administrative first sergeant as he called attention when the august figure entered, nor did he hear the rasping ire of the division commander, nor his irritating announcement. Nothing. He stood by his microscope, adjusting it, up and down, turning a knob, looking after it, poured liquids from one bottle to another, looked again through his beloved microscope, so dear to him and so wonderful, that removed the carnal cloak and uncovered the horrible enemy to him: the battalions of brave pests, in ambush, spread out, squirming and devastating ... he didn't see the august person. He didn't have time for that. The division commander stood up and asked, his face flushed:

"What is the condition of the soldiers now?"

"Now ... now ..." stuttered the First Sergeant obsequiously and trembling. "Now, Exalted Sir, I most respectfully report -- now they are somewhat better...better, Exalted Sir."

"How many doctors did you say are in attendance?" asked the exalted person again, in order to hear the terrible truth again.

"Just one, Exalted Sir, one."

"And who is he?"

The nasty beast awoke within the First Sergeant. He pointed to Dr. Scheier and said:

"Dr. Scheier, assistant chief physician," the First Sergeant answered. And in order to make this moment worse, he added with stress: "He also ran away from the front to here unlawfully... without permission... ran from the front... before the 'storm'... Tomorrow we are supposed to storm the enemy."

At this moment the exalted person forgot all the epidemics, all the dead and all the pests in the world. His eyes flashed with sparks: "This is a battalion of crazy traitors. One leaves the patients and runs away, the other leaves the field of battle..."

He gnashed his teeth and foaming at the mouth, he shouted at the young doctor:

"Dr. Scheier! Dr. Moshe Scheier! Are you deaf or a corpse?"

The young doctor came from his bench as he was in a white apron, with bare hands and approached

the exalted person.

"Present."

"You ran away from the field of battle?" the division commander asked, looking at him, a slacker, who didn't even know how to stand straight.

"As you say, Exalted Sir."

"Do you know the punishment is for such a step? -- Running from the 'storm'?"

Dr. Scheier didn't reply, bowed his head in submission and then stretched out his hands as if inviting him as a guest to dinner. Politely and respectfully he said in a civilian tone:

"Please, Exalted Sir, do step up to the table."

The exalted commander looked at him as if he were a fool. The unmilitary civilian, "waiter-like" gesture as if attired in formal dress. -- He furrowed his brow and a small smile smoothed out the twisted, suppressed anger. This strange fellow surprised him with his innocent impertinence until he capitulated, assented to his request and went to the table, as if saying: "Oh well, we see what the weird, wild person wants." Dr. Scheier adjusted the microscope and, with another civilian waiter-like gesture, said:

"If you please, look at that -- into the microscope."

The awe-inspiring exalted person gave him a suspicious glance and then looked into the microscope, looked and looked ... and a distant, strange land took form before his eyes. At the beginning he saw only a wide greenish cake, with a multitude of white spheres floating here and there on top, as if in a deep, clear greenish sea. Quietly, moderately, motionless. Each one of the spheres had what seemed to be a eye in its middle, a whitish eye. These eyes looked directly back into the eyes of the exalted person like round, veiled, fish eyes that were somewhat threatening.

"What is that?" burst out the division commander in a secretive and curious voice.

The cake shrank, became narrower, the spheres became smaller too -- but mainly they multiplied: thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands.

"That is our battalion, Exalted Sir" -- Dr. Scheier said calmly, "the battalion of our life. These are the soldiers in our blood who stand watch on the front, guarding our lives from possible threats."

The picture changed. In place of the many spheres, there was but one sphere. A large sphere whose large eye in the middle of its body looked directly back into the eyes of the division commander. The commander's head flinched a bit backwards.

"That is one of our loyal heroes," Dr. Scheier explained again.

The division commander suddenly saw a live picture: at the edge of the cake a small white worm squirmed and approached, closer and closer.

Dr. Scheier contemplated the face of the division commander and noticed a sort of grimace.

"That is the enemy," he said with all seriousness.

The worm squirmed and approached the sphere, threw from its mouth a blue drop, and the drop flowed straight to the sphere.

"The attack. The enemy attacks," said Dr. Scheier.

The sphere shook and came to life.

"Aha, aha!" said excitedly the exalted commander.

Suddenly from the body of the sphere a sort of hand stuck out, like an arm of Polypus. The arm encircled the little snake, embraced it and then attached it to its body, and the snake was within the body of the sphere, inside it, and it was swallowed up, suffocated, enclosed from all sides.

The division commander was satisfied with the demonstration. But soon the little snake gave birth to a second snake that did as the first snake: threw out a drop and squirmed ... and a second arm reached out and enclosed this one too, which in turn gave birth to a third snake, the third -- to a fourth, and each one divided and multiplied many, many times over ... but the sphere also put out arms from all sides, blindingly fast, cunningly, with great wisdom, until it swallowed all of them, crushed them into itself, killed them in an instant, the snakes frozen within its body, not moving, dead carcasses, melting away ... And the sphere again floated calmly on its green sea slowly digesting the melting worms which disappeared one by one.

"Victory," said Dr. Scheier, "please, next."

The white sphere floated motionless. Suddenly: the little snakes attacked and assaulted it from all sides, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, multiplying in an instant, the drops spraying quickly, unceasingly, angrily at the sphere; the sphere drew out arms from all sides, snatched, imprisoned, enclosed, swallowed and crushed them, but they multiplied without bound, to an immense host of venom-hurling snakes, peeling, squirming, running away and returning, the sphere was already full of arms, its body overflowing with carcasses, the snakes multiplying unceasingly and attacking it, and it defended itself, absorbing them, one after another, but to no avail: the snakes were too numerous to swallow, its arms slack, faltering, tired and exhausted.

The division commander faced Dr. Scheier with a sudden turn of his head:

"Don't let them, don't!"

Dr. Scheier smiled and said:

"It is still alive, soon help will come -- if you please."

He drizzled some sort of liquid on the glass under the magnifying glass and the division commander saw: from the left edge of the cake suddenly flowed a reddish liquid. The flow widened out, sending waves, the waves enveloped the white sphere which was still struggling with the snakes, the flow washed over the snakes and they, as if struck by apoplexy, steadily weakened, suddenly froze, made as if to escape, but they can no longer squirm. The sphere regained its strength slowly. It stretched out its arms again, stretched them over the swooning snakes, enclosed them and swallowed them, swallowed and enclosed. In the meantime, the snakes ceased giving birth and multiplying, their numbers decreased and crashed, as they disappeared within the body of the sphere. The sphere again floated peacefully on the calm greenish water, throwing out the remains of the carcasses of the wicked snakes...

The exalted commander let out a sigh of satisfaction.

"And now, if you please" said Dr. Scheier, "now will come the 'storm'."

"What?" asked the division commander. "What will come?"

Dr. Scheier adjusted the microscope, suggested to the division commander that he look into it and said:

"The storm, Exalted Sir."

Before the eyes of the division commander appeared a wild image: thousands and tens of thousands of spheres and many more snakes sailing hastily, in panic, climbing over each other, butting, fighting, choking, squirming, twitching. Running away and assaulting again. Those who were caught tried to escape, spitting venom, some multiplying and some swallowing, dissolving, killing, the riot increasing, all the spheres full of arms that snatch, crush, shake and close, but the hated enemy increases more and more, the spheres are already full of carcasses and the multiplying snakes, one dividing into two, two into four and after that into hundreds and thousands, and the spheres exert their strength in vain: the remnant of their strength is exhausted and they are delivered to their terrible fate - they float motionless, shrinking, contracting, folding up and little by little they wash up on the beach, the edges of the cake, the waves throwing them -- and the snakes reign over the greenish sea. The sea slowly becomes pale, loses its transparent hue, becomes diluted, dark and polluted, and the snakes multiply at their pleasure, being fruitful and multiplying unchecked.

"This is death," said Dr. Scheier in the stillness. "This is our death, Exalted Sir. This is the 'storm' of the epidemic ... and for this storm I ran from the front line. Because of this storm."

The division commander raised his eyes, still sunk in that world along with his soul and wondered, innocently, almost pleading:

"Is there no way to stop these bastards?"

"It is possible, Exalted Sir," replied Dr. Scheier. "With a bit of good will and a bit of courage, Exalted Sir, anything is possible. The danger is great. These snakes, should one of them attach itself to your finger, and should you, Exalted Sir, wipe your mouth with it -- a storm like this will occur within a few moments even in your stomach, your blood. That is the storm ..."

The division commander looked at Dr. Scheier, motionless, then closed his eyes for an extended blink, looked at the strange young man from head to toe and said in a serious military tone:

"Tomorrow morning you will be court-martialed! Understood?"

"Understood, Exalted Sir," said Dr. Scheier. He furrowed his brow and returned to his work.

The next morning when Dr. Scheier stood at the court-martial -- the division commander himself pinned to the lean, sloping chest of the young doctor "The Cross of Honor, First Class."

("Tfew!" spat out bitterly the First Sergeant. "These Jews make a big to do out of everything! Even the cholera works in their favor!")

# Revenge

For Hermann Yedlovker

1

Among the reserves who today entered the front line was my young friend, whom I was very fond of: Fraidy. Fraidy is a green officer, about twenty, with a baby face that looked more into the soul of its owner than at the indecent world. I had known Fraidy for more than three years. When I first met him he was on the podium of a stormy musical concert where Fraidy was the artistic guest. Fraidy was a violinist. Already at age fifteen he was talked about as a truly special artist, not so much for his music, but for the astonishing way he played the violin, for his wonderful and sophisticated technique, which was more appropriate to a mature violinist within whose arteries coursed sixty or seventy seasons of playing. Fraidy was looked upon as a promising rising young man whose reputation would spread throughout his Fatherland and the world.

There in the city Fraidy was the youngest of our band who lived the nightlife -- the Bohemian lifestyle, together with us who mistake the love of that trollop known to the world during the day as art, but to us she is modest, homey, alluring and saddening even unto suicide to reach the afterlife. This band of ours who listened to Fraidy's violin were different from the outsiders who listened to him in the crowded concerts, where wafted the scent of dolled-up women and the smell of affluent males with callous and fraudulent hearts.

I have nothing to say about Fraidy's art. There was something in his art that could not be clearly talked about and analyzed with a scalpel. Something that could not be expressed in words nor even grasped in thought. But one thing became clear to us, to almost all of our band -- something, that some of us did not talk about out of courtesy and others since they ... simply attached to it little significance -- but we all felt the same way. It was: the Jewish style of Fraidy's music. Fraidy wasn't Jewish; but this was of no importance in our band. Jew or not -- it was all one to us. For a long time we were above distinguishing between nation and language, and all the more so between one religion and another. To generalize: art was universal and belonged to all mankind. Especially music.

But this style -- if I am allowed to call it so -- was somewhat stubborn. The style seemed to develop more and more, become more prominent and important, became the essence; as if to irritate. Everything that emerged from Fraidy's fingers -- was marked as Jewish. It didn't matter whether he played Meyerbeer or Beethoven, Grieg or Bach, Schumann or Puccini -- it was all Hebrew.

We never talked about it. But one time a director in our band noted innocently that a sonata that she didn't recognize when Fraidy played it must be a Jewish melody. We smiled and answered her that she was really stupid because it was a sonata by Liszt ... But Fraidy began to tremble all over, became pale and threw down his violin, cursing. At that moment we felt that things couldn't continue as before, that the time had come to "sort out" this issue, because Fraidy felt his honor was impugned. Not out of contempt for Jews; but simply because the sonata was not Jewish, and a despicable libel was directed against him, that he was playing the composition in an inappropriate style. Since I was one of those most fond of him and he was fond of me, I initiated a conversation on this subject. Coincidentally, he started the conversation. Negatively, of course. More than that: with a serious protest.

"This is unprecedented stupidity!" he said angrily. "It is simply ridiculous."

"No, Fraidy, not at all. There is a lot of truth in what she said, things which have nothing to do with Jewish music nor even with Jewish life, but to which you give not only a Jewish coloration but even Jewish musical content ..."

"Perhaps: run-of-the-mill oriental?"

"Oriental? -- let it be oriental. But can the substance of the issue be disputed? The point is, Fraidy ..."

"True," he confessed, "it's all the same. It's a disease -- to play Liszt's Sixth Rhapsody or Beethoven's Moon Sonata in a Jewish style or just in a run-of-the-mill oriental style. It's without a doubt an internal disease -- what should I do?" he asked with a naive childish sadness, profound and heart-rending.

"What should you do? Nothing, Fraidy. Were I in your place," I emphasized, "I wouldn't concern myself at all, Fraidy; it's not unusual and it might only be a temporary thing that depends on the time and place, or on something else. As Joachim said: when he was young, every melody that he composed aroused laughter -- an accursed, venomous devil's laughter -- even the most joyous one. There's no tragedy in it, Fraidy. It later turned out, that Joachim got into a foolish mess, an American duel with a German student, and Joachim drew the black ball, which according to the rule meant that within a year he had to hang himself from the bridge. It is understandable that during that accursed year his violin laughed a devil's laugh."

"And how did it turn out?" Fraidy wondered.

"In the end the German student, Joachim's adversary, died of tuberculosis the same year."

Fraidy took a deep, comforting breath: Thank God.

"Yes, Fraidy, as I was saying, there is no tragedy in it. Joachim accepted it for what it was. But with you, Fraidy, it's different. And that is what I want to talk with you about. It is something that I, we all felt and talked about among ourselves."

"Which is?"

"The thing is, Fraidy, my friend, that this can't continue. It's a war between you and yourself, Fraidy; more precisely between your two souls. We feel that the two souls are fighting when you play your violin."

Fraidy went pale.

"Continue, please continue," he pleaded impatiently. "Please! I too wanted ..."

"Well, it seems to me that you yourself should feel it. Tell me, Fraidy, you're not Jewish, are you?" I asked him, although it was clear to me that he wasn't.

Fraidy opened his eyes wide and looked at me:

"Surely you know that I'm not Jewish?"

"Hmmm..."

"But -- I was talking with my mother yesterday and she told me that her father's mother -- that is, my great-grandmother -- had an affair with some Jew when she was a maiden ... no, I can't lie to you: not just some Jew, but with her music teacher: with Mendelssohn... but later she married Graf Bellini and bore her first son: Graf Zador-Bellini who is my mother's uncle, the one who was the conductor of the first Budapest Opera. But that was so far back and besides it has nothing... it is impossible to attribute to that act of love that my mother's father's mother -- and as a maiden -- how can any importance be

attributed to it? It's foolish!"

"I don't know, Fraidy: maybe yes, maybe no. In any case: blood is not totally insignificant in life, especially in art. After all, you know how complicated a first love is. For example, a maiden who marries a black Negro but does not bare him children and later marries a white man, in a large percentage of cases, the subsequent first-borne is black or half-black. I'm telling you, Fraidy my friend, that this knowledge that your mother's father's mother's lover was Jewish -- and a musician -- lifts a heavy weight from my heart. You know, Fraidy, I like you as much as I like myself, possibly even more. I want to ask something from you: please be candid with yourself. I'm telling you: you are at war, yes, now it is clear to me: there is war between your two hands. Do you understand me, Fraidy? We've felt this already: your left hand, Fraidy, is fighting a bitter war with your right hand..."

Fraidy's eyes opened round and innocent like a tender boy's, and two tear-drops -- two fair pearls that lit up their source -- appeared. He stared at the ground and whispered, in a cleansing voice:

"Yes."

"Well, Fraidy, war; thank God, at least we've cleared that up. Your right hand is faithfully fulfilling its mission. You bow is the faithful servant of all the composer's notes. Always; but your left hand is always demanding its due: your due..."

"How is it going to end?"

"The end, my friend -- is clear to me: the left hand will either win or -- it will take revenge on you. Yes, Fraidy; its revenge will come -- and it will be a strange and terrible revenge... I don't want to ask for trouble, but there have been similar cases, Fraidy."

Fraidy sat down and looked at me with moist eyes pretending to be astonished, then he stood up suddenly, laughing. Believing and not believing.

"You're exaggerating," he said confidently. "It's an exaggeration, although my mother too said something similar -- about her uncle, the conductor, who as you know hanged himself on an organ string... but even that is a bit vague... Ultimately: What fault is it of mine? And if it's my fault, well... what can I do?"

"What can you do? I don't know, Fraidy -- be a Jew! That is: let your heart, your blood be what the messenger commands you: your left hand, try it, the attempt should be successful, Fraidy..."

Fraidy paced back and forth, then rubbed his hands and said:

"No! No, my friend, it is impossible! Music has nothing to do with politics nor with religion! Music stands above any society or nation or religion -- and I am a musician. An artist and nothing more! I'll show you, I'll force my left hand to succumb to the voices of my saints, to Grieg, to Beethoven, to Rubenstein, to all of them. Where they were Jews, I'll be Jewish, and where they were Hottentots -- I'll be a Hottentot.

I never saw Fraidy again. The crazy mobilization started and carried me away into the conflict.

2

Now, more than a year after I am squandering my life in these trenches of death, Fraidy showed up again. It is impossible to describe this meeting in human terms. Just as it is impossible to describe in any terms a meeting of two friends and acquaintances at the front in the killing fields. A connection formed in a joyful life that binds two souls together is not like the connection that death conjoins. It is a sublime and sad construction that in vain you try fathom; its origin is there, beyond life and death,

one that makes a single universal brigade out of tens of thousands of fragments of our worldly essence. There is no love like the love betrothed under the canopy of the angel of naught. This love expresses itself only in the terrible symphony composed of the sound of the guns and the dying groans of thousands of creatures killed without hate who die for no reason and with no grief for the reason.

In the middle of this horrible symphony, Fraidy's violin was always a blessed intermezzo, occasionally restoring us to life with the elixir of sublime song, joyful, softening, fragrant and healing. Whenever the battles abated for a day or two, when we, as well as the miserable creatures on the other side of the line of life that are called the enemy, collapsed for a few moments -- Fraidy would come and give us the narcotic that no wine and no woman in the world could give us.

Therefore, and it goes without saying, Fraidy was excused from all the commandments of war and from every rude gesture. Fraidy walked among us as a symbol of the life we had abruptly lost, a symbol of the city which had sent us who erred in love for her, from its warm bosom, from the rhythmic applause of its beauty that grew old in the year of heartbreak, to the din of war, to the bosom of death, to protect it, to stand guard over its life and to die on its altar, both impure and holy. Fraidy's violin sprinkled into our souls the lost scent of this city, and, unusually, the battalion commander found it pleasing. He watched over him as if he were the apple of his eye. He lived with him behind the lines, ate and drank with him, and walked with him day and night. Gradually, Fraidy's name became special even to the ordinary soliders; in the city, it was a name that art-lovers had to search for and understand, and here the simplest farmer surreptitiously shed tears for the most abstract aria. Fraidy had come to the pit, to the front row, and gave us the fullness of his soul, overflowing with infantile life, hope of spring and the riddles of youth.

The soul was -- Jewish. Really? How could it be recognized as Jewish? By what signs was its Jewishness apparent? It is impossible to clearly know. Go figure it out. Dig in and analyze it rationally: Why did his Ambrozio's sonata cry like a Jewish lamentation? But we felt, we all did, from the naive farmer soldier who had passed by a Jewish synagogue only once in his lifetime, to the battalion commander who conducted a symphonic choir at his home, all of us felt the same Jewish soul in the caressing sadness, the angry protest, the hope, the affront and the touching forgiveness -- in everything.

Fraidy was a concept for us. And this concept was synonymous with another that all of us felt in the depths of our souls, and only the devil who fought, struggled, struck, murdered the soldier in battle, always overshadowed it and did not allow that hidden but demanding concept to burst out.

That concept was -- peace.

I don't know how it came about, but when Fraidy played for us, none of us were homesick, none yearned for peace, but truly and simply we felt that peace, in which we had been born and for which we lived, popped up and flourished in our blood, and we no longer hoped for it, because it already existed, lived and came to us. Least of all did we think it a marvel the fact, which caused my friend Dr. Meising -- a professor of physics at home -- to go out of his mind for joy, that: whenever Fraidy came and played for a few moments, all the shooting was immediately silent, whether from our lines or from the enemy's, even the shooting that both sides were wont to do during rest periods; and everywhere along the sector of the line where the music reached, suddenly arose a silence, soft, calm and full of riddles -- as if by a mutual command from both sides, not to disturb the hearts that seemingly feel no enmity to each other. On the contrary.

At first this was amazing. Then came interpretations of the wonder. Prof. Dr. Miesing strived to

explain it in terms of the well-known method of sound waves. According to this method, the primal cause and reason of every movement in life, every change in creation, even every move of the heavenly bodies is: the waves of the sublime symphony: every form in the world is the embodiment of rhythm, from snowflakes that differ in their precise structure, to the innumerable and unfathomable stars and suns. Dr. Meising could not compose himself until he had proved to us using the well-known experiment with grains of sand filtered onto a plate of glass, when the bow of the violin is drawn across the edge of the plate, the grains of sand slowly coalesce into the form of small stars, amazingly precise and similar to snowflakes; these are the visible forms of different rhythms. Just as another explanation couldn't be found for the bridge over the narrows in Petersburg. A battalion of Emperor Paul's once passed over that bridge (the same Emperor who was crazy and so fastidious in demanding precision drill that it caused one to laugh). The battalion passed over in "parade march" when suddenly the bridge split into two. All the experts decided, and the decision remains in force today, that this bridge that weighed a hundred and eighty thousand times the weight of the battalion was only destroyed by the rhythm that happened to pass through the fault line of the atoms of the bridge. How else can you explain -- asked Dr. Meising in righteous indignation -- the fall of the walls of Jericho from the sound of the shofars of Joshua's seven priests?... Compared to this, how hard can it be to silence a few tired soldiers! -- And if all this is like rain on stone to you -- the professor of physics asked the high-ranking officers -- why are you so cautious to lead your battalions without rhythm, "break step," when you cross bridges? -- His great joy to finally argue and prove these sacred truths to which he had devoted all his life and on which he was dependent -- caused Dr. Meising to go insane.

Others among us ridiculed him. For example, one of them explained simply that on both sides of the front line there were many Jews whose intelligence influences their friends, so when they hear a "Jewish tune," they immediately silence the shooters. And there were other similar explanations. Whatever, one thing was clear to us, that Fraidy's music spread over us a blue veil of dreams, of repose and love so staunch that the tough discipline that brought victory to our living souls was endangered. Hearts softened, muscles trembled and became delicate, and lips, used to cursing, swearing and biting, began to become homesick for an embrace and a kiss...

Peace, peace, peace! -- This was the only pleasant, universal song that emerged from the fingers of young Fraidy -- world peace...

"If peace will come soon," smiled our battalion commander when he was stunned by Fraidy's music, "I am sure that it will come from Fraidy's violin against its will -- against the will of the stupid diplomats..."

However, within this peace another war could be sensed. A war of two concealed, distant, ancient wars. Of course, only a few of us discerned this intense, hidden war. Among the few who could was: Fraidy.

This war was coming to its close.

To me, who had long observed this war, Fraidy's violin had become a terror, a monster, a secret anxiety. An unconventional fear assaulted me when I listened to him. I was always expecting something to happen... and during these last days I ran away and hid from him and his violin, but fate caught up with us.

It happened towards evening. The setting sun cast over us her spring radiance that was liable to drive the soldiers of the fields of death and torment crazy. For six days we stood in the trenches without preparing for battle. In such an interim period, all we heard was the routine shooting above us that

occurs only to fulfill a minimal obligation, for total stillness was everywhere forbidden. Still, because of this shooting, one could not stick one's head above the trenches. The front lines were so close to each other that not only was exposing one's head dangerous, it was even dangerous to expose a hand. Exposing one's head led to certain death, but so did exposing a hand from -- a court martial. Anyone exposing a hand was deemed to endanger himself by "self-inflicting a wound in order to evade the war" -- and was therefore guilty of a capital crime.

Once Fraidy came to me and jested that he wished to be slightly wounded. First, in order to go home for a few weeks; and second, it would be an act of bravery and bring glory: to be a wounded officer... I cautioned him: the act would be mortally dangerous; death by court-martial. Fraidy laughed and said bashfully: "By God, my evil inclination tempts me to do it. I am not an object, I have a special status here. I am the protégé of the battalion commander. But whenever I enter the trenches, it is as if an evil devil grabs my hand and thrusts it upwards."

My blood froze. I was silent. I was suddenly moved by a spirit: I stood up and rushed to the telephone; I wished to disclose this to the battalion commander. I knew that he loved him. He would certainly absolve him in advance for his ugly foolishness and restrain him. The telephone was busy. Later I had second thoughts: this was tattling, suspecting a blameless one. After all, he hadn't done anything yet and he certainly wouldn't do so in the future.

It happened towards evening. Isolated shots came more and more frequently with twice the energy. Fraidy came, took the violin and began to play in the pleasant, saddening, darkening twilight. I sat on the sofa in front of my dugout, a few paces away from him, and covered my ears so as not to hear him. But I was not successful. He who has not heard the sound of the violin of an artist that comes from the trench of death towards evening, he who has never listened to music that escapes from within the soul of the soldier, who lives and suffers under the wings of the same wondrous angel called death -- will never understand or imagine the seven voices that copulate with seven colors into a mysterious harmony full of wonders, flowing bountifully forever. Fraidy played from within thousands of thousands of hearts at once. At first I didn't clearly recognize which composition he played... it didn't seem to matter... Then I recognized it, it was "the song without words." The violin began to swallow up the shots that flew over our head sawing through the air and the soul, received them and turned them into a pleasant, strange, accursed, and wonderful harmony. It seemed to swallow them up completely: the voices of death slowly became quiet and on the wings of a soft warm and quiet evening came and spread the blue-red healing shawl -- peace...

Suddenly -- a sound grated on the ear, like the sound of a bird whose neck was being wrung: a string had snapped.

The dream was ripped open in the middle. Silence. Silence with no breathing, with no movement. And then, an instant later -- a hushed scream that broke one's heart and tore at one's nerves: it was Fraidy's voice. And a moment later the rumor spread: Fraidy is wounded!

"Wounded where?"

"In his hand."

I rushed to Fraidy, raised him off the ground and my heart stopped: the bullet had pierced the junction of the tendons of his left hand between the palm and the elbow.

The battalion commander paced back and forth as if he were crazy. He understood the disgrace immediately -- his Fraidy had a self-inflicted wound -- what a shameful disgrace!... The soldiers looked at one another: this is terrible. What is going to happen? -- death by court-martial?

Fraidy was not summoned to a court-martial. The battalion commander did his best to cover up the incident and was able to save Fraidy.

A rumor spread throughout the trenches the next day. A rumor more terrifying than the first one: the doctor found that the bullet that had pierced Fraidy's hand was a bit rusty, so it would be impossible to heal the wound by conventional methods. The hand was poisoned. There was only one possibility: to amputate the hand in order to save the life of the wounded man. This action could not be delayed.

This rumor spread like a burning rage, choking the chest: Fraidy's hand would have to be cut off... Like a rag... Fraidy's hand... How could that be?...

The fate of the world was gracious to us in this tumult: that same day the enemy attacked us and we forgot the whole terrible thing.

### 3

I heard nothing about Fraidy until I myself was wounded. When they brought me to the regimental aid station I was in a mild state of shock. My wound was serious and dangerous. Nevertheless I had not forgotten Fraidy. I asked the doctor if he perhaps knew where he was?

"Fraidy -- he's in an insane asylum," the doctor answered, "and I believe that he died the day before yesterday."

What happened to me a moment later -- I don't remember, because my injury began to flow through me from my body to my brain...

A few days later the nurse who cared for Fraidy told me the story:

"The whole thing was very strange," she said, "so strange that it was written about in the newspapers. What happened was this: when Fraidy's hand was cut off, the patient asked the professor that they give him his severed hand. The doctor who was acquainted with him fulfilled his request, of course, as an exception -- such a hand!... We all cried. The professor embalmed the hand as the custom was in such cases so that it would last a long time. Then they placed it in a beautiful glass box, silver-plated, and gave it to him, placing it on the small table next to his bed. The wonder was: the boy lay quietly without complaining, without despair, as if he accepted with love the torment and the ruin of his life. Later a rumor spread that the music conservatory wanted to take the hand for its museum, but Fraidy refused to give it to them. 'I won't give it to any conservatory in the world!' he would say. Of course, no one urged him to do so. Thus the poor boy lay silently without anger and accepted the bandaging calmly. But once he complained to me and to the doctor that he had a headache. Suddenly he asked that the box be taken from his table. He didn't want it -- he said with a sigh of hidden pain; but when we went to fulfill his wish -- he had changed his mind. No. He is not going to give his hand to others! Once he awoke at night and began to shout. I immediately hurried to him and found him in a wild and confused state. Upon my asking, he answered that he was afraid to reveal his secret to me.

"What secret?" I asked laughing in wonder. He began to cry.

"Sister,' he said through his tears, 'dear beautiful sister, this hand wants to strangle me -- to strangle...'

"What do you mean: to strangle'

"Yes, sweet sister, it ... is strangling me ... here on my neck ... strangling ... it still lives...'

"You are a fool, dear Fraidy, a fool, calm down. This dear and saintly hand is not strangling. Calm down, you're a bit tired.'

"No. Dear sister, it wants to strangle me, to kill me ... with its five fingers ... Every time that I fall

asleep, it moves, leaves the box, crawls to me, on top of me, climbing like a spider on a lid... Then it grabs my throat and strangles me -- strangles me forcefully, dear sister...'

"Dear Fraidy, you are tired, you are too sad... Calm down, dear chick, it's a stupid dream, nothing more.'

"He didn't hear me.

"Sister of mercy, please, don't go away, don't leave me... Please don't go... Sit here...'

"Yes, yes, dear Fraidy, I'll sit here with you, always... But, if that is to be, it would be best we gave it to the conservatory. Yes, my dear, gave it ...'

"The boy raised himself up on his bed, as if he wished to save the box so that they would not steal it from him, protecting it with his one hand.

"No, God forbid!" he said in a hoarse, almost threatening, voice. 'God forbid! It's my hand!... Don't anyone dare touch it... But -- strangling me...' he added with a deep bitter sadness, as his grip weakened and his hand fell away from the box. Again he began to beg me: 'Sister of mercy, don't leave me, don't go away...'

"He fell flat and began to cry strangely in a way I had never heard before in all my days here at the hospital. Then he closed his tear-filled eyes and began a whispered mumble, as if to himself:

"I know... I know... It is going to strangle me... It won't keep still until it has strangled me... It will take its revenge on me, this Jewish hand... Dear sister -- please talk to it, pacify it, please... I'm not guilty of this... I swear, I'm not guilty!...'

"I didn't understand what he was saying. I kissed him and he fell asleep. He was tired like after a fierce battle.

"Towards morning Fraidy's shouts again wakened me. Now he was shouting with all his weakened strength:

"Help! Save me! Take pity on me! Save me!' He shouted as if he were crazy, his eyes wide open, staring at the box in front of him. 'The cursed hand is strangling me... Now it fled to its place!... Look, here, on my neck, look here... Here, five fingers... Look at it, how its fingers are bent, crooked... the spider!...'

"We looked at the hand in the box and our hearts stopped: the fingers were bent, crooked. The box was halfway open. Perhaps he himself had opened it, but the doctors were amazed: this is unprecedented, that an embalmed dried up limb should change its outer shape. Only the old professor nodded and said to himself, partially sharing a secret:

"Yes, this is unprecedented, in anatomy. Yes, yes, anatomy, anatomy.' he said with mocking desperation. 'Anatomy... is it possible that he has here some friend or relation?' asked the old man.

"A couple of hours later his wretched mother visited him. I did not speak with her, you couldn't speak with her, she was so miserable. The professor talked with her, just the two of them, secretly... Then I saw the professor nod, as if he finally understood it all, and he said: 'anatomy...'

"That same day they transferred the boy to an asylum, but they were forced to take the severed hand with him. Without it, it would have been impossible to bind him or calm his agitated spirit... It was terrible, although a tender boy yet he had the strength of the giant.

"A few days later we heard the rumor that Fraidy died. The story is that he repeatedly said that the

hand was strangling him. The strange thing is: when he was found dead, they found the box broken and the hand standing up. Actually standing on its forefingers on his chest. An examination later found that he had been strangled: on his neck were the blue marks of five fingers."

# Jacob's Bow

## Shimon and Life

My friend the professor of pathology looked at his self-reflection with closed eyes, his whole body shuddered and he said with grave decisiveness:

"No, my friend, no one has been able to explain to me whether suicide is cowardice, as most people think, or courage: 'the most heroic courage in our lives that are filled with the fear of death and terrified of any sadness', as you claim. No. Courage and cowardice are concepts that are totally unclear, especially when they appear together, simultaneously, in one place and time and in a single soul."

"How can it be in a single soul? After all they are such extreme opposites," I asked.

"Opposites? What of it?" was the professor's surprised reply. "Do you really think that the law 'two opposites cannot exist together' applies to the human soul? I doubt it. There are two extreme opposites in our rational thought: the 'finite' and the 'infinite' that both exist. In fact: they live together in our miserable brain. Can you, my friend, conceive of something infinite? No. That is impossible. Try to conceive it -- and an absolute bound will flash before you. There is no absolute infinite. Because it must keep going. -- As for suicide, that act of self destruction, I can bring you viable evidence, my friend, evidence that proves that these two opposites, courage and cowardice, are intertwined, I would even say that they form a chemical bond. You've heard of the suicide of Shimon Goldony, haven't you?"

"Yes, but Shimon Goldony's act really proves that I am correct, because this Shimon, as you well know, was one of the most amazing heroes of the war, and his courage prevailed even at his final hour."

"Pardon me," said the professor, "you knew him at the front, while I knew him a few years before the war. I'll let you in on the secret of that wretch: in all my experience dealing with the workings of the soul, I never knew a coward as pitiful as Shimon Goldony. But first of all, it is worth paying attention to other aspects of this young man's outlook. I got to know him just a few days after he had left his previous life for the bustle of the city. He had left the Talmudic seminary, the 'Yeshiva' in Mattersdorf in favor of the enlightenment. Apparently, he did not find what he was looking for in this new life and being naturally tempestuous and excitable came to the recognition that the ability to commit suicide is wonderful. When I asked him to explain this to me, he said:

"Among all the good that fate allows us in our lives, the only truly good thing is the free will that allows us to choose between life and death. This is an unmeasurable happiness. For if we did not have this choice -- who knows what we would do with this suffocating thing called life. Imagine life without the ability to be rid of it whenever you want! -- How much happiness there is in our ability to spit at life whenever we want."

"At the time his words made an impression upon me," added the professor, "but still I could not enable him to achieve this happiness when he asked me not to hinder him in committing this deed -- so I began to monitor him extremely closely. For this, I also enlisted my colleague, Dr. Werner, who in time became one of Shimon Goldony's most loyal friends. In truth -- we were a bit ashamed of

ourselves. After quite a lot of reflection, we were ashamed of ourselves, for we clearly saw that the great fondness we had for him and our monitoring him was nothing more than a despicable caricature of love for ourselves. When he asked his small favor of us, to rid him of his suffocating world -- we can't even feel that this is our fundamental duty: not to suffocate him even more and not to lie secretly in ambush.

"On the other hand, neither I nor my colleague believed that he would carry out his plan. Our Shimon had a dread of even the simplest weapons that I had never seen before. This was the point: he wasn't afraid of death but weapons. We laughed at it. When we asked him, he replied:

"'You must understand that a weapon has a reality of its own,' Shimon said thoughtfully. 'This metal dagger was made by a man's spirit -- and because he made it, because it was created and delivered for a purpose -- it lives its own life and does not submit at all to the will of its creator. Yes, yes, my friend,' added Shimon, 'not only does man, created by God's spirit, by the highest spirit, have a choice, that well-known "free will" -- so does any creation of a spirit in the world; at least as much as we ourselves have. Take a simple humble peasant, a decent man who loves peace and quiet, give him a weapon and note what he will do once he gets used to it. This is a well-known fact. Of course you will say: the peasant "is under the influence of the weapon," and so on. Wrong. Moreover: it gave its permission to be taken and that is the secret of all the wars in the world.'"

Shimon said again: "There is nothing more wonderful than death itself -- for it is our own handiwork. For nothing is more terrible than to die by someone else's hand. If one has to die, let it not be from coercion nor from the compulsion of some contemptible object, but because it is desired.

For this reason weapons caused him to quake from fear. "Better a thousand other deaths than death from a despicable handgun, anything but that. -- In truth, he once added, "if I can't find another way, I will be compelled to use one, this contemptible object. But only in dire circumstances."

With every fiber of his being he waited for those dire circumstances.

"Suddenly the war came ... and Shimon became an entirely different man; a man familiar to you and me, a man of war, who astounded us all."

"Yes, the lad became a real hero," I said. "If there is such a thing as heroes in the world, he was one."

"Again you are mistaken," said the professor, "if you think that at the front he was not scared of weapons. His comrades would joke about it. It was funny in an insulting way that he feared his own rifle. Not death, again: he did not fear death, he feared his rifle. That was the secret of his courage: with open eyes he looked into the thousands of rifles and cannons. That is why he did what he did. Later, when he was wounded but remained alive -- you know that he cried like a child because he stayed alive. Crying wretchedly.

He did not return to the front when he recovered. They left him in the city -- and Shimon became a man. I noticed the change in his life. In truth, by accident I found out that he had tried several times to end his life -- unsuccessfully. Once by drowning, once by hanging, once by poison. Apparently, he despaired of fighting with the lord of death and gave up. I was happy to see him joyful and working steadily, studying and reading and writing juvenile letters to his good mother. He began again to go to libraries and theaters, not only that but an amazing thing happened: Shimon carried a handgun and was not anxious about playing with it like a child. That was a good sign. Shimon became a man: Shimon is not afraid of a handgun, Shimon has negotiated a compromise with life. Good. Nevertheless, we of course continued to monitor him.

Once we visited his room and found a short note:

"You are despicable, my friends," he wrote in his last words. "You are despicable. I never expected this stupidity, this lack of understanding. I felt that you set an ambush for me. That is: you too. So: even your 'good' hearts are a bit treacherous. You can't give up, no, not at all, not on your friend, the one called Shimon. You find him likable, and his sufferings too -- you find likable. Shame on you, my friends. Shame. Hungry worms that live off a man's sorrow, a supposed friend. Somewhat too late have I found out about it, truth be told, but the choice still remains in force. What is late didn't happen. Farewell, find yourselves some other spiritual livelihood."

Signed "Shimon".

PS: "Thank you for correcting my mistake."

We searched the whole room and didn't find his handgun. We rushed after him. To where? God knows. After a whole hour of panic -- we suddenly saw him from a distance walking on the railroad tracks; we recognized him from far away. He was walking in rather rapid steps. Towards the railroad bridge over the Danube.

We understood right away. He had two options, the river and the railroad. Truth be told: he didn't fear the the river all that much. They are not "man-made." But the railroad, that clumsy spirit is "the creation of the spirit of man." It can bring death to a man, it's creator, against his will.

Meanwhile -- the express train appeared. It approached at a terrifying speed. Shimon stood in the middle of the bridge. A very long bridge. Even if he tried to escape -- and I knew for sure that he would try to -- the train would crush him. We began to shout running towards him to the bridge all the while waving our handkerchiefs. Shimon stood and looked at the eyes of iron animal. He moved to and fro, raised his hands to the engine roaring towards him and then began to flee, flee, flee from it, towards us, towards the field, towards the end of the bridge, towards his friends. The train came after him, noisy, roaring, flying. Our hearts stopped beating. Suddenly, when the train was almost upon him -- a brilliant idea occurred to him: Shimon grasped the railing of the bridge and in one bound threw himself bodily to the other side, his hands holding onto the bridge -- dangling over the river...

He hung there -- and the train passed.

It passed us too -- we stood like pillars of marble and sweat dripped from our eyes.

"Wonderful," stammered my friend, "wonderful. This invention!"

"Wonderful," I stammered too. "What an idea. Really."

We looked at Shimon speechless, as he climbed again onto the bridge, back over the railing until he stood again on the railroad tracks; standing and wiping his brow.

He is not even looking at us.

"Shimon!" I shouted to him. "Shimon!" stretching out my hand. "Here! Come here!"

He paid us no attention, wiped his brow and his hair once more, and stood again, as after a cursed deed, after a great and terrible act.

We suddenly saw -- that he wanted to throw his handgun into the river.

"Of course," I said to myself, "it's obvious."

"To hell with it!" I shouted to him. "Into the river! -- To hell with it!"

Shimon didn't pay attention to us, past the handgun again from his left hand to his right, looked into its barrel -- it was if he spit into it contemptuously... and with an ear-splitting sound blew his brains out.

When he fell -- he fell through a crevice in the bridge into the river.

## On a Blessed Autumn's Dawn

For my elder brother, the senior rabbi, Rabbi Zanvil Yarden  
With admiration and confidence

With tired eyes, our aching bones shivering, we stood -- the entire guard detail who had observed the enemy's lines all night with protruding eyes -- we stood in the trenches, our hearts melting with yearning for the stifled song, we immersed ourselves in the autumn's dawn as its grayness yielded more and more to the golden rays, spreading over the fields, the hills and the rotting grain untouched by a farmer's hand these past two years...

A blessed autumn's dawn...

The reddish yellow grass enfolding the unharvested trampled grain -- cast its light from tens of thousands of beads of winter dew that bind one stalk to another like strands of precious pearls. The farmers call these strands threads of "oxen spit." These are the white threads of autumn that cover this silent open space with an infinite net as far as the horizon. On these strands the beads of dew are undisturbed and undamaged.

Undisturbed. Because no living being could step on them and remain alive. The wide open mouths of thousands of rifle barrels face them.

Into this net, colored gold by the rays of the rising sun, now radiate all our miserable desires.

"Fortunate is the one who will be the first to dampen his feet in the dew without danger, with a song on his lips -- a song of peace"...

Thus we stood astonished -- with protruding eyes.

The battalion commander awakened us from our dream:

"Choose a reliable chap for guard duty today," he said to me, "one who is not overly afraid of death. I have just found out that the enemy is planning to surprise us today with a 'stunt'."

"A stunt" is not something pleasant. A stunt is a downpour of aimless bullets. Shooting for its own sake, to strike fear, just to disturb; and as a sign of life, so we shall neither slumber nor sleep.

"What is so special about today?" I asked.

"That's a stupid question. But there really is a reason for it; today is some Slavic holiday, God knows which one."

He had hardly finished speaking -- when Uncle Österreicher who had just awakened from his nap and stood to one side -- came up to us and reported:

"Enlightened Sir, please assign the duty to me today!"

Uncle Österreicher is hardly a "reliable chap." No. Uncle Österreicher is a forty-something-year-old uncle who already has a few grandchildren at home.

"What the devil has got into you, Uncle Österreicher?"

"Nothing, Enlightened Sir. It's just that I want to. Please."

"That's not a reason. Why do you want today of all days? Don't you know that this is the day when

they will serve up a 'stunt'?"

"I know that, Sir, I heard it, but it doesn't bother me that 'they want'," Uncle Österreicher emphasized sarcastically, "it little matters what 'they want' unless God wills it."

He made a disparaging gesture.

We were quite used to Uncle Österreicher's disparagement of the enemy and of his trust in God. But my curiosity got the better of me.

"What of it? Why do you want the duty?"

"Why do I want it, Enlightened Sir -- certainly not to die. It is forbidden for a man like me to die a strange death before his time, Sir. My young grandchildren are waiting for me..."

"You won't go, Uncle Österreicher. Your young grandchildren are waiting for you, you are right -- today, today ... today's 'stunt' has no consideration for grandchildren. Tell me why you insist on going there -- and I'll consent."

Uncle Österreicher creased his elderly brow and said decisively:

"I want, Enlightened Sir, to sanctify the name of God!..."

"Do you mean: to die?"

"No, Sir. A good Jew does not sanctify the name of God by his death if he can do so by his life!"

I didn't consent to his going and wanted to call someone else whose turn it was to stand guard. But the battalion commander who had listened the entire time and with a smile on his face kept silent said to me:

"Leave him. Let him go. For once in my life, I would like to see how a good Jew sanctifies the name of God with his life. At the time when a thousand deaths await him..."

He left the trench and crawled on all fours on the wet grass towards the barbed-wire fence.

Suddenly I saw that there was a knapsack under his arm.

At first I thought: a small sandbag like we used to use protection against bullets, but -- the pouch bore no resemblance to a sandbag. I called after him:

"What is that can of worms under your arm?"

"A protective bag," he turned around and answered in a clear whisper.

"That's a lie, that is not a protective bag."

Please believe me, Enlightened Sir. If I tell you that it is a protective bag, please believe me," Uncle Österreicher turned his face with its scraggly beard to me, "there is no protective bag like it in the entire battalion!"

What could I do? -- I believed him. Uncle Österreicher doesn't lie. Sometimes he talks in silly riddles, but he never lies.

Uncle Österreicher crawled further until he reached the barbed-wire fence.

There -- he sat upon the wet grass, lay down his rifle, supporting its barrel on a strand of the fence to keep it away from the moisture -- and sat a few moments facing the enemy's front line.

We didn't even manage to turn back to our shelter -- when the shooting started.

At first sporadic, one by one, and then more frequently, in large numbers, from thousands of rifles, whistling, stunning, exploding and shrieking over our heads...

We ducked into a shelter -- but the shots escalated into a whistling hail from tens of thousands of mouths of satanic animals.

"Poor uncle!" I said to our commander. He won't sanctify the name of God with his life, but with his death!"

The commander raised his eyes to meet and said:

"I think you are wrong. You have no idea how much I believe in these Jews. Laugh if you want, but if it were up to me -- I would recruit all the Jews of this type for my battalion. There is something about these 'uncles' that protects you more than a thousand cannons. The devil take ... only God knows why that is, but I can't escape from this superstition that ever since I took this Jew, the 'white uncle' -- you know him, the old man Javets -- for my batman, I have nothing to fear anymore... You laugh? -- Well, so be it. Look... look, you'll see that he'll come out of it... that the enemy will do only his duty without a 'closing prayer'..."

The closing prayer was a shot from their largest cannon that terminated the "stunt." This shot is always aimed at the person on guard. Without this shot there is no stunt.

The commander took a sip of wine, grabbed his binoculars and carefully went to the "loophole" in the parapet to look at Uncle Österreicher...

Strange. The commander is not usually a hero and here he is endangering his life when there is no need for it... Truly he does believe in the uncle...

A few moments later -- he called to me:

"Quickly, quickly! -- Come here!"

The bullets whistled unabated -- but I went out anyway. It was the commander's order.

I went out and stood leaning next to the commander -- and saw something strange: Uncle Österreicher raised himself up onto his knees -- and signaled to the enemy... calling upon them to come...

The bullets rattled over his head -- but he continued: calling to the enemy...

"Is it possible that he wants to desert? -- Ah, that would be ugly..."

"Stupid!" the commander reproached me. "Uncle Österreicher desert? Nonsense. Wait!"

Uncle Österreicher never ceases signaling to the enemy with both hands, calling to them.

The enemy -- answers with thousands of bullets.

"The enemy is not acquainted with Uncle Österreicher," I ridiculed, "they certainly don't believe in him."

"Wait!" the commander reproached me.

Uncle Österreicher -- when he saw that all his gestures were apparently in vain, shrugged and sat for a moment on his heels. Then, as if he had decided on something -- he took his pouch, opened it and removed something -- we couldn't see clearly what it was -- and placed it on his head under his cap.

The commander turned to me:

"Well, are you a good Jew? -- Tell me, what is he doing? -- Do you know what he is doing? -- He is

doing what my old batman always does: his is laying on Filim."

"What?"

"Filim! You're a Jew and you don't know that they are?"

Oh, yes, Tefillin! -- Really."

"Shh -- wait!"

Uncle Österreicher adjust the Tefillin on his head. Then he took something else from his pouch... and put it on. A white Talith.

The commander panicked:

"Is he crazy? -- He is setting up a clear 'target' for the enemy!"

"What of it?" I ridiculed. "After all, Enlightened Sir, you believe in him."

"You're right. We'll see."

Meanwhile we didn't even pay attention that the shooting had suddenly stopped and that we were standing erect, watching without fear.

"Well?" said the commander triumphantly. "Who was right?"

"It was a fluke."

"What fluke?" And where is the 'closing prayer'? -- What fluke? -- For you people, everything is a fluke."

"Of course it was a fluke; more precisely: for a moment they responded to his signals for some reason."

"So be it. Whatever: there is no 'stunt', no 'closing prayer' and no death... we'll see what happens..." and we continued to watch.

Uncle Österreicher stood up -- enveloped with the Talith and Tefillin and signaled...

Through the binoculars we saw... a man's head rose over the enemy's front, a hand signaled to Uncle Österreicher, and he answered. Suddenly, another head and then -- another. And then -- the form of a whole man left the trench and crawled towards Uncle Österreicher. And then -- another human form and another, crawling towards him.

Someone behind us said:

"I'll 'pursue' them a bit!" and he aimed his rifle at the crawling figures.

"Damn you!" reproached the commander. "You can 'pursue' your grandmother, fool!..."

The crawling figures approached Uncle Österreicher one by one...

"That's treason!" I said angrily. "It's a capital offense!"

"Let's wait and see," replied the commander. "So far nothing's happened. We'll see."

A few moments later a small band of men were standing, yes: standing on the other side of the barbed-wire fence -- and swaying... praying...

The prayer intensifies. The moving, the loudness, the singing...

"What daring!" said the commander with an amazed smile. "Incredible chutzpah!..."

He looked at the band of men, praying in unison.

The band prays undisturbed. The blinding white sun rose behind them and in the abundance of its scorching light blazed ten forms in a magical fervor with expressive gestures, although clearly in danger of death -- but with gay self-confidence... and their song shook the quiet air.

They became quiet all of a sudden -- and from the quiet came the voice of one of them reciting so clearly that we could hear:

Exalted and hallowed be God's great name...

It was Uncle Österreicher's voice.

Immediately after the end of the prayer -- Uncle Österreicher thrust his hand into his pouch, took out a small dish and then a small cup, filled it and served it in turn to each one of them, filled and served...

To life! -- To life!"

My commander almost jumped out of his uniform:

"That scoundrel!" he said half smiling and half angry. "What Jewish chutzpah -- I'll hang him on the straps of his Fi... Fil... Tefillin!"

"Perhaps," I said, "perhaps not, Sir, there will be another 'fluke' and he won't die..." I said with a hint of scorn.

The band acted -- as if nothing had happened: they drank and turned to leave. Each one stretched out his hand to Uncle Österreicher. Uncle Österreicher -- to our great surprise -- waved them off: No! Sorry, but no!

He didn't shake hands with them. We didn't hear what he said to them... but he didn't offer his hand to them.

We looked at each other.

The band got down on their knees and crawled back... into the trench.

Uncle Österreicher removed his Talith and stuffed it back into his pouch. Then he sat on the ground.

He got his things together and then took up his rifle, brought it up and aimed... and let off a shot towards the enemy. Then another and another, three. Then he lay down to continue guarding.

When he returned from his shift he was brought up on a 'disciplinary charge' before the commander: he gnashed his teeth in a stifled laugh:

"Do you know what the charge it?"

"Yes I do, Enlightened Sir," answered Uncle Österreicher.

"Well? What is it?"

"It was impossible, Enlightened Sir, there was no other way."

"No other way? No other way to do what?"

"Today is the anniversary of my wife's death, may she rest in peace, and there is no one but me to recite the Kaddish for her... It is sanctifying the name of God, Enlightened Sir, the Kaddish, it is important, sanctifying the name of God, Sir..."

"I am going to hang you!"

"That would sanctify the name of God even more, Enlightened Sir. That would truly be sanctifying the name of God: to do so when threatened with death. But out there, there was no danger. No danger from the enemy, Sir, a man enveloped in Talith and Tefillin cannot be controlled by death..."

"We'll see! But before I continue: tell me why you wouldn't shake hands with them?" Uncle Österreicher jerked as if bitten by a snake:

"I? I, Enlightened Sir, would I shake hands with the enemy?"

"The commander turned away so as not to burst out laughing; he went into his room and then returned with the remnants of a smile on his distorted face and shouted out loud:

"Get out, damn you, you mangy donkey, you old fool!"

Uncle Österreicher jumped as if stung.

Outside he turned to me and said:

"I told the Enlightened Sir: it was a protective pouch. Because of it I have been reprieved from a death sentence..."

"What pouch?" Where is the pouch?"

Uncle Österreicher smiled confidently... raised his cap and showed me the Tefillin on his head:

"What do you think this is, Enlightened Sir?..."

# The Living Lantern

A

This time I will simplify my story and tell things as they were.

Not like the way the newspapers told them. No. The newspapers -- lied, deceived, distorted and embellished.

It took place at the front. The second year of the war. In the winter.

At that time the animal called man began to carry out its tasks: to murder, to abuse and torment flesh and blood, not out of coercion, not because of the dictates of war, but for its own sake: for the murdering, for the "intoxication of the knife."

"For the pleasure derived from tormenting our fellows."

I do not mention this from philosophy nor from literature, but as an explanation; in order to explain something: why did First Lieutenant Erich Stubnia always prowl among us excited and trembling, searching for some transgression, some miserable transgression for which he could mete out an unusual punishment?

For several months the front had been quiet. Two meters of snow covered the landscape and we couldn't move.

During this boring period -- First Lieutenant Erich Stubnia craved some interest...

There is nothing more interesting -- than another's misery, his cringing in pain.

They say: this is a Slavic thing. Not necessarily. It is also a Hungarian thing. I'm afraid that it is a human thing.

Whatever -- the latest order from Lieutenant-General Von Groilichen -- facilitated First Lieutenant's desire. The order concerning those who deserted from the front. The order said:

"Whoever apprehends a deserter running away, must strike him however he pleases and with whatever object he wishes without waiting for a trial, except for the death sentence, which demands a court-martial".

This order was a godsend for First Lieutenant Erich Stubnia.

"However he pleases..."

The clever devil created the order in many forms:

"Whoever apprehends a deserter..."

What could be easier than that? -- Please consider: every day such a deserter could be apprehended -- should we desire it.

Mr. First Lieutenant desired it and found one.

He found -- corporal Haim Yosef David.

Haim Yosef David -- that's quite a nice name. It offers scope for abuse.

All the more so for a strange creature like Haim Yosef David, an ascetic Talmudic student, who grimaced, lay Tefillin for prayer every day, perused Hebrew books when at rest. He always presented

a gay face and adhered to happiness like the first Hasidim...

This gay face consumed the life of Erich Stubnia, the first lieutenant. Consumed him like vinegar consumes the eyes. Consumed him to the point where he went up to him and said:

"Corporal Haim Yosef David, why are you always so happy? Do you really think that war is entertainment for us? Why? Why are you so happy with such a foolish face?"

Haim Yosef David's answer was simple:

"Why should I not be happy, Enlightened Sir, for this war came only to purify mankind."

"How is it going to purify?" he asked with a truly foolish face.

"Afflictions purify a man, Enlightened Sir, afflictions purify, purify..."

First Lieutenant Stubnia didn't understand even after this explanation. But something came to him at the moment; he thought and mumbled his thought in a low voice:

"Soon I'll purify you."

His Turanian blood boiled with a pleasant trembling; his hands shuddered with supreme bliss...

In his mind's eye, he already saw -- no, not in his mind's eye, he saw with his body's eyes as did we, all of us, in our simple body's eyes -- and we fainted a bit. We fainted -- but no more than that. We fainted -- but we didn't bite ourselves, we didn't kill each other and we didn't go insane.

No.

We fainted...

It was like this:

## B

The next day -- was Hanukkah.

Haim Yosef David did not forget to light the candles, according to custom. He lit the candles, recited the blessing and sang fervently, pleasantly, in a holy voice, with a genuine uplifting of the soul.

We sat around him in the trench and looked at him. We listened to his songs -- and he sang, sang, wholeheartedly, with humility, with great love, mercifully -- eternally.

Suddenly First Lieutenant Stubnia came in.

We all stood up out of respect -- but Haim Yosef David did not see him. He didn't notice him and continued to sing.

Then we saw how the first lieutenant's coarse eyes reddened, how his face became bloodshot and his hands shook.

He spat out a few words -- but we didn't hear him.

He went out -- having made a decision. That we noticed -- he went out having made a decision.

We almost knew already, that Haim Yosef David's fate was sealed.

The next day, towards evening, Haim Yosef David was arrested.

That same evening Haim Yosef David was brought in in handcuffs.

The first lieutenant himself brought him in.

Then -- came the terrible rumor: "First Lieutenant Stubnia himself caught Corporal Haim Yosef David at the moment when he bent down and began to crawl towards the enemy's lines."

Now what?

Now -- the punishment. Without a trial. As ordered.

No death penalty, of course. Just an ordinary punishment.

With pale faces we speculated on the punishment. We paled and our hearts beat strangely, unnaturally. Like a broken clock.

The first lieutenant issued a command, decisively: "No noise! No tumult and no commotion! Quiet! Calmly, silently. It is a disgrace, a dishonorable shame, that beings such as this exist among us, who want to sell themselves to the enemy, this disgrace shall remain a secret, known to ourselves alone, and we alone shall punish the sinner."

Among us, First Lieutenant Stubnia brought the "sinner" to the common room, stood him against the wall and launched into a speech...

We didn't hear his speech.

Our ears were sealed with disgust; this disgusting person, giving a brazen speech, all in the name of justice, integrity and bravery.

We didn't hear -- but a few things forced themselves into us:

"If afflictions purify the soul," said the monster in human form, "if they purify, as you so joyfully told me, Haim Yosef David -- you now have an opportunity to become pure. I will let you have a Jewish opportunity, as you wish: to fulfill together a commandment. Do you, Haim Yosef David, feel that you are guilty?"

Haim Yosef David who stood handcuffed like a thief -- did not look at him; instead, he looked down at the dark floor and said almost musically:

Before God the King of Kings -- yes; but before you, before a mortal man, Enlightened Sir -- No."

"What?" the first lieutenant reproached him with a wild laugh. "What? Not before me? Good. If that is the case, Haim Yosef David, you must purify yourself before your God. Now, purify yourself, Haim Yosef David. I won't put you to death, no, the orders do not give me permission to do so. I don't want to either, but I do want to purify you... you, Haim Yosef David, light your candles."

"Yes," said Haim Yosef David.

"And recite the blessing out loud."

"Yes."

"And you shall be purified from your sins."

At his urgent command -- a soldier entered with a bucket full of some black paste. Some sort of tar -- or something like it. The tar was still almost boiling. They set the bucket down next to Haim Yosef David, released his handcuffs and the first lieutenant ordered him:

"Immerse both your hands! Your fingers!"

Haim Yosef David apparently didn't know about tar. He didn't know if it was hot or not, Haim Yosef David didn't know anything.

He immersed the fingers of both his hands... and let go a whispered bitter groan that sawed at the fibers of the heart.

"Silence, you despicable dog! Shut your mouth, you pimp of the Fatherland, Nikolai's friend! Did you think that it is *honey*?"

Haim Yosef David stood with his shaking hands immersed in the boiling tar, quaking, twitching in the torments of the awful pain and his face was distorted like a miserable monster.

"Enlightened Sir," he said almost crazed by pain, "Enlightened Sir, it hurts -- it hurts a lot, Enlightened Sir."

"Raise your hands! Up with them!" shouted the first lieutenant. "Up to your head! -- Elbows straight. Flat, palms upward! Higher! There, now stand against the wall. Behind you! That's it. Now, Infantryman Kalmar! Tie his two hands to the wall! So that he can't move."

Private Kalmar hammered four pegs into the wall, two for each hand, placed his hands between the pegs and bound them with iron wire.

Thus stood Haim Yosef David... like a Menorah; with two branches. On the two branches -- eight black candles, eight fingers -- in addition to the thumbs -- black with tar.

We knew what was coming and tried to leave the room one by one.

The first lieutenant reproached us in a terrible voice:

"No one moves, bastards! -- What do you think, for whom am I punishing this traitor, if not for you, for... as an example! And now," he turned to Haim Yosef David, "now recite the blessing!"

At that moment -- Haim Yosef David did not heed the first lieutenant, at that moment the first lieutenant did not exist for Haim Yosef David. He turned to us and said in a whisper, in a sad voice, almost singing, in Hebrew:

"I deserve this for forgetting Hanukkah. Even I forgot. Yesterday was already the seventh day but I thought it was the first day. A full week I forgot, for the first time in my life I forgot. Do you feel compassion for me? Don't, I am suffering, suffering..."

The first lieutenant struck a match and set fire to Haim Yosef David's fingers -- and Haim Yosef David spoke, added:

I am suffering. Suffering. The pain has passed from my fingers to my brain. My brain hurts. My memory hurts. Because I forgot. It is forbidden to forget, my friends. It is forbidden. In particular it is forbidden to forget Hanukkah. Hanukkah is our festival of war. The festival of God's war. In this damned war of ours we forgot the war of the living God. We forgot the High Priest Mattiyahu. No. I didn't see him in my dreams, but with my eyes, I saw him here on the frozen window. Look, there on the frozen window, among the flowers, the flowers of frost... Look, he stands there... he is waiting for my blessing. I will recite the blessing and you will respond: Amen..."

Haim Yosef David began to recite the blessing.

He chanted, chanted the blessing, in the holy melody, fervently, with sadness, his face burning and transparent, with a baby's tears, for eternity...

His fingers withered, the face of Haim Yosef David burned as in a flame -- and we, all of us... blood flowed to our heads, we stood a moment on the verge of falling, leaning on the wall -- and we fainted one by one.

When we revived -- Haim Yosef David was no longer with us. They were ordered to take him somewhere. Perhaps to a hospital. Perhaps to a grave. We never saw him again.

The next morning one of our friends with a face at once red and pale hastened to bring us to the frozen window, full of flowers of frost and various designs. We could not believe our eyes. Among the flowers of frost, at the side of one of the panes we saw the face of an old Jew...

Trembling shook us.

We stood transfixed -- and looked.

"He drew it himself," said one who didn't believe his own words.

"Fool!" said another. "Was this drawn by human hands?"

At that moment all of us forgot -- that Haim Yosef David's hands were no longer hands.

Haim Yosef David's hands had been raised up to the sanctity of a Menorah.

## Shlomo Hold's Prayer

Shlomo Hold's prayer awakened within us strange doubts and reflections that humiliated us a bit. Shlomo Hold's prayer -- had the power to cause our pulse to pause in the madness and tumult of the boundary between endless life and immediate death, to cause us to pause a moment, to stare at the sky and to silently ask:

"Must it be so?"

It was already the second year of the war. In the fourteenth month of the world's madness, after tens of thousands of deaths and holy afflictions, that elevated our nervous system into a sentimental and gentle spider's web of the soul, that catches every wave of the ether of thoughts and extrasensory mystery, and slowly enters the realm of the great Omniscient God and sees with almost mortal eyes what the prophets didn't see...

We became somewhat embarrassed at this state of refinement of the soul. No one knew how or why -- but all of us, even the staunchest unbelievers among us, had the calm clarity of our minds blurred and we became superstitious. We reached the edge of ridiculous nonsense that should engender pity -- were there anyone to pity us; that is to say: if we weren't *all* such believers. It was sufficient if we had been saved from death in connection with the superstitious gesture -- and this superstitious gesture became the center of our life, became holy in our eyes, and we all believed that thanks to this gesture we were saved from the gates of hell. All of us -- including Shlomo Hold. This Shlomo Hold had for several years been the head of the "the government of consciousness" in his city and all his life had fought with cool zeal against any type of religion or belief and had even managed to have the group ban the books of Kant and Spinoza whom he considered to be rebels against enlightenment, "the entanglements of hell are liable to dull our minds and overshadow our souls with a cloak of godly nonsense and to make us miserable mystics" -- Shlomo Hold's words.

Shlomo Hold did something that brought us all to smile and reflect at the same time: one morning after a crazed bayonet fight, Shlomo Hold was ordered to appear before the battalion commander to receive an important official letter addressed to him. Shlomo Hold appeared before the battalion commander in the required spit and polish -- but his cap was on backwards; the brim was to the back of his head. The battalion commander took into account the wild situation that we had been in the entire bloody night, and did not get worked up about this irregularity. But he did order him to straighten his cap. Shlomo Hold listened -- but didn't move, nor did he correct his hat. He stood astonished and a silent smile asking forgiveness fluttered over his mouth. The battalion commander suddenly foamed at the mouth as if he had been bitten by a snake:

"Straighten your cap, you stupid slacker! Why are you standing before me like a drunk gypsy 'facing' backwards? Are you a goose? Only a goose turns its face onto its back!"

Shlomo Hold stood -- and didn't move.

The battalion commander lost his patience, went up to him, stared into his eyes and shouted at him with a terrible scream:

"Straighten your hat, slacker, if not -- I'll turn your head right around! Are you out of your mind?"

Shlomo Hold's whole body trembled, his smile froze on his lips and he whispered and stuttered:

"Battalion Commander, Sir... I respectfully report... Please forgive me... it's better this way... that was

how I was saved from the terrible bombardment that killed the two 'neighbors' who lay by me throughout the explosions... by chance my cap was at that moment on backwards, please permit me to continue doing... so..."

Shlomo Hold was lucky that the battalion commander didn't wring his neck at once, rather he stood and chuckled through his screeching teeth and his eyes that usually spread terror began to smile in spite of themselves. No, he didn't wring his neck... because the battalion commander's right hand had for the past four days been clenched into a fist as if from apoplexy... and he wouldn't open it for all the money in the world; for four days straight, the battalion commander signed the orders -- with his left hand... because four days ago the same thing happened to him: when a "thirty-one" shell blew his quarters to shreds but he remained live and well -- he noticed that his right hand happened to be clenched -- since then: no power in the world could force him to open his fist. Who knows? Truth be told: it is possible that he was saved by his clenched fist...

Thus occurred that amazing wonder, Shlomo Hold, a simple soldier, stood before the battalion commander with his "head on backwards" -- and he didn't wring his neck like a chicken's. The two souls understood each other...

That is: these things spread their authority over our tortured souls until they became holy and stupid in their holiness...

At this time Shlomo Hold fell ill with a strange disease.

It happened on a clear autumn day, saddened by the sun pouring through the autumn leaves, as if requested by the living God. We sat tired and exhausted in our dugout and sang the songs of some Indian Fakir, when suddenly Shlomo Hold came in and stopped us:

Comrades," he said with a slightly bashful smile, "guys, I have a suggestion."

"Fantastic!" all of them jumped at the offer. "A suggestion? So be it! Let's hear it!"

"No, no," apologized Shlomo Hold, "It's not about bravery or chasing women, guys. No. Not at all. It's actually something modest. I received a letter from my elderly grandmother."

"Well, well, well!"

Ha-ha-ha -- "A letter from my mother's old lady. She reminds me... that the Day of Judgment is near." -- Ha-ha -- "What are you laughing about, fools? Don't you know what Rosh Hashanah is? -- You don't know," he addressed the Christians among us, "but you," he turned to us again, "all of you certainly know what it is. Rosh Hashanah," he turned again to the Christians, "is the Day of Judgment. That is to say, the same thing that the birth of Christ is to you. But more than that, Rosh Hashanah is the day..."

"When you stuff yourselves with food!" interrupted with a laugh the Catholic platoon commander, Vilani. "Pancakes and bacon fat and all those important things!..."

"No," Hold explained. "Don't you know that Rosh Hashanah is our Day of Judgment? -- I don't believe in such things. But my grandmother warns me that on this day... on this day our fate for the coming year... on this day it is being written up there," he added with a forced laugh, "up there in the high heavens they sit and record in a book our coming fate. Do you know that? Nonsense, of course, but... Who knows? Why not? What do we care? Really."

"What shall we do if it isn't written?" asked one of us. "Truly: what shall we do? -- What shall we do?"

My grandmother advises me to repent. Simply to pray a little: don't laugh. What difference does it make? Instead of singing Indian songs, songs of fakirs, we could sing the songs from the prayers."

"What of us?" asked the company commander somewhat seriously. "Will we too receive from you some intercession for our fate?"

Shlomo Hold replied in all seriousness:

"What do you mean? There is one God for all of us. Every one of us will sing according to his custom and in his own language. There, up above, all languages are heard and understood. But only... (suddenly it was hard for him to express these words) if it comes from the heart. And why not? Are we not living with afflictions and torments? -- What would be easier than to pour out our hearts for one moment? Let us come together and pray a little."

"I know something more," added one of our group, Yitzhak Alpadua, "I know that ten men are needed."

"Yes, yes," Shlomo Hold interrupted him and raised the letter in his hand to his eyes. "Yes, yes: my grandmother wrote to me about that. How does he say it?... Yes: a 'Minyan.' 'A Minyan of ten,' she writes. Well, we are thirteen!"

"Among them only six Jews!" noted Yitzhak Alpadua, "where will we find four more?"

"What?" said Shlomo Hold in amazement. "What? -- What is the meaning of four more? What difference is there between Jews and non-Jews? Nonsense! There is one God for us all... Well, guys, evening is coming on -- let us pray a little. And you," he turned to Yitzhak Alpadua, "you are truly a God-fearing man, you must certainly know how to pray."

Yitzhak Alpadua smiled modestly, stood up, went to his pack and while we remained totally silent -- took a small prayer-book from among his things...

Within a few moments -- all the of them were praying and singing... Yitzhak Alpadua stood next to the wall and behind him thirteen men repeating his melodious songs with delightful chants and in innocent holiness...

"On Rosh Hashanah it shall be written..."

They responded after him:

"On Rosh Hashanah it shall be written..."

"Who for life and who for death... Oy, oy, oy, who for death -- for d-d-eath-eath."

The Hungarians responded with their mistakes:

"Who for live.. and who for d-eas..."

No one noticed the mistakes, and no one heard his friend. He heard only his own voice. Only the echo of the keening of his wavering soul, the voice of his God calling him mysteriously from deep within himself. Everyone entreated, opened up to his God, and everyone thought of the one soul for whom it was worth enduring this life of torments, a life of tortures and thousands of strange deaths, every one called his advocate before the bar of justice, his old mother, his sick father, his beautiful lover and this elderly, pure grandmother.

Every one opened up to the holy, juvenile harmony, purifying before his creator, cowering, asking for a few more years of life and afflictions and torments -- only to stay alive...

"Repentance, prayer and benevolence will nullify..."

When they had finished praying -- Yitzhak Alpadua stood as if stunned. He stood with a deathly pallor, turned from the wall to face his friends and said trembling:

"Comrades... we have made a mistake... we didn't say the prayer... it is my fault... we recited tomorrow's prayer this evening..."

Shlomo Hold made an expansive and gay gesture:

"You're stupid, my friend! -- It doesn't matter! It's all the same which prayer we said. God doesn't care what comes before and what afterwards! Did you intend to ask for clemency? That's enough! If we made a mistake then... and besides... however... good. Did we make a mistake? Then tomorrow we can pray again. Tomorrow morning we can say the correct prayer! As long as we don't eat dinner today."

"Actually we can eat," said Yitzhak Alpadua, "it doesn't preclude anything."

"No!" insisted Shlomo Hold. "Why eat? For once we can refrain from gorging. Who knows? Truly: it might really be important... don't you think so, guys?"

They all agreed.

One hour later -- all of us slept; our snores were deep and pure, decorated with pleasant and happy dreams, hope for a gay life and the aid station.

The next morning Baruch Galnan from the neighboring battalion came in with a wild laugh:

"Happy New Year, guys!" he shouted with a cruel, rowdy laugh. "Happy New Year -- ha-ha-ha -- ha-ha-ha! Happy -- ha-ha New Year ha-ha-ha!"

"Why this outburst?" Shlomo Hold angrily screamed at them. "Why are you merry like a crazy horse? You donkey son of a donkey! What's gotten you shook up?"

"Happy New Year -- ha-ha-ha!" he rolled on the bunk. "Guys -- ha-ha-ha!"

Shlomo Hold went up to him and started choking him:

"Shut up!" he shouted, grinding his teeth. "Bastard! -- Drop dead!"

"Ah-Ah-Ah! Go to hell, fool!" He relented and dropped his hands. "You've got two heads!... Do you know what you've done? You've celebrated Rosh Hashanah twice!... Do you know when Rosh Hashanah was? A trivial thing! You're only nine days too late!... Rosh Hashanah was nine days ago exactly... Ha-ha-ha -- ha-ha! Nice!"

Shlomo Hold stood pale and shocked. He didn't say a word. He turned and left.

Later he returned and asked:

"Listen, you savage! Are you stupid? Are you leading us on?"

"Are you out of your mind? Look at the calendar. Here is a calendar. On every calendar the Jewish holidays are also listed!"

Shlomo Hold's hands shook as he took the calendar, glanced at it and said:

"You are right, I was late. Damn. There's no escaping it. That young witch -- do you know her? The whore from here in the town of Razlovich was right. A few days ago she foretold that soon I would pitch my tent in the world to come. Damn."

He went outside with his head buried in the sand. While walking he mumbled to himself:

"For once in my life I wanted... but I didn't succeed, damn. To hell with it all!" he yelled once more and disappeared.

The next morning we received an order: to send a small detachment to scout hill 337.

When I read the order -- Shlomo Hold came up to me and reported:

"Please, I want to go."

"Why you of all people?" I asked and immediately remembered: No. Why should I ask for trouble?

"Next time, Shlomo. What is so important about today?"

"I want to get it over with, Sir. Why the day after tomorrow if I can get it over with today?"

"You're a fool."

"That's possible -- but that's the way it is."

"Well, you won't go! Stay with us a few days and when there is a real battle -- you'll go anyway."

I didn't send him.

When the detachment set out -- Shlomo Hold stood and watched with bulging eyes.

"I'll accompany you a bit," he said and went with them.

"Alright," laughed the detachment commander. "You'll bring us luck, after all, you want to die anyway," he added kidding him. "You will be our salvation. You will be the sacrifice..."

Shlomo Hold said nothing and went with them as the detachment entered the field...

A while later -- the men returned bearing something:

They brought Shlomo Hold who was dead. Just as they left the trench -- a bullet pierced his forehead.

"Your God is very punctual!" said the platoon commander as he looked into the moist eyes of the body.

# White Night

1

"I'll tell you the truth, my friend," said to me the new major who only yesterday came to our trench, "I won't deny it, my friend, that I... really could have stayed home longer, that is, at the barracks in town, without coming to the front for six more months. But... I didn't want to stay there. I really am sick. My lungs are full of tuberculosis. And my father is, as you know, an old and very influential physician. One reluctant word and I would have stayed longer. Possibly, I would never have come. But it was my choice."

"The Fatherland," I said trying to guess the reason of his return to the front. "You caught the scent of heroism that emanates from here, didn't you?"

"To hell with the scent and the Fatherland. I am not at all an enthusiastic 'patriot'. No. I'll trade the whole heroism and Fatherland thing for one glass of wine."

"Then what?... life here... nerve-racking... yes; a game of nerves. Don't you think?"

"You are right, you prophesied but you didn't know what you prophesied. There is one thing in life that has always stimulated me, but I have never been granted the chance to enjoy it. Do you know what it is?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"A dead face," the major responded in all seriousness. "Yes, a dead face. I have seen many things in my life, but one thing is totally unfamiliar to me: I have never seen a dead person."

"How is that?"

"That's just the way it is. It's not by chance. I am an only child. My parents are not Catholic, but Calvinists. You know that Calvinists are not permitted to look upon the face of a dead person, not of their family and not of others. My mother was very strict with me that I should not commit this 'transgression'. She was steadfast in this, in particular out of concern lest I should suddenly panic. That is why I have never in my life seen a dead person."

"Even on the stage of a theater?"

"In the theater, yes. But that doesn't count. After all I knew that it was only acting and that a few moments later the actor would stand up, take a bow and receive applause. But a real dead person, that is a very important thing, my friend, and I feel that seeing the face of the dead person will completely change my life. Imagine it: to see a dead person who only moments ago was drinking, laughing and philosophizing with you -- and suddenly you see him lying motionless, you talk to him and he... does not move and does not speak. That must be funny... Imagine that..."

"I don't need to image it... Funny? -- well, not necessarily. Perhaps a bit ridiculous... perhaps... but not funny... we've had the privilege of seeing a few... and we forgot to laugh, my friend..."

"That's it. That's what I want. To see -- and to feel the initial impression... When will the enemy attack again?"

A rookie question to be sure. The question of a naive man who sits all the time in the barracks and now has come to the theater. More than that: a major. Not a private soldier -- a major. A superior officer. "When will the next attack be?"

"The enemy keeps forgetting to tell us of his attacks in advance, Enlightened Sir," I answered formally because of the dust of anger caused by an abusive question from a superior officer.

It was already midnight and we went to sleep.

2

There have been no battles at the front for the past four weeks. Occasionally a rain of hot metal, a sudden hail of bullets -- but no actual combat. Both we and the enemy were prepared. The great snowfalls will pass and the mud will come. Then.

That upset the spoiled major. A true disaster. He had been at the front a few days, when yesterday he entered: to the spearhead company, the "first rank" -- and not even one "measly" experience of death.

All day the major paced back and forth in a state of excitement. Didn't we know what was happening? We didn't sense fear in him, but still we had the impression that he was a very excitable person. Now that he told me his secret, I understood. He was a bit homesick for the dead.

A while later we were both fast asleep. He fell asleep before me. I heard him stutter and mumble in his sleep. It was difficult to understand what he spoke from within his dreams, a few words that he threw out could be pieced together:

"Rabbi Zalman Baer... an observant Jew... in death... not death... you're a swindler... a Jewish swindler... you're alive..."

He laughed in his sleep...

I too fell asleep.

A while later -- he woke me up:

"I'm sorry... I'm really sorry... but... I want to ask a favor of you..."

"At your command, Sir!"

"No, no. Not officially, my friend. You are a more experienced officer than I am. Although you are required to respect the rank."

"At your command, Enlightened Sir!" I shouted angrily because he woke me in vain.

"Don't be angry. Let go of this nonsense. Informally. I ask a favor."

"Please."

"I gave our artillery battery the order to fire."

"Have you gone insane?"

"Sh... it's done, I gave the order... What are you upset about? I have the authority to do so..."

"You have no authority to throw away our lives, damn you."

"All of us? Why all of us? -- Nonsense. We will 'hunker down' here and you will send five men to the observation post, to the forward 'shelter'. Only they will be in danger."

"That's... that's... that's..."

"I know: it's despicable," the major's voice suddenly became serious and very grave, "I take personal responsibility for what I did! -- Understood?..."

"Understood, Enlightened Sir!"

I stood up and sent five of my men to the appointed place.

Needless to say, I couldn't sleep after that. An order to fire meant that the next evening we attack the enemy. That means that tomorrow evening the forward shelter with the five men inside will be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. Nothing will remain of them but a few bones.

I lay on my bed and there was a sudden knock at the door. An old soldier entered. The oldest soldier in our battalion: Rabbi Zalman Baer. He requested vehemently:

"Enlightened Sir, tomorrow evening I wish to be together with my sons..."

"How many sons do you have?"

"Four."

"Where are they?"

"They are all in your unit, Enlightened Sir."

"What are their names?"

"Their names, Enlightened Sir, are different... One is called Abraham Kiliny, the second -- Shlomo Kaloary, the third -- Moshe Karas and the fourth retained his old name -- Michael Cohen."

"So, Kiliny, Kaloary, Karas and Cohen -- are brothers, your sons?"

"Yes, Enlightened Sir."

Only the devil knew this... Of course; if their father was Cohen then they are Kiliny, Kaloary, Karas and Cohen. Well, thank God, at least one of them remained Cohen.

"Why do you want to be with them tomorrow evening?"

Tomorrow evening, Enlightened Sir, tomorrow evening... please know, Sir... tomorrow evening is our holiday... Pessach..." said the old man with an apologetic smile.

"Ah: The 'Seder'. Well, good. Why not? If this pleasure can be granted you, then why not? Well..."

At that moment, it was if my head had been hit by an axe and my heart jumped out of my chest:

"Hell's fire! They are all there... in the forward 'shelter'!... I had sent them there just a few moments ago... On the orders of the major... but it was not my fault," I tried for no reason to justify myself to the simple soldier... "really, it is not my fault. Why didn't they tell me that they are brothers..."

"Never mind... never mind..." stuttered the old man with a pallid face... "It's not important, Enlightened Sir... it's not important... we aren't cowards... an old experience soldier like me... on the contrary, it's good that they are together..."

"On the front line, man!"

"What of it?... Good... I will be there with them..."

"That's the last thing they need! -- It's impossible!"

The old man stood over me his eyes almost brimming with tears:

"Enlightened Sir... I entreat you... after all, Sir knows that a 'Seder' is, and I'm an old father... I have never led a Seder without my sons... I beg of you... God will requite the Enlightened Sir."

My heart constricted inside me.

The old man was aware of that and consoled me with a smile:

"Never mind. Enlightened Sir, on a night like this, the eve of Pessach... a white night... trust God, Enlightened Sir... there is no danger in a white night... the Jewish God -- I entreat you..."

"It's midnight, where are you coming from?"

The old man hesitated a bit, turned here and there, swallowed and said:

"My apologies... Enlightened Sir... from there... I was with them... I was on duty until midnight and then I heard that they had been sent there -- I went to visit them..."

It was strictly forbidden to go "there" unless ordered to -- but I couldn't be angry at the old man... a father of four sons... who wanted to lead a Seder with them... let someone else be faced with this and not allow it.

"Agreed. Sleep now and tomorrow you can go."

The old man had just left -- when the major woke up laughing, rubbing his hands with glee:

"Wonderful. I heard. It's wonderful!..."

### 3

On Monday evening, the eve of Pessach 1915, there was action on the front. Not real battles between enemies -- but tens of thousands of bullets blasting the rocks to white powder and the trees to splinters frayed our nerves to threads. Our heads no longer felt anything: they had become completely muddled. Like an opaque unease that struck like a dull sledgehammer on our skulls. We could stand without leaning against a wall.

This continued -- for several hours. The father and his four sons were -- "there." Tears leaked from my brain into my throat.

And then -- silence.

I seized the occasion and with my last breath ran to the observation post.

On the way I felt that some men were running behind me. I turned around: the major with a smile.

A terrible anger took hold of me. I looked him square in the eye and gnashing my teeth said directly to his face:

"In vain. They are alive!"

"How do you know that?"

I couldn't find the right words to use. But from under my tongue my hoarse throat shot out a word of its own:

"A white night!..."

I turned away and hurried on. The major thought that I stammered something in my anger and didn't understand a word. We ran through the long trench that led to a sort of uncovered dugout that served as an observation post.

When I stood before the door of their "shelter" -- a strange, sweet levity assailed me. Behind the door I heard voice:

"Blessed art thou who created the fruit of the vine..."

I opened the door and with a sense of revenge and triumph I allowed the major to enter: "Please, after you."

Just as we opened the door the five voices were singing joyful and fervently: "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations that know thee not...!"

I couldn't help bursting out laughing. -- With us -- the father and four sons, but without ceasing their singing... The rickety table was set: a tablecloth, matzah, wine, bitter herbs, the haroset condiment... everything.

The major was completely disconcerted. To cover his disgrace, he forced himself to laugh. Suddenly I saw: he grabbed a cup of wine and raised it to drink...

The old man jumped up as if bitten by a snake! He snatched the full cup from the superior officer and said:

"Enlightened Sir, it is forbidden! It is the cup for... for... for... for the esteemed Prophet Elijah!"

He replaced the cup, filled another, put it in the place of the first one, and poured out onto the ground the wine in the first cup, then filled it again and offered it to the major:

"Please, Enlightened Sir! You are our honored guest..."

I immediately understood what happened: Elijah's cup had been "touched by a gentile" and was no longer acceptable, so it had been poured onto the ground. A second cup was placed for Elijah and the "defiled" empty cup had been refilled and offered to the major. Then I was handed one of the four cups and he said:

"To life, Enlightened Sir!..."

We drank -- and only at that moment did our eyes really open: everyone was dressed in white... except for the sixth soldier who sat at the table with them -- he alone was dressed in a uniform.

The major looked at them, his eyes not focused, and paled.

Only then did I notice -- that he was completely drunk. He could hardly stand. He downed the cup as if forced to, tried to place the empty cup on the table, but it slipped from his hand... he wiped his damp brow as if he had come from a bathhouse -- moved to and fro, then leaned heavily on me, rubbing his eyes and with a thick stammer asked uncertainly:

"What's that?... Tell me... what?... Are they alive?... Are they dead?... No... I must be drunk... no... I'm asking you, tell me: are they white or not?... Or: am I mistaken?..."

I clasped him to prevent him falling and sensing an impending danger tried to calm him down:

"Yes, yes, Enlightened Sir, they are white... you're not wrong... they are white."

"What?..." mumbled the major and started to vomit... "What?... Really white?... Oy!... What's happening to me... Hold me for a while... Oy! Why are they white? Are they dead?..."

The old man came down off his 'reclining couch', went up to the major and caressed him with the coaxing words of an old father:

"Enlightened Sir... Don't... hang in there... you've drunk a bit too much... never mind... it won't hurt... well, Enlightened Sir, cheer up... for God's sake..."

The major fell over his feet. The old man lifted him up onto his arms.

"Ah, Enlightened Sir... this is not proper... is this what is done to a host that invites in a guest and offers him a cup of wine?... This is not nice... dear Enlightened Sir... Please get yourself together... I'm really offended... my wine is good... Pessach wine..."

The major lay still with his eyes closed, breathing deeply.

"Never mind," said the old man somewhat relieved, "never mind... God willing, it will pass... The Enlightened Sir won't leave our battalion." He leaned over and looked at the face of the major.

At that moment something strange happened: the major opened his eyes a crack... then opened them wide... he looked into the eyes of the old man... lashed out with an immense shout and clutched at me with hair-raising terror:

"Help me!... Help me!... He's alive!... Rabbi Zalman Baer!... He's alive!... He's a swindler... He isn't dead... he just put on a shroud to deceive me!... Chase him away!... Oh-oh-oh!"

In his terror of a strange death, he embedded his nails into my body:

My blood trembled. The old man's old eyes bulged... the major said: "Rabbi Zalman Baer"... How does he know the name of this Jew?...

I immediately remembered the words he mumbled from within his dream... last night...

The major stretched out to his full height on the ground, and again gushed from his mouth a strong stream of wine mixed with blood and bile, then his body collapsed... and he remained motionless...

When the doctor came to examine him, he found that he had died of a heart attack.

4

The next day I asked the old soldier:

"Did he know you?"

"I have never seen him in my life until you brought him to us."

"So how did he know your Jewish name?"

The old man shrugged:

"Who knows?"

Later, lost in thought and without looking me in the eye he said:

"Poor fellow... Does Enlightened Sir know? I know what he died from... The cup of the Prophet Elijah is a dangerous thing... and he 'defiled' it. Poor fellow... but I'm not at fault, Enlightened Sir."

# The Blacksmith

1

The most courageous of the brigades of the 15th Division -- was the 65th; the most courageous of the battalions of the 65th Brigade was the 1st; and the hero of the 1st Battalion was the soldier Yehuda Kraft.

In Yehuda Kraft's personnel file was written:

1. Status: Infantry, volunteer.
2. Name: Yehuda.
3. Family name: Kraft.
4. Religion: Israelite.
5. Age: Twelve years old.
6. Assignment: Platoon commander.
7. Decoration: First-class gold medal.
8. Wounded: Twice.
9. Enlisted: 1914.
10. Civilian profession: Blacksmith.

I don't know which of these items is most important.

You would certainly order them as follows:

First: the fifth item, a twelve-year-old soldier. Then the seventh: a twelve-year-old soldier who had been granted the gold medal, and not only that, but he was a platoon commander. Next in importance is certainly that he was a volunteer, that he had thrown himself into the great conflagration that every moment threatened thousands of mortal dangers. Of course, it is nice that this little one had been wounded twice. Twice he was saved from the dark regime of death. It goes without saying that you are fond of him because he is a Jew.

Nothing more?

You are wrong.

The most respected item on this file is that Yehuda Kraft -- was a blacksmith.

If this makes no difference to you -- for him, for Yehuda Kraft himself, this was the essence of his being. The ultimate goal of his life. His genius and his vitality. The crux of his soul. Everything.

2

I got to know Yehuda Kraft at a strange time and in an unusual state of mind. On a night of fury amid a secret terror of death: "A holiday eve": the evening before a great attack upon the enemy.

Whoever has not participated in "a holiday eve" -- that's what the Hungarians call it -- has not savored the taste of a sacrifice to God's name.

In the living grave: in the battalion's underground shelter -- rest. Some soldiers were sleeping, some

picking lice out of their clothes, some playing instruments and singing ballads, and some -- just sitting, staring with closed eyes at a distant dream.

Suddenly -- the telephone.

"Br-br-r-r."

Silence. I hurry to the phone with the clear knowledge who is calling:

"At your command, Colonel!"

(Meaning: I am your humble and despicable servant in this world and the next, so-and-so son of so-and-so, stand before you my battalion commander, trembling and in total subservience I am ready and willing to hear every sound from your august throat and every speck of dust of your holy thoughts and to fulfill your titanic desires though my enslaved soul depart this world!)

He said:

"Tonight, at five minutes and three seconds after 03:15 -- attack. Understood?"

"At your command, Colonel! Tonight, at five minutes and three seconds after 03:15 -- attack!"

"Yes. Direction: Liniatz Tower. Objective: Hill 304. From there -- wait for further orders. Understood?"

I repeat back his instructions. He continues:

Yes, twenty-two minutes from now -- What time is it? -- Synchronize watches: exactly three quarters of a tenth. Yes. In another eleven minutes -- avzar. Understood?

Of course -- I understood. Avzar is a euphemism for horror. Avzar -- is the last supper, the devil's dance, the preparation for the holiday eve: champagne, cognac, rum, chartreuse, cointreau, absinthe, slivovitz and the cursed triple blessing: tokaj-bordeaux-carmel in one gulp. And another and another.

When a soldier hears the battalion commander utter the word avzar -- his mother's milk froths on his bitter tongue and his forehead sweats sulphuric acid. The ordinary soldier knows that avzar is the prologue to a strange death: to an attack.

The battalion commander added:

"Artillery preparation -- two hours. Reserves to come closer. And you -- be brave and serious. Gold medals of all sorts and ranks: will be given to all your men! Understood? -- Dismissed!"

"At your command, Colonel!"

"B-r-r-r-r..."

When I turned to face my company -- a terrible necklace of bulging, terrifying eyes stared at me with scorching beams of light. The faces -- white, pale, glistening, dead. Their hands dangled, their webbing hanging down from their knees, their round eyes and furrowed brows showed a dark seriousness -- the shadow of a silent question wandering above -- a question that has no answer.

A long and dreadful silence.

I wound my watch although it was not needed, so that my cowardice would not be noticed. I cannot allow myself to shake and become pale. I must be brave, healthy, happy, kindhearted -- and serious. Yes, serious.

"Well, guys," I said with a sickly smile, "ready!"

The unit moved a bit but did not answer.

"What's wrong? An uninvited guest? Unexpected news? -- Never mind, men! We will pull ourselves together and triumph. A triumph such as never had been seen by those beyond the wire!"

The pallid men moved with slow motions, stretched -- an involuntary yawn -- Ai!

They began to fiddle with their things.

This fiddling -- it's hellish. Aside from mess gear and weapons there are other small objects, precious and foolish toys, that prevent a man from dying. A dear photograph -- a sweet letter, a gushing composition, a small souvenir box, a dried flower from the departure, a charmed engraved coin, a small handkerchief with a heady scent, and more and more.

Bound up with these trifles were memories, loves, tears, kisses, anxieties, caresses, terrors and horrors that diffuse from the heart to the brain and from the brain to the heart -- again and again.

I felt a sort of trembling in my knees.

Fear is a contagious disease. Once it infects one of us -- it cannot be contained. It progresses from one man to the next, from one heart to another, steady like a metronome, through the suffocating air.

The disease diffuses deeply into the heart, the nerves, the blood, progressing from one man to the next and from one nerve to another. A kind of pain. An ugly shivering. A type of shame.

One of the Hungarians stood up, threw away his pipe and spit out a curse:

"Ai! Great God so awesome and fearsome in his seven times seventh heaven! -- How many times can a living man die!"

Again the soft silence and soft movements. Fiddling with trifles.

One checked his pack and found some useless thing, looked at it, considered for a moment -- and threw it away.

Another -- also threw something away. Then -- he picked it up and put it back in his pack.

A third -- looked at a small photo, looked again, looked furtively -- he wanted to kiss it, turned to and fro -- ashamed, raised it to his mouth -- and thrust it back into his pack.

A fourth -- restless and full of anger -- quickly put something on and straightened it, took out useless objects and threw them on the ground, to hell with it, there is no life, no love, no memories, to hell with it, we will die like dogs, without absolution. Without a eulogy and without a shroud, to hell with it all, to hell with it!

A fifth -- a small chap, quiet, never in a rush, does his tasks calmly, without sadness, without anger, without despair -- an orphan, no father and no mother, no relative and no friend, no parcel of land in his village and no assets, a miserable orphan who doesn't even have a plain girlfriend to wait for him, to remember him. His worldly possessions are just his kit, nothing more. If he lives, he lives. If he dies, he dies. Many die here. What of it?... Beyond, beyond -- possibly beyond, beyond the grave, he will see his mother?... Possibly.

And me -- I already feel that I am in danger: the entire unit has lost its resilience and strength. With these men to fall on the enemy? With these cowards? We -- our company in the first wave, we -- the vanguard: the first battalion!

There is not even strength enough to speak.

But this silence -- kills.

At night -- out there -- deep stillness, black and brimming with terror.

I stand and listen.

The murmur of movements and heartbeats. Silence.

Telephone:

"Br-rr-r..."

I run to the wall.

"Hello!"

A wrong connection.

Again the stifling silence.

One minute, a few minutes. Silence.

Suddenly -- a deafening, heartrending shot here in the dugout -- through the door!

A shot from a handgun.

My heart stops and I draw my handgun.

"Holy ...! What was that? Who shot? By the raging inferno of hell, who shot?"

The door opened and on the threshold appeared a diminutive soldier laughing out loud.

"Ha-ha-ha! -- Exalted Company Commander, I respectfully report that I did it!

I looked him up and down: a serious face, standing at attention -- as prescribed, but he could hide his smile, it hadn't disappeared entirely. This damned little guy is laughing at me, at us, spooking us and then laughing.

And he reported -- that he had done it.

On his shoulder straps -- two pips, this cheeky imp is a platoon commander and on his chest -- sparkles a first class gold medal.

Well -- that's the thing. If not -- I would have torn him apart.

"Come closer, platoon leader!"

He approached me -- marching as prescribed and stood at attention.

"Who are you?"

"Company Commander, Sir, I respectfully report: Platoon Commander Yehuda Kraft, from the forward medic detachment of the first battalion! By order of the battalion commander!"

Well -- I have to accept him. An order from the battalion commander.

I look at him and my anger wells up again.

"Who gave you permission to shoot through the door?" I ground my teeth. "Who gave you permission, you despicable dwarf?"

"Company Commander, Sir, I respectfully report: I am not a despicable dwarf," the little one answered me protesting in earnest. "I am not a despicable dwarf -- I am a blacksmith!"

His face reddened and his eyes that until now had been smiling, suddenly flashed white-hot and with a pure childlike sorrow.

"What?" I shouted at him. "What are you? A blacksmith?"

"Yes, a blacksmith! And the battalion commander gave me permission to shoot through the door! I shot upwards, towards the ceiling!"

"And why is that?"

"To embolden the men's hearts for the attack!"

It became impossible to contain my laughter.

The little one gave a nice performance, both as a boy and as a soldier. His innocent eyes sparkled with tears. They were not tender tears. They were tears of reproach and protest, demanding respect.

I was afraid he would break down crying. I went up to him and rapped his soft shoulder.

"Soldier. At ease. Speak."

He stood at ease. Relaxed his stiff stance and explained the matter to me.

From the beginning of the war, he had belonged to the forward company of medics. Since the attack was imminent, and since our battalion was in the first wave and since he was a blacksmith -- it was obvious that he should be attached to us, to the company in the first wave, who face the most extreme dangers, to bind up the first wounded, the most important victims.

I understood it all, the little one spoke like a veteran with years of experience, pedantically clarifying the meaning of the matter, so that it entered one's ears and one's heart. I understood it all.

Except for one thing. What does being a blacksmith have to do with it?

While this was going on -- all the men in my unit stirred, were invigorated, revitalized to a beautiful state of mind, moving around, alive, even laughing.

In the meantime the door opened -- and drinks were brought in.

Only a few moments passed -- and the living grave became a bash.

Drinking, frolicking, smashing cups, singing.

The singing -- was a sign of victory.

It goes without saying that the singing was infused with cursing and swearing.

As for me -- even after the solemn order, even before the reception by death approaching in the dark night and even after drinking eight cups, which caused me to imagine death as red annihilating angels -- I was still preoccupied with the trifle: Yehudah Kraft -- the blacksmith.

I found out that this dwarf was a volunteer, his parents didn't give him permission to enlist so he ran away. He stood before the war minister himself and didn't move until he was enrolled. I found out that he had already taken part in several great attacks, demonstrations and the most massive defensive battles that have taken place so far. The medal was earned for steadfastness in a terrible battle. He saved the drunken general, His Excellency General of the Infantry von Rajokziger-Langsam from the thrust of a bayonet by a Circassian Cossack. He had the utmost contempt for this general and did not fear to reveal it to me. "The general is not worth two bits, he's a coward through and through, a drunkard born of a drunkard." If it weren't for his good treatment of the ordinary soldiers -- he would have left him there to go to hell, trampled under the hooves the Circassian's horse. "Unbelievable: a

high-ranking officer, upon whom the light of the battalion depends, gets drunk when thousands of soldiers are exposed to danger!"

"A soldier like this," Yehudah Kraft told me with total contempt, "is not even worth shooting in the head! If I were not a blacksmith, I wouldn't have saved him. Even considering his kindness and benevolence towards the soldiers. After all his soldiers are seven times better than him!... I have a medal," scoffed Yehudah Kraft, "and he doesn't! I wouldn't have saved him. But -- I am a blacksmith!"

These words were said with an arrogance that I had never heard, even among frontline soldiers who throughout the generations were accustomed to boasting.

He stopped talking for an instant, pondered for a moment and then said:

"I have participated in thirty-four bayonet clashes, I've been wounded twice -- but I remain a blacksmith!"

I no longer urged him to explain to me the grandness of being a blacksmith. I had already sensed that this was a serious and interesting matter for him and therefore I resolved to defer this surprise for dessert.

"How many men have you killed since you came out?" I asked him. "How many of the enemy have you sent to the world beyond?"

Yehudah Kraft did not budge from his seat, raised his innocent eyes to me then lowered them, and without looking into my face said emphatically, seriously protesting:

"I have never killed anyone. I am a blacksmith, the son of a blacksmith."

I couldn't suppress the laughter that burst from me. I grasped him, clutched him to my chest and insisted that he finally explain to me: what is nature of this great blacksmithing and what demon hid within it?

Yehudah Kraft explained it to me.

I found out that this craft, which from ancient times has been considered to be semi-skilled work, a simple and rough craft -- for him, this little soldier, it has a heritage of the highest pedigree. A pedigree more exalted than any other. I found out that his father was also a blacksmith and the son of a blacksmith, and a grandson of a son of a blacksmith. -- His father's workshop was in the Tatra mountains, on a highway, between two distant villages. In this workshop he was born and raised, like his father and grandfather. His education was unconventional, his father didn't send him to school so that he would not be led astray by bad company. His father taught him to read and write Hebrew and Hungarian. Besides these he knows nothing, just like his father. But that's not to say that his father is an ignoramus. Few people know what his father knows. But all his knowledge comes not from books, but from his craft. It all comes from his craft. Everything. All his experience of the world, all his knowledge of nature -- it was all bestowed by his craft: blacksmithing. A craft is the crown of all occupations and thoughts. And blacksmithing -- is the jewel in the crown of them all. That was what his father taught him, and that was what his father received from his father, who in turn received it from his father and from his ancestors, all the back to the first blacksmith of the Six Days of Creation. The first blacksmith -- his father passed on to him -- was Tubal-cain and he is the issue of his loins. Tubal-cain was the first man to achieve greatest and who had the dominion over the hills and mountains, the lakes and forests, and even over the wild animals. All liked him and were subservient to him. The blacksmith -- has virtues in that exceed those of other craftsmen in the world. These

virtues, needless to say, cannot be transmitted orally. Whoever does not sense them by himself -- would not understand in any case. The blacksmith is the king of craftsmen, and therefore his duties both to man and to God are more manifold.

The blacksmith must be kind to others.

The blacksmith must never be idle.

Not only does the blacksmith never lie, he must never even exaggerate.

The blacksmith must be honest and upright.

The blacksmith works not only to make a living, but to serve those who need him.

Not only do people need his craft, animals do too.

The blacksmith -- his hands benefit everyone. People, wagons, courtyards, gardens, factories, workshops, schools, synagogues, in gardens and enclosures, on hills and dales, at home and in the fields, on land and sea -- everywhere.

The blacksmith symbolizes the perfection and the essence of creation.

And Yehudah Kraft is a small blacksmith.

Small -- but a blacksmith in every fiber of his being.

He, Yehudah Kraft, not more than twelve years old, had hardly attained twelve -- but a blacksmith!

In other words: a man from tip to toe.

He has not even reached his Bar Mitzvah -- but already, in his own estimation, he knew that he must fulfill all the laws and commandments.

He does not fear it. To the contrary, he faithfully fulfills his duties -- he is a blacksmith! He fulfills his duties, he always will, at work, when resting, when walking his dog and when playing with other children.

Children of his age do what they do -- quarreling, squabbling, punching each other, rebelling against their parents, lying to their teachers, and even stealing, playing with chips and cheating each other, beating dogs, distressing cats, clipping the wings of birds, torturing flies, sticking their tongues out at the poor, tripping the blind, making faces at old ladies; they were not fussy about cleanliness, tore up books, gorge on candy, smoke purloined cigarettes and so on and so forth.

But Yehudah Kraft never did any of these things.

And why not?

Not out of fear.

He never did evil to anyone, even his father had no cause to rebuke him, an only child beloved by his father and mother.

Then why?

He is a blacksmith!

Yehudah Kraft told me all this in one go on the evening of the great horror. When our nerves so frayed that we felt we were going crazy, when we were getting ready to attack the terrible enemy. When we drained liquor into our throats, as if we were spraying water onto a blaze, in order to wash

away our brains and extinguish the fear that consumed us, the death that approached step by step -- at this time Yehudah Kraft told us his story.

We drank as he sat and talked about the virtues of the blacksmith and his duties.

We felt a bit ashamed that it had not been granted to us to be blacksmiths.

It suddenly occurred to me that we were all drinking, but he had not touched the cup that had been placed before him. I entreated him to drink the wine.

Yehudah Kraft thanked me but protested:

"God forbid! -- A blacksmith doesn't drink."

The blacksmith does not need liquor to be a hero.

The blacksmith knows his duty even when sober.

Even before the most terrible battles that he had taken part in, he never drank a drop. He didn't drink. During the fighting, when both sides, both hostile battalions, clashed in fury, struggled to murder, to kill, to spill each other's blood, and jabbed at each other like wild animals -- Yehudah Kraft, the blacksmith -- scurried between the two frenzied lines, among the thousands of explosions and strange deaths, binding the open bloody wounds. He saved the wretches from death, inspired them with encouraging words, and brought them to safe havens, one in a ditch, another under a large rock, a third beside a thick tree, a fourth under a bridge. In the meantime, he zigzagged like lightning from one to another, giving them a drink of cognac, covering them, consoling them, ordering his men -- twenty-five men were under his immediate command -- to do this and that, to evacuate them, to go here and there, to transfer, to hurry, to save, not to pay attention to the bullets, the dangers and death. He did all this -- without a drop of liquor.

I could not help myself, I took this young soldier into my lap and asked him, begged him:

"My young colleague, my dear friend, our little corporal, please, drink a cup of wine."

"Thank you very much, but I don't drink."

All the soldiers entreated:

"Platoon commander, Sir! I respectfully request -- a cup of wine!"

"I appreciate it, men. But no. You drink a toast to me."

The entire company stood up as one and drained their cups in his honor.

"To platoon commander Yehudah Kraft, three cheers!"

"To our sergeant the hero -- three cheers!"

Now I could see that our victory today is certain. The little one infused us with a new uplifting spirit. The whole unit frolicked around him like worker bees around their beloved queen, and every last one of them was likely to destroy the world and return it to chaos for the sake of this little man.

Suddenly -- the telephone:

"Br-r-r..."

I pick up; it was the battalion commander:

"Ten scouts must go forward to the southwest towards the enemy's scouts, to reconnoiter the field. -- Br-r-r-r..."

This order subdued a bit the effects of the wine.

I chose ten men and briefed them on their mission.

Suddenly Yehudah Kraft stood up, approach me according to regulations and reported:

"Sir! Me too!"

"No, platoon leader, you are a medic."

Yehudah Kraft didn't move.

"Sir. I respectfully report. It is the order of the battalion commander. Send me, too, the scouts also need a medic!"

I furrowed by brow -- he was right. They too needed a medic.

What could I do? It was an order from the battalion commander.

It felt like I took a knife and cut my heart off from its heritage; I said to him:

"If that is so -- then go."

At that moment -- almost the entire company straightened up and with one voice asked to go too. With him, with the little one, with him they will all go.

A few minutes later -- they all watched the little detachment with moist eyes as they left the lighted trench, penetrated the thick darkness of the night and disappeared into the murky gloom -- towards death.

I could not help myself from shouting after them:

"Kraft -- dear friend! -- my pet little corporal! Be brave and steadfast! Return safely!"

From the thick darkness a pure child's voice was heard:

"Trust me, Enlightened Sir! -- I am a blacksmith!"

4

The battle raged for four straight days. It started after my little Corporal had left with his final words: "Trust me, Enlightened Sir!"

Yes, "trust me, Enlightened Sir" -- During the terrible maelstrom, when two bitter battalions rained a hail of fire and metal on each other, pierced each other's heart with tens of thousands of lead balls, rammed at each other with swords and spears filthy with blood, and trampled the pale corpses that were torn into shreds -- during the maelstrom, during the blinding din, the image of the dear boy never ceased flickering before my eyes and his soft-hard voice, childish and serious at once never ceased to reverberate in my ears:

"Trust me, Enlightened Sir!"

"Trust me" -- and I trusted him. Yes, I clearly felt that it was impossible not to trust him, impossible to cast doubt as to his bravery, and his safe return. -- Impossible... yet, my heart swelled with anxiety as I yearned to protect him -- who knows, what has happened to him? After all he is just a child. A child under his mother's caressing apron. -- Where is he? Why has he not been observed even for a moment? Even for the blink of an eye?...

Can it be that he too lay among the dead that he bandaged?

My heart swelled with anxiety? Can it be? Who knows?

Nevertheless, in my imagination I saw that he lives. He lives and works and does his duties faithfully and courageously. I saw thousands falling dead at his tender feet, the souls of hundreds of wretched heroes departing around him, and he, the tender child, stays and binds up wounds, stays and treats them with his pure childish love, stays and talks with their dying hearts. -- Yes, I knew, that thousands of deaths awaited him at any moment -- and he, Yehudah Kraft, greets them with a refreshing nod and continues with his work.

He -- the blacksmith -- does what he has to do.

But where is he? Where is he?

I should at least see his shadow once in a while.

From afar --

I looked in vain, I sought him, turned here and there, asked my men, asked men from other units, medics, his friends, everyone.

I even asked the trees and rocks.

The bitter battle became harsher, became more savage, because crazier -- for four straight days.

Night and day -- night and day, and another night and another day, and another night.

Only at noon on the fourth day, when the shredded, worn, exhausted battalions were actually fainting, when the battle became nothing more than drunken movement and worn out inertia -- only then did the order come from our commander:

"Retreat behind the river and entrench by the woods to the northeast!"

We carried out the order. We moved back to the river and entrenched next to the woods.

The storm abated somewhat, the tired battalion fell flat as if in a living grave, in the mud, sweating, bloody, starving, thirsty, in damp filthy clothes, taking deep labored breaths.

A blessed period of rest.

As for me -- I enlist my last reserves of will power to search for my little corporal.

If he would only come now, stand before me and report.

He didn't come.

In vain did I ask, in vain did I request, in vain did I wait for him.

The day passed.

Then the evening, and afterwards -- the night.

Whoever has not heard this snoring, the snoring of a battalion exhausted after heavy fighting -- has never heard sweet music.

The night passed.

In the morning my soldiers awoke and drank their morning cup -- I awoke for a moment, then turned over and fell asleep again.

Dreamless.

Suddenly my batman waked me:

"Enlightened Sir!"

"What is it? What is it?"

"The platoon leader, the little one!"

"What? -- He's here? Is he dead? -- Where is he?"

"No. Not dead. Alive. Not far from here. Please come with me."

I looked my batman in the eye.

"You're lying to me, he's dead."

"No Enlightened Sir, he's alive. Please come with me. It's not far."

I got up befuddled and went silently after my batman.

He led me through the trench to the woods and there, near the woods in the trench, pointed out a large rock lying next to the wall of the trench, and said to me:

"Enlightened Sir, please stand on this and look out into no-man's land, towards the right. But please be careful -- the bastards are still shooting."

I stood on the rock -- and looked out on the vista in no-man's land:

The entire area was covered with dead, wounded and dying. The dead and the half-dead moaned in their pain and gave up the ghost.

Among them, among all those lying on the ground, one man only was walking, tending them, examining each one and talking to them.

One tired but living man.

Yehudah Kraft.

My heart leaped with a mixture of joy, pain and excitement.

I wanted to shout to him.

No.

In any case, he wouldn't have heard me. Nor would he have ceased his work. It would be better to wait. I'll watch and see what he does.

Sporadic shots continued -- but God knows why: I was not afraid that he would be hit. I was fully imbued with a powerful certainty that come hell or high water -- he will not be harmed.

It was clear to me that no bullet would hit him.

No death awaits him.

He -- approached us, coming towards the trench.

As he walked he examined the dead and the wounded and suddenly -- heard a weighty mortal groan near us... he raised his eyes in our direction -- and I ducked down. He strode directly towards the dying man.

Here, not far from us, a critically wounded Russian soldier lay groaning laboriously. -- He walked towards him.

My batman and I looked on in secret with pounding hearts.

The wounded man lay about thirty paces from us -- and Yehudah Kraft went up to him, examined him, bandaged his badly wounded belly and talked with him. He spoke Hungarian. He couldn't speak

a word of Russian. He understood quite a lot, as much as he had managed to learn during the war -- but he couldn't speak it.

The wounded man waved to him with his half-dead hand as a gesture both of gratitude and of despair. Yehudah Kraft wished to acknowledge his thanks in Russian but couldn't. The Russian stretched out his tired hand. Yehudah Kraft shook his hand, then stood at attention, gave a regulation salute and said:

"I am a blacksmith!"

The Russian soldier intimated in despair that it was in vain, that there was no hope, that he was dying. Yehudah Kraft bent over him, stroked his brow, checked his pulse with his small hand and said:

"No, my friend!"

The Russian knew that it was all in vain. His last words came out fragmented, feeble, hoarse, dying.

"I want to ask a favor, my friend. Will you grant it?"

Yehudah Kraft understood him, saluted and said:

"I am a blacksmith!"

The Russian continued:

"Please -- I am dying -- a final act of grace. Will you do it?" Yehudah Kraft stance became even more rigid: "I am a blacksmith!"

The Russian didn't understand his words, but he seemed to sense their meaning. With his last ounce of strength he said:

"My friend, I am a Russian. I am a good man, my friend, not an enemy, a good man, my friend, and you too are a good man -- are you not? A good man?"

Yehudah Kraft's eyes sparkled:

"I am a blacksmith, my friend!"

"If so, please listen -- I am a Russian. I come from far away. Far away. From Siberia. I have no one there. Just a child, a small boy. His mother died not long ago. I have received a letter that the boy is alive. I love my boy, very much. I am a father, a loving father. You are not a father so you can't understand it. You can't."

Yehudah Kraft gently rebuked him and reassured him:

"I understand. I am a blacksmith!"

"If so -- please. Here in my pack -- under my head, here -- is something. A small thing. Take it. Do me an act of grace. Will you?"

"I am a blacksmith!"

"Thank you. Take the toy. It is here in my pack. Take it with you and after the war, when peace comes, send the toy. Send it to my child. I love him. He has no mother. I am dead. Send the toy. By mail. Or if possible: in person. Perhaps you yourself can travel there. I ask this. It is nice there, beautiful, white bread, fruit, everything is beautiful there. Go there, give it to the boy and tell him: your father -- your father sent it. He bought it during the war in Galicia. He bought it there, far away, for you. He is dead but he loves you. Kiss him for me. Will you do this? Won't you do this? Far away?"

Yehudah Kraft pondered for a moment looking at the distant fields, then stood at attention and decided: "I am a blacksmith!"

"Thank you so much, thank you. Take it. It is in my pack."

Yehudah Kraft bent over and made an effort to open the pack without hurting the wounded man, carefully, with restraint -- and he found a small wooden horse painted red; he laid the wounded man's head back and looked at the toy.

The wounded man let out a terrible groan. His pain pierced him. Yehudah Kraft leaned over and stroked his head. The wounded man quieted down. Yehudah Kraft looked at the toy, examined it from every side. He liked the toy, a nice horse with a mane. His soft hands petted the nice toy.

The wounded man moved -- and spoke; for the last time:

"Please -- write down the address."

Yehudah Kraft hurriedly took out a small notebook and a pencil, placed the small horse on the ground -- then had misgivings. No. Not on the ground. He picked it up and put it over the wounded man's heart on his chest. And said:

"Please."

The wounded man strove to remember and mumbled:

"Russian, Siberia, Tomsk Oblast, Chita District, Chita Municipality, Shechek Village. Address: Yaakov Sidorovich Borov. Borov. Yaakov is my son. My child. Please. -- Thank you. Will you do it? Will you do it, my friend?"

Those were his last words.

Yehudah Kraft wrote it down carefully. Replaced the small notebook and pencil. He wished to take the toy. The small horse was lodged in the hand of the dying man who held the toy firmly, forcefully. Yehudah Kraft hesitated for a moment: to take it? The hand wouldn't let go. He examined the dying man -- his heart. Was he dead? He checked his pulse. The dying man moved for a second and mumbled something incoherent, almost inaudible, as if in a dream: Will you do it? -- With one deep breath he died.

Yehudah Kraft laid out the body properly. His legs and his arms on his chest. Then he extracted the horse from the dead man's hand, clutched it to his heart, stood at the feet of the dead man, tensed his legs together, brought his hand to his temple and with his other hand -- the little horse; he stretched himself to his full height at attention and with slightly moist eyes declaimed out loud like a boy playing at soldiers: "A blacksmith am I!"

## Jacob's Bow

1

The liberation of the small town of Yaborov from the yoke of the Cossacks -- is written in the memoirs of the Fifteenth Division "Black Fire on Top of White Fire". It is listed as one of the victories both beautiful and bitter of the army of Kaiser Franz Josef the First in the mighty war.

But our brethren the sons of Israel of the Yaborov congregation know what they know.

They know that this immense victory was the handiwork of the grandson of the congregation's rabbi: "clever Yankele".

I, myself, wonder at this. This victory cost me twenty-two of my valiant men, and I almost lost my legs, so I shall evade being a witness and deliver the entire tale as told to me by Yankele's elder sister, on the thirty-seventh day of the counting of the Omer: the day of "courage when faced with a trial"...

2

"You know, Sir," his sister Deborah began with tears of joy in her gray Galician Jewish eyes. "You know, Sir, what the meaning is of this salvation? ... No, Sir, we know nothing at all. I ask your forgiveness, you are, Sir, a real military man ... but to know what brought us this victory -- you have to be a Jew from our miserable town, a Jew of Yaborov. Yes, Sir, you have to be here in our town together with us and together with the Cossacks in order to know, first, who the Cossacks are in general, and what they are for us in particular, and Sir does not know this. After all, Sir either chases after them, or, pardon me, flees from them when in danger, so how could he know them? ... Is it not so? I don't want to tell you nor am I even capable of doing so. Whoever has not tasted them can in no way ever know them, and I just want to tell you about the victory itself: about the bravery of my little brother..."

I looked at the little hero who walked about the house as if none of this concerned him -- and I recalled a story of the romanticist Yukai: I recall the story of that prodigy who was able to prophesy to everyone in the village the good and bad things that would happen to the villagers, yet he himself didn't even know how to talk properly, and he ate all sorts of creepy crawlers and weeds that would most likely inflict a strange death on a person -- but he didn't notice them at all ... But our young Yankele wouldn't do such offensive acts, and not only did he know how to talk properly, but he would learn by heart the "parable of the eagle", together with the commentaries of the Rashba [Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet], the Ran [Rabbi Nissim Ben Reuven of Girona], and the Rash [Rabbi Asher Ben Yehiel] -- however it was impossible to conduct a routine conversation with him, he neither listened nor heard anything, nor did he answer any questions that did not directly affect his topic ... but if it touched his topic -- his eyes would shine and his dirty black face would light up with a sort of bravery never accorded a German general.

Deborah recounted:

"As a matter of fact, this poor little one caused us to worry all the time. We suffered quietly with eyes closed and hearts crushed with torment. And yet the little one -- was the apple of our eye. Above all the Cossacks abused our children. The abuse was taken to the extreme. Their greatest pleasure -- was to feed them carrion. They found a great pleasure in teaching them to dance upon the Torah scrolls, and so on. All the children sobbed from moral sadness and surrendered under the physical abuse they

suffered from the Cossacks -- this child would do ... God knows, what he would do to them had they not forced him to commit these acts."

"What prevented them from doing so?"

"What prevented them? -- A miracle from heaven: by chance their commander was lodged with us, and thus we were saved from all the bitter edicts that cause the whole town to cry out under that yoke. When I say 'we were saved', some kind of salvation it was: To see the torments inflicted on the entire town... And if all the townspeople suffered physically from them and their outrages, that is: from physical edicts -- we, the members of our household, suffered *spiritually* sevenfold. Does Sir not understand? In truth it is difficult to understand these devils. Let Sir paint himself a picture: their commander sits in our house, eats with us, smiles at us with a devious and defiling smirk, caresses us with compliments and, at the same time, right in front of us, writes his terrible commands to his officers: to shave the beards and the sidelocks of our elders and to paste them on women's faces, and then to dress the women with the garments of the men and vice versa, and to force them to enter the synagogue to pray together... All this he would write in front of us, and from time to time intentionally show us these orders; to increase our suffering his drunken mind invented scheme upon strange scheme. One of these schemes was really special: 'suddenly', in the middle of the meal, he would regret having done all these acts, and immediately sit down and write out an order 'to immediately retract all the evil edicts, to grant total freedom to the Jews to do anything they wish, and not only that but to beg forgiveness for the outrages...'. He would read out to us the new order and ask our opinion. As if, should he do this or not? This way he would pluck on our strung out nerves, each time it was expressed differently, each time he would consult us... each time -- regret the new order because he didn't want to retract the edict... until our little one would speak to him with the respect he deserved..."

"How is that?"

"Sir asks how it is? -- Very simple: no entreaty and no power enabled us to bring our little one, our 'clever wild one', to treat the commander with respect. We even became so fearful that it took our breath away. Let Sir imagine: when we all trembled as with fever before the tyrant -- the little one would talk with him as with an ordinary scoundrel, casually insult him, talk sternly with him and curse him relentlessly. There wasn't a sharp word that wasn't served up to him -- once he even spat at him..."

"And he?"

"And he? -- That was his cruel cleverness: he laughed at the little one and said with a smile:

"Well, clever Yankele (these words he learned from the townspeople), very good: you do your thing and I'll do mine. For that I will recall my good order and declare new edicts..."

"With that he answered the humiliation at the hands of our little one, when we in vain tried to do everything we could to influence the little one. But he remained firm: he looked at us scornfully and said:

"In any case, this pig will remain a pig, he's lying: it's not up to him, he's a lying pig, nothing more."

"That's how the 'horror-game' continued day in and day out.

"But what caused us to be so afraid that we almost had a nervous breakdown was -- this wild child's bow. A few days ago, just after the Passover holiday, I looked and saw him suddenly leave his studies and busy himself making the bow. I immediately remembered that Lag BaOmer was upon us and didn't wonder at what he was doing. That's what children do.

"But once he comes up to me, raises the bow upwards and says:

"You see? -- "Jacobs bow". My name is also Jacob, and our patriarch Jacob also had the bow, as it is written: "by my sword and my bow" [Genesis 48:21], and with this bow I will kill our bastard.'

"I covered his mouth with my hand:

"Are you crazy? -- Be quiet!

"Crazy? Come and I'll show you!"

"Without further ado he ran to the other room, the room of 'our' commander and I ran after him to prevent him from doing some foolish deed... I hadn't caught up with him -- and he was already standing in front of the commander, raised his his bow towards his face and said:

"Poof, puff, Esau! -- poof, Edomite! Thus will all your enemies be lost, by God!"

"And he shot an 'arrow' at him.

"The commander laughed out loud and said again as he was wont to:

"Well, good, clever Yankele! An arrow for an arrow, tomorrow I will shoot an arrow at your synagogue!"

"You won't get the chance, evil Titus!" He said with contempt -- and went out.

"The commander sat down and wrote out an 'order', laughing, and in the meantime turned to me:

"What did that creep say?"

"I explained to him that he called him 'Evil Titus' as well as its meaning as I understood it.

"The commander knit his eyebrows and pondered for a moment, then he stood up, took a few steps and sent me out. I left the room -- and in the meantime I saw: he took his order -- and tore it into shreds, cursing:

"Bloody Jew-boy!"

"He hurled the order under the table..."

### 3

"I have often seen him do acts like these whenever he gets into a 'conversation' with the little one ... Many times has he done such things, at first we saw no connection between the two, but later, when it occurred not just once or twice -- we laughed: 'Through the praise of children and infants'... [Psalms 8:3]

"But lately this game has become dangerous. Our Yankele said things that caused our hair to stand on end. The more we quaked with fear -- the more he became kind and cheerful, as if he saw an avenging angel coming towards us. Four or five days ago I heard him tell my little sister:

"Do you know Roche'le? This is not a real bow, with this bow nothing can be done. I'll find a real bow, a handgun. You know? Lag BaOmer is almost upon us."

"My little sister went up to him, put her hand on his mouth and whispered something.

"This little sister of mine was in fact the little one's evil instinct, in everything she was his confidant and ally; the two allies, the bitter foes of the commander, would always walk together whispering to one another. If we scolded him on his acts and manners with the commander -- she would always support and encourage him.

"Now, too, she certainly whispered something similar to him.

"The next time I scolded him, I snatched his bow and broke it.

"He laughed: 'break it, so what, in any case it wasn't any good: on Lag BaOmer I'll have a gun, and he won't be granted...'

"Be quiet, you creep!' I put my hand over his mouth and threw him outside.

"During the past few days nothing unusual happened; the commander ceased his evil acts in the town, God forbid not from remorse, but for a completely different reason: he was too busy; one could sense some sort of commotion among his officers. In the meantime, of course, they didn't cease to become even more drunk than they were before. Last night, when the commander was drunk, the little one came up to him and with an excess of chutzpah said to him:

"Well, when are you going to leave? You had better hurry, because tomorrow is Lag BaOmer!...'

"Of course the commander didn't understand the word of this, but as usual he answered him:

"If you eat some pork -- I'll command the battalion to leave immediately!

"How will you give the order?'

"How? -- I'll just order them to leave, to run away from your Austrians; they will hear one cannon shot and leave all at once, well, agreed!

"The little one thought for a moment and said:

"Good, write the order.'

"Well, if that's the way it's going to be: bring him some pork, but say a blessing over it, out loud!

"First write out the order.'

"With frantic laughter the commander sat down and wrote out the short order.

"We stood by and laughed at the whole thing. We were used to this game.

"In the meantime the little one went out for a few moments and returned in a panic:

"Deborah, Deborah, go quickly, mother is calling you!...'

"In a panic I ran outside to mother. But I couldn't find her anywhere.

"Suddenly -- a terrible shot shook the entire yard.

"After the shot -- our Roche'le, scared to death, left the commander's yard with a piece of paper in her hand.

"I knew the order in her hand, I asked her where she was running off to -- but she didn't say a word. She ran as fast as an arrow towards headquarters.

"I ran to the yard from where the shot was heard -- and a shocking scene lay before me in all its terror: the commander lay dead, and next to him -- our little one.

"I couldn't say a word. I choked up and fainted.

"One cannon shot had done him in.

"Half an hour later -- the damned battalion fled for its life from the town.

"Sir knows the rest:

"That same night, the day before yesterday, you came and at the head of your battalion: my sister Roche'le.

"Jacob's bow", added Deborah and, her happiness concealed, embraced the clever savage and showered him with kisses.

# The Spider

1

Even before we were able to rest our tired limbs from four days of continuous fighting, still snoring in our sweet snatched sleep -- we were faced with an order:

"One of the reconnaissance officers will take six men and attack the enemy's machine (machine-gun) that is on the other side of the bridge over the Dniester, and bring it back dead or alive!"

The order was given to our group of eight. We were all tired, shattered, drunk with exhaustion, all of us fortunate to have been saved from the jaws of death. We lay down in one room of a dugout and slept, safe, but not out of the woods, after the terrible battle we hoped that we would finally be able to rest at least for a day or two.

And suddenly -- the order.

By chance I was the one who received the order and I read it out loud. Of course I did this as my duty, I myself was to be in charge -- that is: I wanted to be, but immediately one of our comrades stood up, the officer Walter Amoodo and pushed me forcibly back onto my bed:

"Where the hell are you going? Lie down. I'll go."

He got up and got dressed (though we barely took anything off before going to sleep) and in the meantime mumbled as if to himself:

"I'll show that cowardly swine what courage is. After this if he will dare to dishonor me again -- I'll take him to hell with me. Let me die with ... " [Judges 16:30].

Walter Amoodo was a Jew -- more of a Jew than any of us. Walter Amoodo was a strange man. He was a young man of twenty-two, who knew not one Hebrew letter, whose Judaism before the war was limited to yearly visits to the cemetery on the anniversary of his mother's death, where he gave the caretaker a gold coin to plant flowers on his mother's grave. When he was called up to go to war -- he went again to the caretaker of the cemetery, gave him a gold coin and said:

"Listen, Jew, this time plant an etrog on my mother's grave do you understand? Plant an etrog!"

The eyes of the Jewish caretaker bulged as he said: an etrog?

Walter Amoodo sensed his astonishment and corrected the crookedness in his heart:

"Why are you surprised? I want an etrog, I once saw... like this, this flower... a Jewish fruit, and I want one on my mother's grave. Is it possibly -- too expensive?"

He gave him another coin -- and left.

Walter Amoodo was an unquestionable Jew.

But here in the war, in the campaign, a demon got suddenly got hold of him -- and Walter Amoodo was the only one of the Jewish officers for whom every word or gesture having to do with our Jewishness gnawed at his flesh and spirit, and led him to do things -- for which he got so many medals for bravery that there was no longer any room for them on his chest. All of this -- to show that a Jew was as good as anyone else.

With his bemedalled chest Walter Amoodo came to our company, the reconnaissance company. And

here, as if to spite him, he found Thaddeus Galzgoj the commander, whose entire entertainment in the war was limited to insults towards us, towards the Jews. Thaddeus Galzgoj was a "born officer", and never was there an officer who had as little right to talk about cowardice as him. For that reason alone he picked on Walter Amoody, whose silver and gold medals on his chest drove him to distraction... Walter Amoody suffered in silence -- and did what he had to do. Heroism upon heroism, one dangerous mission after another... Of course he never received a medal for heroism from Commander Thaddeus Galzgoj, certainly not: he was the one who always found fault with Amoody's deeds, some mistake and some --- cowardice.

For that reason Walter Amoody stood up and took upon himself to fulfill this senseless order. Senseless -- because it was impossible for six men to pounce upon machine gun on the other side of the bridge, whose entire crew was in a safe place, to the extent that even a large unit couldn't approach them.

Walter Amoody took six men, formed them up in line and said:

"Listen, kids -- which one of you is a really good swimmer?"

They all answered "me".

"Good," said Walter Amoody, "if so, throw away your rifles, take a bomb and tie it to your head. Understood?"

And that's what they did.

The bridge over the Dniester River was our bridge: we were the ones who had laid it out and any minute the enemy could have blown it up. We needed that bridge, because we were in a state of "attack alert", where the enemy was on the other bank and put all his effort into not abandoning his position. That's why we stood with taut nerves and fearful expectation that they would cut off our only way to get to them: the bridge that cost us so much dreadful effort to tie together the two banks of the Dniester.

Walter Amoody left his soldiers for a moment and went to our artillery emplacement.

A few moments later we were deafened by a tremendous explosion -- the bridge was ripped to shreds and we all stood pale and wracked with despair so that we really cried.

At that moment Walter Amoody returned and said:

"Good, now we'll go!... What are you standing around for... pillars of cheese? I myself blew up the bridge."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm not crazy, but an order -- is an order. I want to bring the machine here. And if a few moments ago I myself was somewhat doubtful if I would be able to carry out my plot -- now there's no choice. I am forced to bring it here. If *he* isn't willing to spare seven of his soldiers and sends them to a certain death, sacrificial lambs -- at least let us sacrifice the bridge on the altar of these men's lives.... This bridge, my friends, has no mother and father and no sweetheart lamenting at home; while we -- do. Let's go! -- I'll show him...!"

And off they went.

In the meantime evening fell.

As if forced by the devil we all stood and accompanied him with desperate stares. Then -- we fell

asleep.

2

After an hour, an hour and a quarter, had past, we were awoken by a tremendous shout from several men, a shout for help. We jumped towards the voices: towards the Dniester.

In the darkness, a strange sight, hair-raising and amusing at the same time, appeared before us. By the weak light of the moon: seven men were swimming through the current towards our bank -- each of them with one hand on some object pulling it behind them through the water...

It was the enemy's machine.

And after it another object...

As they crawled out of the water we saw: the second object was a man's body.

Walter Amoody came up to us -- dragging the corpse, which he threw down at our feet and said:

"Here you are, comrades, a present for that..."

He didn't finish his statement. Whether from suppressed anger or out of dread of discipline before "that" commander -- we don't know.

We shook his hand affectionately honoring his amazing feat -- but he drew away and went to the telephone:

"Commander Sir," he reported through the handset, "the order has been carried out. And I have also brought you a present, Distinguished Sir -- I have brought you your good friend: the machine's officer. A Russian pig -- also a Jew lover.

Apparently the commander did not understand from the telephone call Walter Amoody's venomous hint, and told him in a bland voice that he should go to sleep, because he would come in person several hours later.

A few hours later -- the commander came.

We all slept and tried to awaken Walter Amoody, but his entire body was exhausted and his spirit did not wake up. The commander did not find it in himself to awaken him, so he talked with us in a whisper about the incident. "In truth, it's a ... great operation... but ... the bridge ... that's terrible. To blow up the bridge."

We were amazed at his inner contempt and we made an effort to placate him, to prove to him that this courageous act deserved to be glorified. We promised him -- that now that the other bank had been cleared of danger -- we would all rebuild the bridge, but none of this made any difference. The commander shook his head dismissively.

Suddenly -- Walter Amoody shuttered in his sleep and woke up in a panic. Thrashing around with his arms and legs, emitting strenuous curses... he jumped out of bed terribly fearful with a pale face and bulging eyes -- and looked on the bed with a frozen countenance, overwhelmed by fear. We went up to him and he pointed at the sheet: 'thunder and lightning!... there it is!... disgusting vermin! Phew! Brrr!'

He flinched away from the bed and jammed himself against the wall, trembling.

We look at the sheet and saw -- a big black spider standing there and looking at us.

When the commander saw this he looked at Walter Amoody with a penetrating stare, went up to him

and said to him contemptuously:

"'Sir Officer' is afraid of the spider, that's great, really great. A chest full of medals -- and the spider. Ah, that's fitting. What a shame, a disgrace -- no, 'Sir Officer'. An officer like that does not deserve medals for bravery! It would be better if you took them off your chest."

We stood there like pillars of marble. Walter Amoody stood for a moment, his eyes bulging, his whole body trembling, then drew himself up to his full height, approached the commander, his face almost touching the commander's, and began to shout:

"Commander, Sir! My medals for bravery? Medals for bravery! Leave my medals of bravery alone!" he shouted directly into his mouth. "my soul and my life I gave to get them! My soul!"

He clenched his fist as if to hit him -- then pulled away. Suddenly he went to the bed, took the spider, held it in front of the commander's face and shouted: "here you are, Commander Sir! Here you are! If you're such a hero -- here you are!"

And he shoved the vermin into the commander's mouth.

The commander's whole body shook, he recoiled, stammered few words -- Walter Amoody turned to either side as if searching for something and let out a terrible yell:

"Comrades! Where is my handgun? The life of this miserable bastard, this coward has soiled my soul! Where is my handgun? -- Let him die like a dog!"

He found the revolver and shot off all six bullets at once. Then he took hold of the dead body, dragged it outside, threw it on top of the corpse of the dead Russian officer and snorted:

"Here you are! Here's your friend! A hero like you!"

In a state of dreadful anger he kicked them both and broke out into wild, insane laughter.

## The Battalion Commander's Great Benevolence

The only grace we have been given is martyrdom.

My grandfather

The battalion commander gathered us together at his pleasure and this time spoke with us as one would speak with a neighbor.

Not an order, God forbid, not some strict military matter nor a reprimand.

No, simply: he wished to win us over.

The battalion commander spoke to us simply and freely, using gentle polite language.

In gentle polite language, the battalion commander told us in his poetic style that was well known throughout the battalion: "I have heard that it is said that I am a bad person.

"That I am a bad person. That's not right!

"That's not true.

"In fact I am a military man! A soldier. Nothing more.

"Nothing more.

"It is true, sometimes I have to be a bit too strict!

"A bit too strict.

"But it's not my fault, officers, it's not my fault.

"It's not my fault.

"You understand that discipline is dear to us all.

"Dear to us all.

"But I, myself, I am a good and honest man.

"A good and honest man.

"If it were not for discipline, I would be like one of you, by His Majesty's button!\*

\* On the buttons of the soldiers uniforms the emblems of the royal house were embossed.

"Long live His Majesty's button!"

Thus spoke our battalion commander in soft and pleasant words.

Soft and pleasant words.

We believed him, our battalion commander, by His Majesty's button we believed.

The battalion commander was not one who boasted of his goodness and honesty. He was a soldier, a real soldier. In the true sense of the word.

In the true sense of the word.

A soldier does not boast of his goodness and honesty.

More than that, a soldier boasts of his courage, that he is fearless, that he is brave and knows no danger and his soul's conviction that does not confess to know death.

Does not confess to know death.

The battalion commander was brave and very loyal: fearlessly, he would send his soldiers into the greatest danger and did not dread death.

"There is no greater coward than one who takes the life of his friend" -- said the sage. And he, the battalion commander, was no coward and never took the life of an enemy. No. He always sent his soldiers. Let them take the life of their friends.

The battalion commander's courage knew no limit or boundary.

No limit or boundary.

Stand and order the soldiers to fight, to put themselves at risk, to die and to cause death, to stand over them and look at them with a trembling eye, and a trembling heart and prickly skin -- that's not courage.

That's not courage.

Courage is to -- sleep at that time.

Sleep at that time.

To lie down on a soft well-sprung sofa, five or six kilometers away from the front, and to order his soldiers fearlessly and with courage to assault the guns spitting hellfire, the tens of thousands of bullets whistling through the air, puncturing hearts and skulls -- and at the same time sleep the sleep of innocents, rest with a smile and dreams of red wine -- that is unsurpassed courage.

Unsurpassed courage.

The truth was that the battalion commander received medal after medal and gratitude after gratitude from the supreme command for his courage, his bravery and his unsurpassed loyalty.

Unsurpassed.

There is integrity, too, up there in the soul of the supreme command. The supreme command does not deprive any battalion commander of his due for the courage of his soldiers. On account of this integrity, the supreme command delegates to their battalion commander, their playmate. He too was a good and honest man. In his goodness and honesty, there was no way he could put up with the ordinary soldier "infantryman Moshe Chaim Cohen, age: thirty-eight, civilian occupation: elementary school teacher, family: a wife and six children, religion: the religion of Moses".

Religion: the religion of Moses.

Do you think it is possible that a good and honest man and a good soldier would in any way be able to put up with infantryman Moshe Chaim Cohen? Do you? -- I don't.

Do you? -- I don't

It's not that every infantryman called Moshe Chaim Cohen is naturally a Jew. God forbid.

God forbid.

It's just that names like that cause the battalion commander to feel a sort of -- pardon my saying so -- revulsion.

A sort of revulsion.

Not, God forgive, for any national or religious reason, but simply: they might be converts.

Simply: they might be converts.

Infantrymen Moshe Chaim Cohen suffered the torments of Job, the torture of Egypt and the tribulation of hell. Yet these torments inflicted by the battalion commander -- were torments of love. By His Majesty's button: they were torments of love.

The battalion commander would torment him out of love. He liked Moshe Chaim Cohen. Even though he couldn't put up with his name. He wanted to make out of him a man, a soldier.

A man, a soldier.

It's not that Moshe Chaim Cohen did not faithfully fulfill his tasks like all his comrades at the front. No. It was because the battalion commander wanted to make him into a soldier who knew how to suffer.

A soldier who knew how to suffer.

Because no soldier deserves to take pride in this title until he knows how to suffer. This is what the battalion commander was teaching him, infantrymen Moshe Chaim Cohen, age: thirty-eight, civilian occupation: elementary school teacher, family: wife and six children, religion: the religion of Moses.

Religion: the religion of Moses.

The battalion commander taught him according to the usual pedagogical method. Usual according to His Majesty's prominent people. The battalion commander was a traditional person, as befits one who is at home in the supreme command and His Majesty's button, and thus his teaching was according to the tradition of His Majesty's button. "Whoever spares the rod hates their children" [Proverbs 13:24], said the wisest of them all, and the battalion commander would not spare the First Sergeant's rod from infantryman Moshe Chaim Cohen. He didn't hate him. Not at all.

He didn't hate him. To the contrary.

Infantrymen Moshe Chaim Cohen, age thirty-eight, teacher, wife and six children, would stand from time to time, about twice a week, bent over against the wall, his backside bared, receiving the rod before everyone, to the point that they closed their eyes and the old sick blood of Moshe Chaim Cohen flowed. The reason? -- Foolish philosophers grub for the root of all reasons, but a real soldier would not look for one. He found it. He always found it. Even in a place where it wasn't.

Even in a place where it wasn't.

There is no need to say where it was. He saw it through the mirror that was shining seventyfold. And through this mirror the battalion commander saw the "iron ration" that tragically Moshe Chaim Cohen ate prematurely. Eating the iron ration is strictly forbidden, that is: until the supreme command issues an order permitting it. We had not eaten for three days, but permission had not come, and Moshe Chaim Cohen strength was exhausted to the point where he turned green and fainted, so he did what he did: he ate what was forbidden.

He ate what was forbidden.

The First Sergeant heard about it, and from him it went to the company commander and then to the battalion commander. That's all there was to it.

To the battalion commander. That's all there was to it.

The battalion commander didn't hesitate much. In his fondness for Moshe Chaim Cohen, he ordered that he be given twenty-five lashes on his dry, wrinkled, thin body, and that he not be given food for

another four straight days. Three and four equals seven.

Three and four equals seven.

Because the forbidden meal that Moshe Chaim Cohen ate was never digested. He threw it up. And thus infantrymen Moshe Chaim Cohen, age: thirty-eight, civilian occupation: teacher, continued to fast, suffering in quiet. And on his face... his face began to change.

Began to change.

On his cheeks two dimples with three grieving lines deepened, as if he had no flesh at all on his cheeks, his lips were greenish blue like a martyr's and his eyes -- oh his eyes, oh, oh his eyes...

Oh his eyes, oh his eyes!...

His eyes looked like like the eyes of slaughtered cattle in the slaughterhouse. None of us had the fortitude to talk with him and to look into his eyes. Not only none of us, but even the company commander didn't look at him when he dressed him down. Only the battalion commander had the fortitude. Only him. He had the fortitude to look directly into his eyes, as a soldier. Because he was fond of him and aside from that he was a good and honest man. He looked at his bulging dim eyes and said to him:

"Infantryman Moshe Chaim Cohen. Don't think that I'm doing this out of hatred. I love my soldiers. Yes. I want them to be men, to be soldiers. And I also want you to to be a man, a soldier who knows discipline.

"Who knows discipline.

"You must know that an order is in order, and if it forbids you to eat the preserved food, the iron ration, it is protecting you, because it doesn't want you to waste your food at the wrong time so that God forbid you will not suffer hunger later on. That's all it is. God forbid that you should weaken.

"That's all it is. God forbid that you should weaken."

Moshe Chaim Cohen became more and more gaunt, tinged with blue, thinner, starving to death.

Starving to death.

Another soldier who could no longer bear the suffering of Moshe Chaim Cohen whose body had become a monstrosity -- snuck him a piece of meat. Moshe Chaim Cohen threw it up. Not discreetly. In front of everyone.

In front of everyone.

The battalion commander heard of this, came himself, and in his honesty and goodness said to Moshe Chaim Cohen in a gentle sweet voice:

"Moshe Chaim Cohen, this is the way it is. It's not enough that you were whipped, starved for three days with an additional four days. No, this was not enough for you. Nevertheless, I want you to finally become a soldier.

"Finally become a soldier.

"You did well, Moshe Chaim Cohen, that you threw up that forbidden piece of meat. You do well and I take pity on you that you didn't mend your ways. You do not wish to obey me. Even though I'm looking out for your welfare.

"Even though I'm looking out for your welfare.

Who gave you the forbidden piece of meat? Please tell me, Moshe Chaim Cohen."

Moshe Chaim Cohen kept quiet and said nothing.

"Moshe Chaim Cohen, if you don't reveal who gave it to you, you will catch more."

Moshe Chaim Cohen kept quiet and did not reveal who it was.

"If you remain stubborn, Moshe Chaim Cohen, I'll add on another day of fasting.

"Another day of fasting!"

Moshe Chaim Cohen was not startled, was not horrified and did not lose heart. He no longer had the flesh on his body to be horrified and his heart... his heart no longer felt any clear feelings.

No longer felt any clear feelings.

One more day of fasting -- Moshe Chaim Cohen aged, shrunk, withered like the body of one of the wild Indians, lying out for a month in the burning sun. The thin skeleton, still alive, called Moshe Chaim Cohen, was just like that. That thin skeleton which no longer showed any sign of life apart from the dry cough that pierced the heart of any who heard him with rusty needles -- that thin skeleton stood all day with his rifle on his shoulder and prayed and prayed and prayed.

And prayed and prayed and prayed.

Moshe Chaim Cohen would always pray, even in the most disturbing times of war, more so did he pray in the holy days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Those days were the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

That gaunt skeleton did not want to leave this world without repenting in full. Thus Moshe Chaim Cohen would sit on a stone or stand guard with his rifle on his shoulder and pray and pray.

Voicelessly, without moving his lips. With his eyes closed rocking his body, oh his body, oh his body...

Oh his body, oh his body!...

On the eve of Yom Kippur, at twilight, the First Sergeant came and informed him that when it became dark, his punishment would be over, and that it would be time to eat.

It would be time to eat.

Moshe Chaim Cohen did not jump for joy, his heart did not skip a beat and his stomach showed no appetite for food.

Whoever has feet, let him jump -- he no longer had feet. Only two dry bones.

Whoever has a heart, let it beat -- he no longer had a heart. Only something like a dying animal.

Whoever has a stomach within him, let him eat with gusto -- he no longer has a stomach within him. But he does have something like a fresh wound. Like some sort of rodent absorbed with its last vitality, stinking and stinging.

Stinking and stinging.

"First segeant, Sir," said the walking skeleton, "I, I..."

"Yes, yes" said the First Sergeant, mercifully, "first we will give you a bit of milk, then some thin porridge, a bit of rice..."

"No," said Moshe Chaim Cohen, voicelessly, "First Sergeant, Sir ... I request -- fast until tomorrow."

"You're out of your mind, Moshe Chaim Cohen!"

Moshe Chaim Cohen no longer had the strength to talk and could not explain his request to the First Sergeant. He said to him but one word:

"Yom Kippur."

# In the Name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth

## Rizpah Daughter of Aiah

### [2 Samuel 3:7]

She did not let the birds touch them by day or the wild animals by night  
2 Samuel 21, 11 [should be 21:10]

For Dear Mrs. Frieda Chirikover

The Sergeant returned from his mission and reported to me:

"The enemy has turned tail and left the battlefield. Some demon suddenly spooked him, or this is some sort of ruse on his part. To a depth of three kilometers there is no trace of the enemy. The village of Bazara is completely clear. Clear, Sir, the miserable village is clear. Those famished ones even snatched the garbage. They looted it all, the bloody robbers took everything. But to the right of the village, not far away, are the ruins of an estate with half a house and a roofless cowshed. As I approached the half-demolished house, I saw a woman standing at the opened door. The woman stood there with unkempt hair and tattered clothes, gesturing as if warning us not to approach the house. The woman was presumably a Jewess. Her gestures were crazy and so terrible, Sir, that I said to myself, I thought, Sir, that people must be hiding in the house, the enemy, lying in ambush, for we were only three, four counting me, and the woman warned us with signs not to approach. That's why I didn't go forward, but returned to report to Sir, and to ask if he will be so kind as to give me a few more men, including one who understands Jewish, so that we could talk to her, who knows, what's there."

"No question about it, comrade," I said to the loyal and conscientious Sergeant. "If you need men -- take my whole company!"

However -- I thought -- in any case it would be a good idea if I went myself to see what type of person she is and what that house is.

I went off with a few of my men.

That village really was clear. Of all it contained. Everything was destroyed, everything was looted, everything was taken. Except for a few mewling cats who had lost their owners, there was not a single living creature. After passing through the dead village, about two hundred paces to our right, I saw the demolished estate. Looking through my binoculars I clearly saw: a woman standing in front of the door, in a strange and heartrending stance: her two feet seemed to be rooted in the ground underneath her and her two arms formed a cross with the two door posts. Her hair was unkempt, her clothes tattered and undone, and her eyes, to the extent that I could discern through the glass, were round and bulging in terror. We approached, but as soon as the woman saw us, a sudden, secret, heart-wrenching groan escaped from within her, and with first one hand and then the other, she began to wave to us shooing us away. We went on. The closer we came to her, the more intense were the strange gestures of her hands and her feet. The secret, hoarse groan she let out from within got stronger, an overt scream, a terrible painful lament, mixed with jumbled incomprehensible words. Of all the grating lament I understood these words:

"Mein einzige kind, mein Kadish'le, last mir leben, gazlanim!" (My only son, my Kadish, leave me

him! Thieves!")

At first I thought: I am mistaken, I don't understand her. I raised my gun and went towards her. Her wailing overflowed into soft entreaties that made one's hair stand on end and weakened the muscles of one's hands. She left the place from where she had not moved until now and, so as not to let me go on, stood like a living cross blocking the way. Her face was contorted and her damp eyes, red and bulging with a terrible burning flame, threatening but full of entreaties and pleas for mercy.

Not to go further -- I can't do that, I am in danger here. Who knows what's in the house? I aimed my gun at her face.

The woman quieted down, but did not move from where she stood. With round bulging eyes she stood and looked at me. And only when she saw that I was ready to shoot her, she fell down on her knees with her hands raised, and in a hoarse choking voice, speaking partly Polish and partly in broken German begged me to have mercy upon her, for she was unsullied by sin and her children too were innocent and not at fault...

It became clear to me that this miserable creature was crazy. I put away my gun and began to persuade her. I put her mind at ease that I wouldn't harm her and that I only had to check out the house. The poor one stood up, emphasizing again her dark red eyes, and in this situation, face-to-face, retreated back and stood where she had first stood... There by the house, she again stood as if crucified, and with soft, awful weeping began to ask me not to go in, not to cross the threshold of the house.

I explained to her that I had no choice but to come in. I had to know what was in there. The miserable one did not pay attention to what I said; she stood as if frozen and did not let me enter.

In the meantime one of my men pointed out to me that she was bleeding from both her legs, and that she was already standing in a pool of blood... I looked carefully: it was true. There was a small pool of blood beneath her.

What is this?

I took one step towards her, and at that moment, as one prepared for all the catastrophes of the world, she thrust out her chest and in a grating voice yelled:

"Shoot, shoot, vile thief! Kill me, cruel one, kill me... kill me... please... please kill me... it's all one to me... There is no one to say Kaddish over me..."

Her voice choked with tears that flowed out of her open eyes like two cursed fountains, plentifully, heavy and murky, bountiful, like a melting glacier.

Two of my men held her by force and I went into the house.

When they open the inner door -- my heart skipped a beat. On the floor: a wide pool of blood like a piece of red carpet, and three dead children laid there.

In the cradle lay a one-year-old child playing with his soft hands and feet.

I closed my eyes. I couldn't look. Even a soldier well-versed in killing could not bear it.

I went to the cradle and picked up the tender baby. The baby -- such a nice wonderful little creature, like a living and kicking painting of Rubens -- spread its two little arms, soft and warm, hugged my neck so tightly that I was almost strangled. With mute love, blessed pressure, and the miserable cooing of a dove.

My heart felt a warm shudder. At such a time one couldn't even kiss the small creature.

I looked again and I saw a few pieces of parchment hung around his soft neck: four bloodstained Mezzuzot.

I embraced the little one and kissed him. Tears began to well up in the child's two clear black eyes.

At that moment the mother burst out of the hands of the two men, sprawled over me, snatched the baby from my hand and with a stinging love, crazy as if concussed, embraced the baby to her heart and with an abundance of pity cooed like a dove:

"Mein Kadish'le! (My Kadish)..."

Astonished, I stood and watched. A moment later she let the baby slip from her hands into the cradle, and began again to shout that no one dare touch her son, otherwise she would strangle us --

Again, my men and I grasped her, laid her down on the bed, as she groaned and twitched like a wounded lioness, so that I could check her body to find out: from where does the incessant bleeding comes from? -- Right away I found out: In her left thigh there was a deep laceration all the way to the bone from where the beautiful blood flowed and streamed, hot and reddish. A fresh deep wound many inches long was open from near the hip diagonally through the bleeding veins almost to the knee.

Nausea assailed me. My men bound up the open wound.

Meanwhile, Yaakov Shapira, one of my men, came in gripping a young maiden, whose eyes were flashing at once with a black flame and a dread of death:

Shapira said, "I brought her out of the basement by force, she was too scared to come out by herself."

The maiden was about sixteen years old, her face clumsy with terror. Her hair was stained with clotted blood. From shock she could not speak. For a while she stood and looked at us through smoking eyes, as if she had just awoken from a deep slumber, then, as she noticed us, she fell upon the children laying in the blood and burst out crying.

I raised her up out of the blood and stroked her hair. She stood up but it took a while before I was able to get her to talk.

"Little chicks -- dear chicks --" she said through groans and tears. "Dear pure children... my mother... Where is my mother?..."

She fell on her mother who was tied to the bed, kissing her insanely. I had the maiden drink a bit of red wine, she calmed down a bit and began to talk, blubbering:

"Innocent chicks... pure victims. The Russians would hide in our house. They never liked the Russians. The officers would seduce them with sweets, so that they would inform, but they kept quiet. They never revealed anything that they knew. 'They will never sell out their country', they said. Once, at night -- woe is me, woe, we were all awake while they were asleep, the Russians sat with us and tortured us with questions. One of them sat on their bed as they were sleeping and looked at them. Looked and waited... Suddenly one of the children began to chatter in his dream... I sensed the danger, and wanted to wake him up but they didn't let me. The child talked. The eldest of them, talked... talked in his sleep, in Polish, so they understood... My mother a began to beg: but it didn't help... Woe is me... woe... The officers stood up and said: now it is all clear to us. Then they placed two guards over us and went somewhere. A few moments later one of them came back and said to one of the guards: 'I will leave here and you two will finish these bastards off! Slaughter them, all three at once! Do you understand? -- Then I will come back and see: have you carried out my order? -- and he went off. We prostrated ourselves at the feet of the guards... they were not bad people... But they didn't

dare... Mother went out of her mind, begged them to kill her in their stead. They didn't want to, impossible... I kissed their feet, cried, screamed, mother tore her hair, the children awoke, try to run away, but it was impossible... Then one of the guards asked mother for advice on what to do... Mother was already half crazy, went to the other room, brought a large knife, pulled up her clothes and cut into her thigh from top to bottom. I wanted to stop her, but she pushed me away and stood in the middle of the room. The blood flowed out of her thigh, and when a pool of blood formed around her, she took hold of the children and told them: 'children, lie in the blood! Right now, in the blood!' The children refused so she took hold of them, dunked them in the blood, and ordered them to lie there without moving... She hit them and they lay down... She soiled them, their heads and their bodies, with blood and said: 'when these murderers come, they will see the blood and be satisfied.'

"At that moment the officer returned and was satisfied... He was about to leave... but one of the children moved a bit, The officer took his gun and shot them, even though he thought they had been slaughtered. I fled outside and hid in the cellar. Woe is me... woe... Why did they move?... They could have been saved... woe to me and my life... my mother!... save my mother!..."

She went to the cradle, pounced on the baby and clutched it.

The mother again began struggling with my men. The maiden approached the bed and entreated her mother to have pity on herself and let them bind her up... The maiden turn to us:

"If one of you is a Jew," she begged in a hoarse voice, "Please, recite the Kaddish... please recite the Kaddish and then she will calm down. Mother might calm down... please..."

Jacob Shapira stood over the bloodied bodies and began to recite in earnest: "Yiskadal veYiskadesh shme rabah..."

The miserable mother straightened up for a moment, drops of tears appeared in her eyes as she listened to the plaintive, bleak prayer, and then she burst into tears, warm, soft and healing tears...

Two fountains of blessings that might resurrect the dead.

We dug three small graves and in solemn sanctity buried our little martyrs according to Jewish rites.

## **In the Name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth**

### **[How I became old overnight]**

The Creator is the one with the greatest fantasy  
My grandfather

Who among you has had the privilege of witnessing the digging of his own grave?

The God of war granted me the grace of being a prisoner for one watch.

We were sent on reconnaissance towards the enemy's frontline. All five of us. By chance we were three Jews and two Gentiles. I myself do not like this distinction: "Jew -- Gentile", but for the tale I will tell, Fate did not ask me, if I distinguish between Jew and Gentile. I was forced to feel my Judaism -- even unto horror.

Well: three of us were Jews, and two Hungarians. We were able to obtain important information from the other side of the front, and suddenly -- we fell into a trap. The enemy's leading element surrounded us -- and there was no escape. We were caught: at ten o'clock in the evening.

Our captors, about thirty of them, led us to a small, half-destroyed village. They did not succeed in bringing all of us to their command post: one of us, a Hungarian, escaped on the way. And after they had searched us thoroughly, even smoking out our handkerchiefs [the term used is "biur hametz", removing the leavened bread before Passover] -- to them everything had to be taken -- they led us to the command post. We approached a low hut in the village. The hut was a dilapidated building covered with rotten straw, very much like the shack of the poor in Galicia. Its hat, that is to say: roof, was turned on its side and you could see one ear through a hole: some sort of rag in its attic; its eyes were small always dim and only half open -- its Windows blinking at us with a blank stare, Whose pent up hatred, the hatred of ruffraff ruling for one moment, appear to us. But from this sort of house burst out towards us drunken voices, the voices of revelers, under the influence of drink and song. This was our introduction to: the Russian command post.

They brought us into the broken-down shack. When the door opened, heat mixed with the stench of burnt wine and choking smoke flowed over us. It was if it had opened its evil mouth from which the filth of its drunken lung steamed over us, blinding the eye, sealing the ear and defiling the breath.

When we opened our eyes -- a wild scene appeared before us: a table set with many bottles and glasses, placed in a puddle of spirits of different colors and stench that flowed from under them. Around the table sat Russian officers and soldiers from various branches: infantry, cavalry, Cossacks and ordinary drunks, drinking and smoking and raising hell for the comfort of their half-crazy minds. The Russian sergeant who had brought us in stood at attention before one of them and reported that he had Austrian prisoners. The officer who seemed to be too drunk to see, looked at him with dim eyes, and said to him as if he understood: "good, dismissed." He didn't look at us, didn't even notice our minute presence, and proceeded to sing and drink. The others -- followed his example. One of them began to bellow a Jewish song, but that didn't bother the others, who didn't insist on maintaining the rules of harmony, each growled his own song.

Meanwhile I looked around. The walls were filled with icons and spider webs, which almost tore apart from the weight of dust upon them. Some sort of officer was stretched out on the bed, snoring deeply. His snoring fit in rather well with the impure anthem of his comrades. On a lit stove set a frying pan

filled with pieces of pork, spattering and angrily boiling. That smell too was mixed with the stench of wine and smoke that fused into a stunning harmony that provoked an urge to vomit. And under the table lay a man -- not moving. I examined him carefully. He had no head.

My body shuddered. The drunkenness that stunned me cleared away. Unintentionally I looked at my friends.

"Where is the head?"

We found it: the head was on the table. Among the many bottles and glasses that had stood in a puddle of red wine. Yes. Stood, on its partial neck... Eyes half open, a dim cigarette -- in its mouth.

It wasn't hard to recognize: the head of the Jew -- whoever is capable of the speech of devils and the spirits of the unclean, let him find words for that feeling, that caused my blood to bubble at that moment. Corpses, mangled, wounds, severed organs, are not unusual in war. That is the reason it is a war for honesty and freedom. But this sight -- was a bit much to justify in the name of honesty and freedom.

Of course, I am thinking of all this while I am writing this narrative; at the time I thought nothing. The jumble of cigarette smoke and the stench of drink mixed with human blood, which must have still been warm, totally stupefied my brain. My eyes began to dance in their sockets, my heart began to rise up into my throat, I felt a sort of saliva, both sweet and salty, and in my brain appeared shapes and images of the depths of hell.

I was awakened from this tumult by the voice of the commander, the head of the revelers:

"Who among you is senior?"

I swallowed my warm disgusting saliva and my head spun around me.

"Me."

"Are you a Jew?"

"Yes."

"Good. Who else among you is a Jew?"

"Me," said one of my men.

"I can see that. The cunning on your face shows. Who else?"

"Me," said my second comrade, pale, his voice shaking.

"All of you are Jews! By the fires of hell! A gang of Jews! What about you?" he asked the Hungarian.

"Me... I'm not."

"Well: three Jews," said the officer, "Very good."

"Excellent!" a second officer followed up. "They've come at the right time, on my soul, at the right time."

"Do you Jews know what day it is today?"

I remembered that today is the birthday Christ according to the Russian calendar. I kept quiet and the officer added:

"Jews, today is a holy day, a great holiday. The birthday of the Son of God. You know what that is?"

"Yes!" we answered together, with dry voices.

"Good: of course you know. You certainly must know much more about this holiday than us Christians. After all the holiday comes to us because of one of you. You enabled it, that the Messiah purified us of all sin and transgression by the sufferings he bore -- and therefore, in gratitude you will celebrate this holiday together with us. Where are you from, Jews?"

"From Hungary."

"From Hungary? -- Yes, yes I believe that I have heard that Hungarian Jews are experts at this. Tell me, Jews, is it true, that you, the Jews of Hungary, are experts at drinking Christian blood?"

We kept silent. We stood astonished and kept silent. What can one say to that?

"Well, why are you silent? It's an open secret. Tell me, please," he turned to me, "you are the senior one, you must know more than them: how do you Jews take Christian blood?"

Again I swallowed the pus-like saliva in my mouth and kept quiet. He continued:

"You too aren't saying anything. Why are you quiet? That's not nice of you. Is that possible, to keep quiet? If so, you tell me," he asked the Hungarian. "You too must certainly know: how do the Jews where you come from drink Christian blood? How do they drink your blood?"

The Hungarian stood to attention like a soldier, coughed and said:

"Officer, Sir! Where I come from the Jews don't drink Christian blood! We don't have devourers of humans!"

The officer shook his head:

"What is your religion?" He wondered. "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes."

"Well? As a Christian, as a follower of the Christian religion are you covering up the crimes of the Jews? Or perhaps you are afraid of them? Well?"

"No."

"Obviously. You have nothing more to fear from them. Here among us they will do you no harm. Well, don't be afraid, say everything, tell, all that you know..."

The Hungarian kept quiet. He looked at me and kept quiet. His gaze caused me to feel uncomfortable. It appeared as if he were afraid of me. I turned to him and said:

"Speak up, speak up, Andras: tell what you know."

The Hungarian who until now had stood respectfully before the officer, changed his demeanor, and turned sharply towards me, saying in a confident and firm voice in Hungarian:

"Sir! I can't say anything! I won't lie to that pig!"

The officer was full of rage because he was speaking to me and not to him. I told him to talk to the officer and not to me. The Hungarian did not budge:

His face red, he said to me, "What am I supposed to say to that bloody pig?"

The officer stood up and angrily scolded him, gnashing his teeth. The Hungarian moved a bit, turned to the officer and said in flawed Russian-Ukrainian:

"I will not lie! -- I am a Hungarian!"

These last words he said in a voice so grating that the officer made no answer; he smiled a bit and then

turned to me:

"You are doing an excellent job," he mocked me, "you are doing an excellent job of holding them back and teaching these animals. Well, don't you want to confess like an honest man?"

The situation was clear to me. I decided to accept the judgment in advance and said:

"Officer, Sir! It is clear to me that you know the answers to these questions just as well as I do. You are a cultured man, an officer and I too am an officer and cannot be untrue to myself. We are all in your hands, do with us what you think is right -- we are soldiers and prisoners -- your prisoners..."

The officer burst out laughing:

Ha-ha-ha! You can't be true to yourself? Ha-ha-ha! You are from the race of Judas Iscariot and you can't lie! That's nice: the Jew who can't lie. That's really interesting. Well, we'll see about that!"

He poured another drink for himself and for his comrades and drank. Then one of the officers turned towards the head that was on the table:

"Well, Jew boy, what do you have to say about your brothers? Loyal Jews, aren't they? They don't reveal their secrets. They keep quiet. Quiet like you, Jew boy."

The men sitting at the table burst out in wild laughter.

"Yes," set a third, "this Jew is completely quiet. He will never lie again; he will never reveal another secret... He needs another light: the cigarette in his mouth has gone out. Give him a light."

One of them, a Cossack with a squashed nose and small eyes like a mouse, lit a match and held it out to the extinguished cigarette in the mouth of the severed head. The flame leapt up a bit and scorched the mustache and beard. The officer poured a glass of wine over it.

We closed our eyes and turned again towards the wall. The saliva in my mouth dried up, I had nothing to swallow. I felt like thin needles were stuck diagonally in my throat. My heart dropped ever downward. I leaned against the wall. I felt a burden on my shoulder, a heavy burden -- my comrade leaned upon me. The wall was damp. A pleasant sensation, cold. For a moment I felt as if I were about to throw up. A bell rang. Pleasant sounds. The clock on the wall clanged: eight, nine, ten, thirteen, twenty, thirty-two -- infinity. I stopped counting. Let it clang... Wild laughter: "twirl his mustache," "beautiful" -- "pretty Jew..."

A shocking voice woke me up:

"What about supper, boys?"

"Right away, Enlightened Sir!"

I opened my eyes: the soldier standing at the stove served food to each and every one sitting at the table and they ate.

The officer turned towards us: "sit down until we finish."

Behind us stood a long sofa. We sat down on it. It couldn't come at a better time, I was standing like I was drunk. I felt that blood was draining down to my feet, and my feet were too tired to hold me up. I looked at my comrades: none of them looked at the table. Eyes closed. On the table: the head with a cigarette; completely damp from the wine. Again I felt as if I were about to vomit. A cramp in my stomach. "The Jew has to be fed too." "Open his mouth and stuff him." "Today he is our guest." They removed the cigarette. "He hasn't got a stomach." "Ha-ha-ha!" A hammer is striking, striking my brain. I leaned over at an angle. Like that. Good. And the hammer is striking, striking. "Ha-ha-ha!" --

Some strange voice from afar -- a soft entreating voice: "What do you want from me?" "I am a simple Jew" -- "a poor Jew." "I have two small sons." The body under the table began to jerk. Tears streamed out of the eyes which looked -- looked, tears streaming... and at home, in the smoke -- floated some sort of white mist, pure, transparent... the soul flapping its wings... like a bird on the head of a cat. The food was its chicks...

A cruel scolding terrified me:

"Get up, Jews! Now is not the time to sleep! A holy day!"

We got up. So did the Hungarian.

"You sit down," said the officer. "You are not a Jew!"

The Hungarian didn't sit down. He stood, we stood together.

"Sit, I told you!"

The Hungarian remained standing.

"Fool!" The officer said to him. "Idiot! -- What a fool! He said to his comrades. "A foolish Hungarian!"

"Sit down," I said to him. "Sit down, Andras."

The officer was furious, he came to me, his nose almost touching my face; the smell of wine from his mouth flowed over me and his eyes almost popped out of their sockets:

"Shut up, loathsome dog!" He upbraided me. "Cursed Jew! Soon I'll teach you how to obey! Well, Alexei Fyodrovich," He turned to one of his comrades, "what do you think, which one should we start with?"

"That one," he answered, pointing out one of my comrades. "That's a typical Jew, no doubt about it; you can tell it from his nose and his eyes; a predatory vulture's nose. Ha-ha-ha!"

He laughed and fell back onto the bench. He was totally drunk.

"What is your name?"

"My name -- Abraham -- Abra..." The officer cut him off in midsentence:

"I don't need anymore: Abraham is enough. Well, Abraham, listen; and all of you listen: a court-martial has been appointed to judge you. The charges are well known to you. We have definitely decided to do unto you as you have done unto others; that is: you drink Christian blood, so one of you must drink Jewish blood. You have to finally taste Jewish blood. Second: you crucified the son of God, so one of you will be crucified. And third: One of you will be buried alive as the son of God was buried and then arose from the grave. Do you understand?" He said and turned towards the table, clinked his glass with those of his comrades and drank. Then he turned again to us:

"Well: you, Abraham, you will drink blood, Jewish blood -- what do you say to that? Nothing? You can still talk; you still have permission to talk."

"..."

The officer smiled:

"We're not the ones passing judgment on you. No. The Supreme Judge is. You can be satisfied with his verdict. He was once a Jew: Jesus Christ the mortal. He was a Rabbi. Rabbi Jesus the son of Joseph. Well: in the name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth -- bring the blood here!.."

One of them gave him a full glass of red wine. When he gave it to my comrade, I saw that it was clotted blood diluted with wine. The officer brought the glass up to the lips of my comrade. The smell of blood reached my nose. My comrade flinched; brought his hand to his mouth; his eyes stood out. Then he smiled. He didn't believe that it was going to happen.

The officer raised his hoarse voice:

"What? Are you smiling? You're laughing, you bloody Jew! Drink, despicable dog!" My comrade turned his head to the side. The officer's anger seemed to calm down a bit. "You don't want to?" He said in a quiet voice. "Drink, drink; Jewish blood, kosher." And I -- for some reason thought it was a joke. I don't know how and why, but a slight smile appeared on my face. The officer turned to me:

"You two are smiling? -- Will soon see how you carry out your duty!... Well, Abraham, I order you to drink this glass of wine right away!"

As he said it with his other hand he drew his handgun, raised it to the face of my comrade and added:

"I order you: drink this class of blood right away, if not -- your grave will be here!"

"..."

"Hold him!" the officer ordered his comrades. "Tie him up!"

One of them went to my comrade, held him and tied his two hands behind him with the strap, then he put his hand on his forehead, tilted him back so that his face would face upwards; another one took the glass and forced it to his mouth, between his lips -- his mouth was shut tightly. "Open his mouth!" barked the officer and he himself took the bayonet off the barrel of a rifle and stuck it through my comrades mouth. The bayonet slid in easily -- my comrade no longer felt it, fainted and fell down. They laid him out on the ground with the bayonet in his mouth, his teeth closed, clenched together... The officer put one foot on the chest of the man lying on the ground and turned the bayonet in his mouth back and forth... the teeth grated on the bayonet and broke, but his mouth didn't open. They took another bayonet, and shoved in. His mouth opened. The officer poured out the red blood into his mouth. The blood went in, in, and then came out of his mouth. My comrade did not move, his face a bluish white. The blood flowed over both his cheeks -- yet he did not move. My head spun around, and on my tongue I tasted blood, warm salty blood. I felt as if my heart had stopped, and I couldn't take my eyes away from the face of my comrade -- they look, look ... I shut them tightly: but it's impossible -- they look. I see -- is he dead? Suddenly a terrible convulsion -- my comrade's body twitched like a slaughtered beast, his head contracted backwards below his neck, and from his mouth spewed upwards a stream of blood, and after the blood another fluid -- a violent and terrible vomit, of mixed colors, yellow, blue, red, white... The stream fell back on his face, he vomited again -- on the face of the officer... His body convulsed, shuddered again, then stretched out, legs shaking, head flopped to his side... repose.

"Son of a bitch" the officer frothed, as he wiped the filth from his face. "Take him away, throw over there!" They took the dead body and threw it against the wall. The officer moistened his face with some eau-de-cologne given to him by one of the soldiers, drank a glass of liquor, turn to his comrades, who, through all that went on, looked with drunken eyes, laughed, talking to each other. "So -- so." "Jewish blood." "That's what they finally needed." "They only drink Christian blood." "Son of a bitch..." "Who's going to be the next one?" The officer asked almost calmly, not in anger, after drinking. "Which one of them will be crucified?"

One of them pointed at me, "their senior man."

A word was on the tip of my tongue -- but I forced myself to swallow it. Sweat broke out on my forehead, underneath my ears, on my head, on my hair.

"No," said one of them. "Their senior men will be the third -- he will be resurrected."

Again a word was about to burst from my throat -- but again I choked it off.

"Well, this one," said the officer and pointed to my comrade. "What's your name?"

My comrade kept quiet.

"What's your name, you son of a bitch?"

He kept quiet.

"You aren't going to talk? Well, we'll call you Judas -- Judas Iscariot. Well, Judas Iscariot, you will be crucified, like your forefathers crucified the son of God!"

I looked at the face of my comrade: it was red and damp. A burning sensation flowed through my heart. My eyes began to tear up. I let them: let tears flow, let out what they hold inside, become blind, flow out of their sockets. Why are you looking?

When two men came to tie him up, he flinched back a bit. Then he rubbed against me, pressed his body to mine, hugged me with his hands, squeezing me with great force, almost squeezing the breath out of me. Yes, yes, -- he might choke me, I might die. I hugged him too, around his neck.

The men separated us. They pushed me aside and grabbed his arms and led him to the opposite wall. On the wall hung a holy picture. Two pictures. The first: a mother with her little son, and the second: Christ crucified. They led my comrade there and removed the pictures from the wall. The clang of tools. Nails... His whole body shook and he burst out crying. He cried, he cried, loudly, and let out a roar, like a small child whose cruel teacher unbuckles his belt in order to beat him. He cried and said nothing. The Hungarian by my side made a gesture and called to him:

"Why are you bleating?" He shouted in his voice that was almost loud, grating, but soft and full of compassion and love, a great and warm love. "Why are you bleating like an ox? Christ the Messiah sees all this, he sees, he is looking, he won't forget... Give the senior one a pop on his despicable face! Give him one and then eave them alone; they will do what they want!"

The poor fellow turned to us and his crying became louder -- crying in protest, begging us for help:

"What do they want?" He sighed in a clear voice, expansive and choked up with tears. "What do they want from me? What do they w-a-n-t?..."

The Hungarian couldn't stand still. He went up to him, held out one hand, and placed the second on his shoulder, shook hands and said:

"Don't cry, comrade, don't cry!" He said in a voice full of pity. "Don't cry!" He said again in a hardened voice. Then he gnashed his teeth, made an iron-like fist, went up to the officer and looked at him with bulging eyes, full of venom. He turned away, went to the holy picture that had been placed on a crate, lifted his fist to it and said, his voice choking:

"You, the many-times-sanctified Christ, look!" He called out in a wild shout. "Look, you, the Messiah!" he added, bloodied tears in his eyes.

The officer hit him and pushed him away:

"Hey, Hungarian, you wild animal! I'll show you! I'll send you after your Jews! -- Tie him up!"

The Hungarian didn't hear him, went again to our miserable comrade, held out his hand and shook it strongly and with warmth, looked in his eyes, then hugged him tightly, again looked at him intently and whispered to him:

"God be with you. Do not fear. Show these pigs that you are a hero unto death."

I also went to my comrade -- but I didn't have the strength to shake his hand. They pushed me away. In the meantime I said a word to my comrade -- that I myself didn't hear. A word, short, choked up, damp with tears -- and we went back to our places.

And then those people -- people! -- They placed a low stool next to the wall, made my comrade stand upon it, raised his arms to the side, took a long nail -- and I look, look -- I can't close my eyes. They thrust the nail through one palm. My comrade made no sound, bit his lower lip and his face contorted. He banged on the nail with an ax. My comrade took a deep breath, long, like notes from a broken flute, and they banged, banged, until the nail went into the wall. The officers were drinking and one of them turned around and said: "like that, like that, boys." One of the officers went out "I'll be right back" he said. From the palm flowed blood -- red blood. Then another officer went out. And I'm looking, looking -- turning my head sideways and looking out of the corner of my eye. They are driving in a second nail into the other palm. My comrade lets out a long deep sound, weak, shaking, like a crying dog -- his voice broke up, bleating, he turned his head aside, looked at us -- oh, the eyes!... He closed them. I felt a terrible pain. Where? -- I felt a horrible pain in my palms. No, on my palate. Beneath my heart. The head of the crucified one collapsed to the side. A red-black veil lowered over my brain and spread darkness over it. The hammer struck, struck...

A terrible scream!... The miserable one freed himself from the wall and with a wild and terrible force pounced upon the men around him and began to hit out left and right, with his hands, with his feet, blindly butting with his head, kicking with his feet. The men wanted to bind him up, but they couldn't catch him. He hit, he butted, he was carried away, kicking, slapping, pushing -- grabbing the axe with one hand, hewing left and right, the men terrified and being pushed in all directions: "Catch him! Catch him!" The officer cursed and yelled and blood flowed from his head and his palm. One lay on the ground with a wound on his head, the Hungarian jumped and shouted: "Hit! -- hit! Comrade! Hit! Brother! Hit! Cut it down! Chop it off!" rubbing his hands, shouting with joy, victory, madness, gnashing his teeth, as our comrade jumped around like a wild animal that has been let out and hitting, hitting people, with bottles, through the air, as if blind... When they caught him, he fell on the ground, on our dead comrade, stretched out, let out a loud sigh, like a slaughtered ox, and went quiet. White froth mixed with blood came out of his mouth. The officer drew his handgun from his pocket and shot him, once, twice, thrice. Then he came to us and pointed the gun at our faces. Standing there, his hand shaking -- and then he lowered it. He came up close and said, without rancor, calmly, blood flowing from his head and hand:

"No, no!" he said in a hoarse voice. "I won't kill you. Do you see this blood?" Pointing with his finger on the blood that flowed from his head, "do you see? No, I won't kill you. I'll bury you alive. Not both of you at once -- no; you," he turned to our Hungarian comrade, "you stand and watch -- and then it's your turn. Grab them!"

The officers busied themselves. One bandaged the head of another with gauze, another drank one more glass of liquor, his comrades too were drinking and cursing, swearing in low weak voices and wondering at the Jew who was so strong that they couldn't stand up to him.

"He was going crazy," one said trying to justify himself, he was out of his mind and so, -- if not, we

could have overpowered him," he said as he dropped onto the bench. "Those two should be tied up really tightly, so they don't go crazy."

"This time they won't go crazy," said the officer. "I -- I'll show them, I'll teach them manners. Tie them up tightly!"

In the meantime they had tied us up. We didn't object. The strap and the thin rope cut into my hands. We stood together bound with our hands behind us. I felt no pain, no fear. I felt hot, very hot. Hot sweat, nothing more.

The officer went up to our Hungarian comrade.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" he said to him, "aren't you ashamed! -- Aren't you a Christian?"

The Hungarian ground his teeth, stood up straight and with a firm scornful voice said:

"You're wrong! I'm not a Christian! -- I'm also a Jew! Do to me whatever you intend to do to my officer! I'm also a Jew!"

I looked at him -- and if I had not known that he was not a Jew, now I would've thought that he really is a Jew. I wished to say something to him -- but I had not the strength to talk. I wanted to embrace him -- but my hands were bound.

"Well, if you're a Jew," the officer told him, "we'll sentence you as a Jew, we'll sentence you like them!" he said and his eyes lit up like the fires of hell.

Then he turned to his men and said:

"Boys, go dig the grave!"

They went out.

One of the officers suddenly stood up and said:

"Leave those sons of bitches alone! To hell with them! Shoot them, a bullet in their heads is enough! I'm fed up with this."

"What?" The officer said angrily. "What? Just a bullet? And what about this blood?" He pointed to his head. "And this blood, what about it? No, Comrade, you're wrong; I'll bury them alive -- alive..."

Silence. They set the table and drank; without speaking, tired, in silence. The head on the table lay on its side, its cut throat visible -- a chill ran through me. All my body shook. From outside thuds were heard -- thuds of clods of earth from digging the grave, against the wall, stuffy, heavy, deadened. Unintentionally we looked at each other, me and my Hungarian comrade -- Who, I believe, said something to me; asked me in a whisper: "really? -- Are they going to bury us alive?" And again the dull thuds. Silence. A heavy leaden silence. The officer paced to and fro. Drunk. The clock on the wall clanged: one -- the ring entered me and continued to chime: Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tick... A pleasant warmth took hold of me -- a feeling of intoxication: to die. To die now, like this, to fall asleep sitting. To sleep, how good is that, yes, I'm dying, dead, I feel nothing. The warmth quivers in my blood, in my heart. My heart does not beat. The soul leaves, stealthy, rising up like a hot mist. Dispersing a pleasant scent, dispersing. I lie on the ground, under the soil, and it leaves from under the heavy clay, rising up to the heavens. There -- my mother. She is waiting for me -- for the soul of her son. She receives me with downcast pity, gives me a warm kiss, healing, maternal, tearful, laying me on her knees. I sit in her lap and hug her, her warm body, merciful, dear, vital, and confess: they beat me, tortured me, buried me alive. I clutch her, burying my head in her warm breast. I sleep, dream: two of my dead comrades have been resurrected... they smile: "it was terrible -- wasn't it? And even so

we are alive -- they weren't successful." They laughed joyfully and horse around like children, like cherubs. Happiness, joy, brightness, radiance, singing -- tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...

A harsh voice shook me:

"Well, dogs, let's go!"

We walked. Outside the night was cold, damp with thick mist. The grave was almost finished. The man dug, dug, one of them standing holding a candle. "Deeper, deeper!" Said the officer. My Hungarian comrade stood and looked into the grave, looked and was silent. Suddenly he turned to me:

"Brother!" He said to me in a weird voice. "Brother, say a Jewish prayer with me -- a Hebrew prayer, brother!"

"Brother" -- This word came from a completely different world. "Brother" is the warmest and dearest word in the Hungarian language. "Brother" means modest homely love, with no duty or formality, and "brother" is a prayer in time of mutual danger, from which there is no salvation. If a soldier forgets who he is, fears not his officer and says: "brother" -- This is terrible death itself... At that moment, that is what he said to me: brother, say a Hebrew prayer with me...

"There is no need, my good friend, no need. For you are a Christian -- pray to your God. He is one -- one God has created us..."

The Hungarian suddenly straightened up:

"Who?" He said almost in anger. "Who is a Christian? Me? Together with these foul men? And with that one? With that bastard?"

Then he changed his tone and beseeched me:

"I beg of you: do this for me -- teach me a short prayer, in Hebrew. Please -- the name of your God..."

"His name? -- No one knows his name. He has no name..."

"Some prayer; I know that you have some prayer, I believe -- that I heard it once: 'Lord' -- please -- 'Lord'..."

At that moment the curtain of clouds fell away from my soul, and wings sprouted from my body. My heart began to pound lightly, singing, blessing, playing music, music, music.

I bent over the face of my Hungarian comrade, and in that manner, with my hands tied around my back, I kissed him. He too kissed me with a warm sweet kiss full of sorrow, of happiness and the pain of eternal pleasure.

When he let go of my mouth, I said to him:

"Say after me, Andras, say after me: Hear -- 'Hear', O Israel - 'O Israel', the Lord -- 'the Lord', our God -- 'our God', the Lord -- 'the Lord', is One 'is One'. Now recite: May His great -- 'May His great', name -- 'name', be exalted -- 'be exalted', and sanctified -- 'and sanctified', in the worl..." -- And suddenly we heard a shot from far away -- a heavy shell that cut through the mist -- za-za-a-a-!!! A terrible explosion, here, close to us -- and then another shell, and another one, two, three, many, many, one after another. All of them exploded here, close to us, around us, quickly -- our blood began to boil, and at that moment I felt new life flowing through me, my body, my limbs, my heart, my brain. My heart beat loudly, the shelling came, came, came, unceasingly, rapidly, the noise heightened, chaos ensued, the men ran around pushing, panicking, as the explosions deafened our ears... "Sirs, Sirs!" The diggers shouted at us. "Come here, jump, jump! Here, into the pit! -- here!" We jumped into the

pit among the diggers, and they received us with love, very affectionate, caressing us: "No matter, Sirs, no matter, very good, very good." They untie us, the shelling comes thundering in, the chaos grows greater and greater, the drunken hut burns, screams. One of the diggers embraced me and cursed the officer. He gave me a dagger and another gave my comrade a rifle barrel with a bayonet. "Don't think badly of us, Sirs, it's not our fault. It saddened us. Don't think badly of us." "No, good friend, no, on the contrary..." dying screams, shouted orders. One officer wanted to jump into our pit - the only shelter. The Hungarian drove in the bayonet in a terrible rage. "Take that, take that," he said to the Russian. "Take that, son of a bitch, bastard!" The shelling continued -- the shots fall further away. Away, away, after the fleeing men. They fly over our heads and explode far away. Nobody is here anymore.

It is no longer dangerous to leave the pit. The shells explode among the fleeing men. We came out of the grave: our men are coming. I ran towards them, running hard in the snow, and a voice calls after me: "Sir, Sir! Wait a bit!" I look back: My Hungarian approached me, and on his shoulder the barrel of rifle with a dead body impaled on the bayonet, partially torn up...

"Here you are Sir!" the Hungarian said with a happy grunt, like a cat with a mouse in its mouth. "Here you are -- the Christian!"

He threw the body on the snow. Drove the bayonet in it again, two, three times... I lit a match and the Hungarian seemed to have his head covered with flour... I looked at him carefully: his hair has become white, he has become old... "What is this?" I asked him. "You too," he answered. He turned again to the body lying on the snow and drove the bayonet in again, into its belly, in anger, roaring... I looked at the face of the dead man and recognized him:

"The officer."

## A Tale of Three Brothers

We captured a young Russian soldier. He was alone. The sentry brought him in. During the night he saw a black speck on the shining snow. The speck came closer and closer. When it got to the barbed-wire fence, the sentry called out: "Who goes there?" The Russian soldier crawling through the snow made known that he wanted to give himself up to us.

The prisoner was a Jew.

I looked at his face: he was young, about nineteen or twenty. His face was gentle, sad, sickly and handsome. The flesh-and-blood incarnation of a Rembrandt picture.

Before I had a chance to speak with him, he began:

"Sir," he said, his voice shaking with desperation. "Please... tell me: have two Russian soldiers, Jews, given themselves up during the past few days?"

"What do you mean? Two at once?"

"No. Not at the same time: one after the other. Day after day. At nightfall or at the beginning of the first watch."

It was not unusual for us to take in prisoners. The winter was cruel and brutal, and the soldiers on the filthy, damp Russian front occasionally came over to us. These prisoners were rotting away.

The First Sergeant removed a small notebook from his pocket, looked in it and said.

"Yes, this week several men came in. Sixteen men. In this order: Sunday, one: Russian; Monday, five together; all of them Russians, Christians. Tuesday: two, one Jew and one Georgian from the Caucasus. Wednesday: five; three of them Jews and two Cossacks. Yesterday, Thursday: three, one Jew, one Ukrainian and one of them some sort of... I'm not exactly sure, God knows, some sort of Lithuanian or whatever. That's all."

The young soldier, trying to restrain from crying, requested permission to ask:

"Is it possible that you know the names of those Jews?"

The meticulous First Sergeant knew that too:

"Certainly, I wrote them down."

And he read out the names.

"Were none of them called Segal?"

"Segal?... Segal? -- No!"

The young prisoner let out a heavy deep sigh. He made an effort contain his sadness, unsuccessfully. His sigh burst out into bitter tears.

There is nothing so strange that can enter your soul as the crying of a soldier. We all looked at him with compassion. We did not interfere with his grief pouring out in tears. The tears of a prisoner provide some relief of our sadness, the sadness of "the captors", who see in an enemy who surrenders their own pitiful fate; these tears washed from our souls the shining filth, the sanctity of war, and for one moment we saw ourselves clearly: miserable human beings, being abused by some unknown hand.

The crying soldier wiped away his tears with his sleeve and then began to relate this tale:

"We were three brothers. Together, in one company. We did not get to the front at the same time. The eldest had been at war for some time. More than a year. We two went one after the other. I -- have been at the front for about a month. By chance we were all in the same company. Our commander was a terrible person. Coarse, with a cruel heart; and above all he had a burning hatred for Jews. He joined us two weeks ago. The previous commander was a goodhearted man. Both my brothers received commendations for bravery from him. But the one who replaced him couldn't stand Jews. At first he would torment us with various burdensome chores that required quite some cleverness to invent. Then, whenever we did something that he didn't like, he would tie us to a tree on a low hill, and so we stood there, tied up, as unceasingly thousands of bullets from the enemy whistled past our faces. To stand and look at death face to face -- arms and legs bound... and in the meantime he stood in the trench, looking at us and laughing with pleasure each time we flinched from terror. Then he swore at us, claiming that we three were the only cause of all the mishaps and the enemy's victories. We suffered terribly but kept our mouths shut. Last Saturday he suddenly did something very unusual: he assigned one of my brothers to the reconnaissance unit. This unit's missions are so important that only men who can be completely trusted not to go over to the enemy are sent. They had never sent a Jew to this unit. He took my brother, listed him as one of the reconnaissance unit and said to him: 'Bloody Jew, you know that I'm granting you a great honor. I know, I know that you are all despicable. But I want to test you. So: be careful! Don't you dare be captured!'

"He sent them off. The unit left, returned a few hours later and reported, 'The Jew Segal ran off to the enemy, to the Hungarian front!' The officer called us over, the two remaining brothers, and beat us on our faces with a whip, spat on our faces and said: 'Miserable Jews, sons of bitches! Your treasonous brother gave himself up to the enemy with our secrets. I want to hope that you yourselves finally understand that this is an ugly deed. Therefore I am sending you out again. Today I am sending a second one. You go', he said to my brother. 'Be very careful! If you don't come back, I'll gouge out your brother's eyes!'

"The unit went off, returned an hour later and again reported: 'the Jew Segal let himself be captured.' The officer, frothing at the mouth while grinding his teeth, yelled, cursed, swore and beat me to within an inch of my life. Then he took a sip of liquor and said: 'Listen, Jew! Your other brother also gave himself up to the enemy. I am forbearing and extremely patient. I will send you too. And if you too run off, let it be known, Jews, that I'll hang you all from one rope, in front of the whole battalion!' And he sent me too. The whole thing looked a bit suspicious to me. I knew my brothers: for more than a year they had suffered at the front and they had had more than one chance in better circumstances to desert to the enemy but they didn't. To the contrary, each of them excelled in bravery, faith and conscientiousness. And now they suddenly gave themselves up? In this manner? When it's this dangerous? Now, when those of us who remain and all the Jews in the company are responsible for them?

"Before we left the front lines the officer came up to me, looked at me and remained silent. Lightning flashed from his eyes. For a few moments he walked up and down, quietly and then clenched his fist and punched my nose with all his might. I fell to the ground. He kicked me and I got up, bleeding from my nose and mouth. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and gave it to me to wipe away the blood. Then he said: 'Listen, Jew, I won't kill you. I am a Christian. I will have mercy for you, but I'm sending you too, the last of the traitors. And if you run off -- may the Holy Mother take pity on you, Jews!' He turned to the unit and said: 'Men, should you have slightest feeling that he is about to escape -- rip him up on the spot like a fish!'

"As for me, the situation was already quite clear to me, I mitigated my own sentence and waited for my demise. I walked as one who is already doomed.

"Darkness had already fallen; but you could still see a few steps ahead. For a while we walked in line beside each other according to regulations. Quietly. We got to a sort of low hill, we stood below it, carefully. At that moment the unit leader came over to me and whispered: 'Jew, we'll stay here and you'll go forward a few steps, around the hill, to see if there is an ambush waiting for us. Go. And be careful.'

"Meanwhile, as he spoke, I noticed that nearby there was a mound of stones and what appeared to be dead bodies. A horrible thought flashed through my brain: my brothers!... My heart stopped beating for a moment, and then began pounding so that I could actually hear it. But, I must go on. I went. The first few steps I took straight ahead, standing upright, then I immediately laid down on the ground and crawled... In the meantime, I heard a voice from behind calling my name. I quickly jumped to my feet, so that they wouldn't know that I was crawling and answered: yes-yes, I'm going. And right away, in an instant, I laid down again and crawled, and at that moment the entire unit began shooting, the bullets whistling over my head! The whistling froze my blood for a moment. The shots missed me. I let out a death rattle and then was silent, so that they would be convinced that they had succeeded. I immediately began to crawl forward like a snake, zigzagging, until I came to a depression. I flattened myself inside and waited. After a few moments I heard steps near me... they were looking for my dead body... My breath stopped. Then I heard one of them say: 'The dog has really run away. The bloody Jew cheated us!...'

"Then they went back.

"That's how I got here so quickly."

The young soldier stopped talking. He lowered his eyes, hid his face, let out a deep groan and bit his lips in tears.

"Please... please..." came a muffled cry, please check again in your notebook... maybe... there might have been a mistake... they might have been captured... yes, at least one of them... Woe is me -- woe, my mother..."

We calmed him down, comforted him and gave him something strong to drink to calm him. He didn't stop crying. His crying became a dirge, a grating howl that was painful to our nerves.

Suddenly he turned to me with a strange request:

"Please, let me go back."

"What's that? Go back?" I asked him. "You know that's impossible."

"Not to the front lines. To my brothers. To the dead bodies."

"That's not possible, my friend. There's no going back. Anyone going back is doomed: he's a spy."

"I'm not going to spy. I'll bring the bodies here. That's all."

"Don't talk nonsense. You're not going back from here."

The prisoner fell silent. Then a few moments later he said:

"I'll go back."

"As soon as you pass through the fence -- you're doomed. You'll die on the spot."

The young man stared at me with moist red eyes and said in a decisive whisper:

"I'll die. But I'll go anyway."

I saw that it was crazy to keep talking; this young man had nothing more to lose in life.

Unintentionally, I remembered his poor mother, somewhere.

"Stupid," I said to him, "your brothers are dead. You feel close to their souls: that's understandable, and it's also understandable that you hold their dead bodies dear. Understandable. But you remained alive. And you have a mother. She has one son left. Do you want her to lose her only son?"

"They are not dead," he said simply.

"How can they not be dead?"

"They're not dead. They are alive, both of them."

"But didn't you say yourself that you saw them lying there?"

"Yes, they're lying there, but they're not dead. They're lying there, in such a way, they're lying there, carefully, so they won't be noticed, so the officer won't notice them. They're alive."

"My friend, you're either stupid or crazy or a spy."

The young man's eyes glistened with tears. His face was contorted, but he didn't cry. He stood up and said, as his eyes darted around, as if he were talking from another world:

"Give me another drink."

I gave him one.

He thanked me and in a dry voice said: "well, comrades, let's go."

I assigned two men to take him to headquarters.

The young man bowed to me and went off accompanied by the two men.

"Behave honestly," I told him, "behave correctly and nothing will happen to you; good luck!" I took my leave of him.

He didn't answer me.

It was already twelve o'clock and I lay down to sleep.

Outside a stinging winter wind blew -- and I fell asleep.

Suddenly I heard coarse rapid steps. At that moment the door opened and the two soldiers who had accompanied the prisoner entered, struggling for breath, their faces distorted and stammering.

"What's going on?"

"He escaped. Enlightened Sir, please, have mercy on us... it's not our fault."

"What? Escaped? -- Miserable ones, what have you done?"

"We didn't do anything, we shot at him, we shot at him and he ran away. We shot at him and he groaned; it might have been a death rattle and he might have died, yes. He died, but a long way off."

"Who's going to believe this, miserable ones? The battalion commander will eat you alive."

"Enlightened Sir, we swear in the name of... "

"Shut up, you miserable ones!"

The situation caused me great concern. What should I do? If the battalion commander heard about it he will execute them himself. And I will also be severely punished.

"But Enlightened Sir knows that he was crazy. Enlightened Sir heard what he said."

"Yes, of course I know, but the battalion commander! Who is going to believe us?... Especially since you knew that he planned to escape. I am forced to report this to the battalion commander."

The soldiers eyes glistened with tears.

"March, scoundrels!" I roared at them. "Get out! Aren't you soldiers? Soldiers that let a prisoner escape and then cringe with tears? Get out!"

The soldiers went off, stumbling over their feet they went out.

I couldn't sleep. These miserable ones will pay with their lives. What should I do? In any case... I have until morning to report this. But... what can I do with them?... How can I not do anything?... Terrible.

I went to the quarters of a friend to ask for his advice.

We couldn't find a good course to take. We sat and racked our brains, how to save the miserable ones.

A soldier entered and reported to me: "the two soldiers have gone over to the enemy."

"What? Deserted?"

"Yes. They left their sentry position and ran off."

We looked at each other: such an abomination had never been heard of! One could suppose that it was because a capital court-martial awaited them: To desert? Will a front-line soldier desert?

If they deserted -- they deserted. What can be done? This has to be reported to the battalion commander. Tomorrow morning I'll report it.

I went to my quarters. I lay down and slept a fitful sleep.

A few hours later -- a knock on my door.

One of the two soldiers who had deserted came in:

"Enlightened Sir, I respectfully report: here is the prisoner!"

"What? The prisoner? You caught him?"

"No. He came in on his own. With his brothers."

"They're alive?"

No. Dead. Please come."

I patted the soldier with concealed affection and went outside -- where a strange scene appeared before me: the young prisoner Segal was standing, breathing heavily and wiping off sweat -- and on the ground beside him were two dead bodies.

I went up to him -- he stood at attention, wiping his brow and his face. Below him was a large pool of blood that kept growing larger. And he was standing. Standing, swaying to and fro and then he fell flat onto the snow...

"What's going on? What's with you, Segal?"

Segal raised his smoking, dying eyes to me, and with a happy smile said:

"Don't worry, my brother. Together, together we'll go home, to my mother. She's waiting for us."

He woke up again, stood up and bent over the dead bodies, hugged them with his ebbing strength, kissed them and stammered:

"My dear brothers. We will go together. I have saved you."

I had the doctor fetched. The doctor came, opened Segal's clothes and shook his head in despair:

"There is no hope for him. After losing so much blood -- he can't be saved."

A terrible convulsion took hold of Segal -- he burst out in a wild laughter, happy beyond description.

We saw six gaping wounds in Segal's chest and abdomen. The wounds were already bluish. The last drops of blood dripped out.

Segal died -- and on his face we saw the joy of a child nestling in the bosom of his mother.

# Lie

Horrors were created  
only to benefit liars

My grandfather

A lone traveler in the ridges below the Carpathians who in his loneliness goes astray in the forest and becomes entangled at the mouths of two rivers, the San and the Stryi -- without a doubt will find a wooden memorial still standing with a Star of David and the inscription:

With elevated sadness, grief-stricken happiness  
and Jewish love, we here erect a  
token of remembrance  
for the warrior, the pure and holy liar  
Squad leader Akiva Ben Yosef  
who fell on the field of glory to sanctify Judaism  
in his youth, at the age of two hundred and five.  
May his soul rest in eternal life

1

We had already heard of his reputation. The "exalted-above-all" minister deigned to demean himself for a moment, and shook his hand, the hand of a simple sergeant, and to pin the holy Iron Cross on his breast, for an action that saved the entire front that twisted its way from Chernovitz in Bukovina up to Riga on the Baltic Sea. And by the way, that simple sergeant dared to express his thanks for the great honor, but did not accept the high decoration for the simple reason: "bearing a cross on his Jewish chest" would be counter to his Jewish tenets and by the latest orders he is allowed to maintain his religious customs in all traditional ways.

For a moment the exalted-above-all minister was disconcerted and did not know how to answer him. But immediately thereafter he asked him to report to him -- and a short while later the exalted minister described his impressions of his conversation with the strange young man to his friends, as he rolled with laughter.

"Oy, oy, he just drives you crazy! I'm telling you, comrades, that I have heard many liars during my life (and who is the greatest liar and all -- the exalted minister blurted out -- than the brother of his Majesty our King, his late Majesty Ludwig, the King of Mexico!). But this young man -- is beyond imagining, my friend. Imagine it: he tells me in all seriousness that once he caused the Roman governor of Jerusalem to be terrified... ha-ha-ha! Oy, oy, ha-ha-ha!"

Even before he finished talking, his belly cramped up from his wild laughter, and when he recovered a bit, exhausted from laughing, he added a few words in total seriousness:

"This is the fruit of the Jewish womb, my friend, only this strange people could cause this toy to be born!... In truth: on the one hand -- a hero, without a doubt a hero. But I think that in his case that happened just by chance. But as a liar -- he is a great artist, ha-ha-ha! A nice guy, ha-ha-ha!"

I got to know him near the San river.

It occurred after a terrible bloody battle when we intended to rest for a few days, to bury the dead and the body parts that were spread across the battlefield.

The men of our battalion were walking to and fro, mixed up, in no particular order, companies and platoons, those who gathered up the dead and the organs were from all units of the army. The enemy took no notice of what was going on and did not shoot at us: he too was engaged in burying his dead.

Suddenly I see a soldier, a sergeant walking among the dead as if searching for something. In one hand he held a sort of deep metal container into which he placed his finds.

What could he be looking for in this garden of death?

I signaled to him and he came over to me. I looked into the container which was filled with some sort of whitish substance that looked like congealed starch. Upon closer examination I saw: the container was filled with human brains, torn, crushed and squashed.

I looked at him astonished: what do you need this horrible material for?

His answer to my question was:

"To give them a proper burial. Other body parts will be buried if possible, or not. But the brains will be buried deep down, so that animals and birds will not get to them. If that rabble will be able to earn a living for a while from this holy material -- God help us. If they adapt for themselves human talents -- all the wars in the world will be like child's play when compared to their wars. They lack only a dusting of discipline -- and then no Germany will be able to stand up to them."

I looked at him very carefully. A youth so handsome that he was charming, tall as a tree, an archetype of an eastern Jew, his bearing fresh and solemn, his eyes were somewhat tired, yet they blazed with black fire.

I hesitated a moment. I remembered the rumors of "the strange liar" and I almost let slip a smile. But his demeanor demanded respect and love. A moment later -- he had completely captivated me. Less than half a day later, I applied to superior headquarters to have him transferred to my company.

In just a few days I realized that I had no regrets.

Initially, on the first day, I thought him a bit crazy. When I asked him how old he was, he answered:

"Two hundred years and four months."

"Meaning?"

"According to your years: twenty-nine," he answered simply, "and according to your calculations: one hundred and five."

When I asked that he stop joking with me, he added:

"You live two hours in a day. At most, two hours in a day, that is: during twenty-four hours. And you call this, the sum of your lives 'one day'; I live fourteen hours in a day -- that is, seven times as long."

Before continuing I must note that it is impossible to relate literally these statements, like all his statements and conversations. His speech was strangely terse, almost in acronyms. Then he formally

requested that I dismiss him, because he didn't want to be idle even for one moment. I dismissed him and he went away. "To live".

With eyes wide open I watched him walk away.

A strange liar or half-crazy -- I don't know exactly. But I do know that this was the first time in my life that I began to scrutinize by life. Unintentionally, I felt that all the days of my life were filled with idleness and wasted time. I came to the conclusion after much soul-searching that all the days of my life were one long chain of procrastination and waste of time. One chain of rushing from moment to moment, from one hour to the next, from today to tomorrow, from tomorrow to the day after, to the following days, to old age -- to death. It was as if we hoped to achieve in the next hour what we failed to achieve in the previous hour: we crowd all the periods of our life as if to catch up with death... Idleness in all its forms and features, how much does it rob from us? How much of our lives do we waste on sleeping, eating, traveling on unnecessary paths, wrong turns, waiting for trivialities, meaningless chit-chat, reading useless books, repetitive conversations, doubts before actions and after them, movements here and there, meetings with wise fools, speaking just to keep up a routine conversation, and above all: uttering totally unnecessary words even when talking about important and essential issues!

Furthermore: the pointless trips, the quarrels, the aimless arguments, and the mother of all idleness: "good manners" when trying to impress men and women about whom you couldn't care less and who don't interest you at all.

In general: idleness for the sake of idleness, "to take it easy!"

What is left of life after all this: work?

I remembered one of my rabbis who before instructing us on a difficult passage would teach us a chapter from "Duties of the Heart" [Bahya ibn Paquda] to cause us to engage in soul-searching in order to value time, so that we would not concern ourselves with queries and hairsplitting for the sake of hairsplitting -- but it didn't help. The temptation of idleness was stronger than the power of the "Duties of the Heart". Where is the hero who is strong enough to restrain himself from all this idleness, and to use his time to actually do something? And how much strength does this hero need to do, to live, to achieve, to know and to act in his life? How many of our years does he live?

And what if this man is blessed with talents?

Here you have a wealth of worlds laid out before you -- and there is no one who reaches out to take them.

No one?

I was privileged to know this man: none other than the amazing "liar", Sergeant Akiva Ben Yosef.

His father -- a simple wagon driver for the owner of a manor in the Carpathians, his mother -- one of those simple Jewish women, one of tens of thousands in remote villages as well as in bustling cities, and he, their son Akiva, was in his childhood a horse groom, a shepherd, who spent most of his childhood in the fields and the forests, together with his animals, at rest, dreaming day and night, watching the stars, homesick for some ancient forest with delusions of blue open spaces and yearnings for...

What his yearnings were cannot be known precisely, only this was known to him, suddenly, aged twelve -- when he was already a Yeshiva student in one of the towns on the Galician border, a diligent and amazingly talented student to the delight of his righteous and naive Rabbi whose favorite student was Akiva, and in the "letter of recommendation" he gave him when he left, predicted that he would have a "strange and holy future, full of adventures and torments of love, and incredible longevity", and finally ... he was envious of him, his student, that he would be granted a holy martyrdom."

He showed me his Rabbi's "letter of recommendation" and added:

"This is not a prophecy. I will not die this death the first time. There is no Messiah for Israel, but there is a Messiah for the Israel of the heavens. And until he comes, I will die tens of thousands more terrible deaths. For that I was created. I am a Jew."

We chuckled upon hearing these words; our pleasant liar, upon whom the exalted war minister performed terrible experiments, to entertain us with wonderful stories of his bravery, that he, the liar, so boasted about.

His strange tales stimulated us to engage him in conversation in order to draw out stories about his life and his famous, boundless lies. His lies were not the only reason that he does not stint with his time to tell them "at length".

That is: it is not that telling his story takes a long time, not at all: he speaks so tersely that we have to exert all our energy to comprehend his stories. But the events themselves -- have no bounds.

He continued with his story. As he was telling it -- we had to suppress chuckles bubbling up from within us, which might eventually break out into wild laughter. Often we would have laughed out loud and scattered in all directions -- except, except for his strange personality, which was imbued with grave seriousness as long as he spoke. Within this personality were known tragedies that aroused compassion within us. He was an amazingly handsome lad, proud and dark-haired, although strands of gray had already appeared, clear eyes blinded by sparkling dampness; his speech was decisive with the seriousness of the speech of old men.

But his mouth lied...

A lad of twenty-nine who does not fear to tell us exaggerations like:

-- There is no settlement on earth where he has not lived;

-- He traveled all the shipping lanes in the world among them "London to London" on a sailboat on the shipping lane: London, the North Sea, Pentland Firth, the North Channel, the Irish Sea, the northern part of St. George's Channel, the English Channel, London;

-- And the other way "London to London" taken only by the cream of ships' captains: London, Lisbon, Madeira, the island of St. Helena, the Cape of Good Hope, Hobart, Wellington Point, Arena, Rio, London;

-- He worked in all the free legions of all the kingdoms;

-- He visited all the settlements in Africa, America, Australia and Asia including the settlements in the Land of Israel;

-- When he was thirteen he left the city of Iasi on his bicycle and rode to Bremen, where he was taken on as an apprentice sailor on a ship that sailed to America, from there to India and then the jungle that he had always yearned for;

- In New Zealand he invented an edible plant that could be pickled and that relieved every drunkenness, but the natives of the country feared it because it contained a powerful poison;
- In Borneo the natives showed him how to tame wild elephants using the bark of a tree, for these trampling animals became quiet and docile from the smell of the bark;
- On the island of Java he crossed coffee trees with coconuts and created a fruit whose juice lit up one's eyes no matter how deep the darkness;
- In China he instructed the coolies about communism -- downtrodden slaves, no better than animals -- and was caught by the foreign secret police and escaped;
- In Brazil he participated in the expedition of the millionaire from Buenos Aires, David Lovando, which traveled the Amazon River "to hunt for orchids", to find the wonderful and expensive orchid named "Red Cattleya Skinneri", which lives among the tree cobras who squirm on the papyrus trees so no creature can come within a few feet of them because of the snakes, and the half-savage people living in these trees who worship the idolatrous flower;
- In Algiers he commanded the French Foreign Legion and received a medal of fidelity;
- On the island of Madagascar he participated in the war between the "savages" and the whites, and discovered that their morals and standard of living were superior to European morals;
- In Bombay he was the contractor for a place of worship for the remaining "Zoroastrians" living there;
- In San Francisco he killed a Russian prince who persecuted Jews and who had gone there to incite trouble;
- In Portugal he was one of the conspirators against the king and his sons, was caught and escaped with the help of the insurgents;
- In Jaffa he participated in the construction of the first Jewish house on the dunes, and when he went to the Turkish governor of Jaffa, and prophesied that this house will be the cornerstone of the "third Temple" of the Jewish people -- the governor flew into a rage and he had to flee;
- In the Atlantic Ocean he was present at the terrible disaster of the gigantic ship, the "Titanic", and rescued the American "Lead King", and received from him the "Lead Medal" inlaid with three "Nile pearls", which he later sold in a pawn shop in Helsingfors [Helsinki] and distributed the money to branches of the "Jewish National Fund" throughout the world;
- In Copenhagen he took part in the movie drama "The Victim of Gold", which was filmed in Monte Carlo. The purpose of his participation was: to influence the plot in order to change the Jewish hero from a negative to a positive character;
- In Vienna he participated in the eleventh Zionist conference as the representative of the Bulgarian Zionist gymnastics team;
- In the year 1905 -- still almost a boy -- he took part in the Russian Revolution and suffered a serious wound in his forehead;
- During the Balkan war he was a reporter for the American newspaper "The New York Herald", as well as the German news agency Wolff;
- On the island of Cyprus he was for a month the headman of one of the small villages and settled Jewish immigrants there;

-- As a Saiami (a wandering Buddhist monk) he participated in the large "Lama Aluma" festival that the seekers of Nirvana celebrate once in seven hundred years;

-- He lived a full year in the Alhambra and its environs among the semi-savage followers of the "Vadu" religion, and with them established a new religious cult, through which he managed to make "child sacrifice" detestable. In addition he forbade them every form of human ritual and eating blood and meat, and left with them the commandment to keep the Sabbath, and forbade them to become enslaved to anyone in the world. However, as time went on the savages deified him -- and he fled for his life;

-- In Brasilia he worked with Professor Lemring at the observatory, was a student of Flamarion, and during a period of nine months discovered four new asteroids;

-- In Kaapstad [Cape Town] ...

No. It is impossible to hear all this calmly without laughing.

And he -- he knew and felt that no one believed a single word. Nevertheless he had valid documentation for all these claims that was hard to doubt.

Among these documents -- one small document of little value nevertheless caused our eyes to open wide; this was a simple but amazing identification card: the card of Dr. Herzl, and upon it was written in German: "Für den kleinen reizenden Profeten und Märtyrer, Akiva Ben Yosef Hack. Dr. Theodor Herzl" ("For the charming little prophet and martyr, Akiva Ben Yosef Hack. Dr. Theodor Herzl").

Another document: a small note in the handwriting of Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan of Kaunas, where the Rabbi blesses him "with the torments of love"...

And these are what? What are these? -- Fraud? Counterfeit?

That's what we all thought.

Still it was hard to believe that these were nothing more than the blatant sick lies of a simple con man. A con man, even the most brilliant con man, is always caught out in ancillary negligible statements, which he can't avoid because they are routine. But with him it was, in particular, these negligible items in the context of a strange, but specific and clear outlook, that initially awakened in us both amazement and agreement, and later tied us, all of us, to him with the love that continues to develop over time to the highest level -- the level of reverence.

If there were among us those whose opinion, for whatever reason, was not changed by his personality, who held that everything he told was lies and exaggerations that could startle the imagination but nothing more, for them he had other "documents", and if it is possible to doubt documents written down in black and white, and inscribed on metal, these other "documents" of his work were beyond doubt and above suspicion:

They were the deeds we observed, observed by the entire battalion.

These deeds were far from being hallucinations of a sick mind; unlike the disgraceful hallucinations of army officers whose exalted heroic acts were daydreams. And what the "knights of battle" dreamed -- he, Akiva Ben Yosef Hack, carried out, as they saw to their anger and fury.

It got to the point where all the officers who embellished themselves with their bravery began to hate him fervently, and took to degrading him, mocking him and scorning him, and finally to enmesh him in nets of danger, so that he would be lost and "done away with."

Instead there was a sudden change in the atmosphere, in the way he was regarded, though none of us

knew the correct reason. And when we found out the reason -- a closely held secret -- something that opened our eyes in amazement: the officers exchanged with each other the supreme order of the battalion commander, sealed with seven seals, which had been received from "on high" saying in a few grave words:

"Sergeant Akiva Hack is to be saved for special actions. He is not to be used for unimportant matters. He is our reserve force and his life is essential for the victory of the four nations fighting for their very existence which is endangered. Let no one misunderstand this order; it must be obeyed literally!"

Thus. Nothing less.

Since then Akiva Ben Yosef Hack has become a miracle: a liar, on whom "the victory of the four nations depends!"

4

However, after all this there was one action of the "lying-hero" about which we all agreed: we all attributed every one of his actions that freeze the blood with bravery and daring to chance, and to the man's madness, to one who has nothing to lose. After all, we, the miserable inhabitants of the front trenches, knew the meaning of the word "bravery". And if the whole world outside that frequents the theaters and coffee shops, readers of newspapers and their journalists who toll the bells of words declaring "bravery" and patriotism", for us here within the struggle -- we took all these empty gestures, some with a smile and some with disgust. We knew, it was made clear to us in the first twenty-four hours when we were face to face with the angel of death, that there was neither bravery nor patriotism. What was there was, on the one hand the final desperation of the panic of a terrible and miserable death, and on the other hand, the bloody discipline that transforms the human into a metallic machine that carries out what it is ordered to do by the will of the supreme command. This supreme command grabs our minds with its nerves that in time become the iron wire that carries the electricity of its will, that pulls our muscles here and there, without even considering the possibility of wanting something else even for a moment. There is nothing that will vex the simple farmer suddenly turned soldier more than debasing talk on his patriotism. There is no question that he loves his country all the time; when he puts on his uniform he well and truly feels that he is now going to "beat the hell out of the enemy so that he will never place a foot over the border of the Fatherland". But the only prayer bursting forth from a simple soldier like a strong curse was short and intense:

"Lord on high, I am not asking for your help in this crazy barroom -- but if I see an enemy's foot tread on the borders of our land, do not prevent me from bashing out his brain, and only his brain, so that he will not return home to his wife as a cripple!" That is the prayer of a simple soldier during his first days. But a few days later this soldier finds himself immobilized by a devil called a "general", and this devil does not allow him to love his Fatherland when sacrificed on its altar.

There was one stupid officer, an opera singer by profession, who once announced: "let the most ardent patriot among us volunteer to undermine an extremely dangerous enemy position" -- this officer almost paid with his life for this "poetic style".

"What?" The battalion commander yelled at him with blood spraying from his mouth. "A patriot? And if God forbid he's not a patriot -- he won't go? For you, is an order nothing more than the supplication of pious women in paradise?..."

Thus there were only two types of "heroes" among us, supposedly: those, who obeyed the supreme

command for lack of an alternative, and those -- who when given a choice between a despicable death and a beautiful death chose the beautiful death, a courageous death, for this beautiful death was only given as a gift from the panic to intoxicate the brain, so that it will not notice the moment between life and death...

We thought that this gift, the gift of madness, was given to our hallucinating liar in a greater measure than it was given to the rest of us. For us he was just the sum of all our huge desperation, which enabled us to do what we did. But we carried out these acts not from free will or rational thought; it was more first-degree lightheadedness. The lightheadedness of one whose life was filled with exaggerated incidents, adventures that he brought upon himself, and above all: a man whose entire life is a chain of lies and fraud, which he himself did not believe in, but wished to defraud those around him incessantly, a man like this -- what does he really have to lose in life? Nothing at all: it would be better if he ended his life.

With this recognition we understood all his actions during which he endangered his life even for trifles.

That is how we explained one of his actions, which was both ridiculous and terrifying. Once, after one of our grievous defeats, when the enemy in overwhelming numbers chased us out like a pack of dogs after a rabbit running for its life -- Akiva Ben Yosef Hack suddenly stayed behind and disappeared into the enemy's front, and to our amazement and disgrace, we saw how he surrendered himself to them. Only after an entire day, after we all had come to believe that he was a "despicable traitor" -- he suddenly turned up at our tired and forlorn camp, in the uniform of the enemy, worn and torn, carrying a little Jewish boy, one of the children of the Galician ghetto, with curled sidelocks, with a small fringed prayer shawl and turned him over to our battalion commander reporting:

"Enlightened Sir, I respectfully report: here is a little angel of salvation for our battalion!"

The battalion commander was surprised and didn't understand a single word.

"What?" He roared with open mouth. "Angel of salvation?"

Akiva Hack stood for a moment and thought, then responded with a few words:

"I sacrificed an entire day to save him for us, please accept him."

And he asked permission to be dismissed.

The battalion commander was familiar with him and dismissed him.

What an act! To save a little Jewish boy when the entire battalion suffered a terrible blow.

"Meshugah metorah ki liolam khasdo!" [Totally crazy, heaven be praised] mocked the German company commander who like to spice up his speech with words in Yiddish.

We -- the Jews -- incidentally took pleasure from this: a nice Jewish boy with sidelocks and a fringed prayer shawl in the quarters of our battalion commander -- and now and then he plays with him on his knee.

The battalion commander, oh, the battalion commander is not only a cruel man and a rigid officer, who strictly insisted on the rules of discipline, but he was also a teeth-gnashing anti-Semite.

Suddenly he was taking care of this "serpent's spawn" (as he was wont to call Jewish children) -- as he would his own darling grandson.

Outwardly we laughed; within us with pleasure and surprise: madness.

Among ourselves we added in complete secrecy: birds of a feather. We considered the battalion commander to be slightly crazy. But his craziness manifested itself always in the flame of anti-Semitism to the extent possible, and so long as the supreme command, which always insisted on the harmony and the unity of the battalion, did not notice. But there were several echelons between the battalion commander and the supreme command, so that their oversight did not penetrate into the trenches in order to thwart the plans that emanated from the pent-up hatred that burned incessantly and flamed higher and higher.

The more the Jewish soldiers showed their bravery, the higher his hatred flamed. Thus it was clear that the bold acts of Akiva Hack, which shamed the officers who boasted of their bravery, poured oil on the stinging fire. Only after a few days and weeks did we discover the reason for our recent defeat. The reason was terrifying:

The desire of the battalion commander himself...

The battalion commander wished to be rid of the bloody Jews and above all -- the "despicable liar" that the high command had made into a "pet of honor" for the Jews in the battalion -- what did he do? He squeezed almost all the Jewish soldiers into one company and placed them in the line of fire.

How did Akiva Hack find out about this? -- No one knows. But the battalion commander's plan to cause a defeat succeeded -- though not in full. Sergeant Akiva Hack led his unit towards the enemy, causing the enemy to turn its attention to an entirely different direction, the place where he stood at the head of his company. He gave the order to turn around and retreat, while he and his company delayed the enemy's leading units from striking the entire battalion. Our battalion truly was disgraced when it retreated, the enemy attacked along our entire front, captured a whole string of villages, but in the meantime Akiva Hack disappeared, moved over to the right wing, the weak side of the enemy and there, together with his company, did to the enemy what the enemy did to us on the left wing. Only four days later after the defeat of the left-wing, our wing, was complete -- did it become known that the crazy Sergeant went into the sector where he did not belong: the sector of the battalion next to ours, and then enabled their battalion commander to achieve two victories that he could never have dreamed about. Moving from regiment to regiment is of course "totally forbidden" -- however he did not suffer any consequences: the neighboring battalion commander understood what the Jew had done for his benefit, and, instead of punishing the "lying Sergeant", praised him. Of course, in complete secrecy, the neighboring battalion commander attributed the courageous act to himself.

In the meantime -- our battalion commander's plan was temporarily foiled.

"How did that happen?" the battalion commander wondered angrily. "How did that happen?" And when he found out that the Sergeant had voluntarily fallen into captivity, he shook his head revengefully:

"Yes. Ah, I knew that in advance. Of course..."

But the next day Akiva Hack showed up again -- holding the "serpent's spawn"... It's a shame, a shame, that he came back. This was an excellent opportunity "to expose the true nature of the Jewish hero". "He did that to save 'his little brother'!"

But those who did not know the reason for the defeat saw the sergeant's strange risk-taking as nothing more than momentary madness.

It goes without saying that they didn't understand what good this Jewish child was for us?

Yet he called him "the little angel of salvation"!...

The German company commander repeated: "Meshugah metorah ki liolam khasdo!"

We were not satisfied with this explanation. When we asked him in private what this child meant to him -- he gave a brief answer:

"Whoever saves one life of Israel, it is as if he saved an entire world."

Well, so be it; a somewhat weak explanation.

However, as time went on it came about that the brutal battalion commander befriended "the serpent's spawn" and kept a close watch over him. As if to justify this he told his friends in jest:

"This is my good luck charm. A Jewish child -- is a good luck charm. All the Jews are descendants of serpents, but this child brings me a lot of good luck. Look and see, we haven't been defeated even once since I have kept him in my quarters. Even Alexander the Great kept a small snake in his house that an Egyptian woman had given him as a gift after his forces destroyed her house. It's a talisman, my friend. What does our crazy guy say? 'A little angel of salvation'."

The little angel of salvation would pray with us three times a day as required by religious law. The battalion commander who at first wished to ridicule him by cutting off his sidelocks -- later ordered a small prayer book for him... and before every important military operation would command him to pray for him.

"Let the little one pray, let him pray," the battalion commander would say with a smile. "Whom does he disturb by his prayer? No one at all. Are you laughing? Prayer never caused any damage."

Thus said the battalion commander -- but at the same time he could not forgive the Jewish soldiers, neither for living nor for their dedication to him; and finally, when he found out about the despised sergeant's clever, successful trick -- he decided "to put an end to all these pranks!"

To put an end to -- means: at any price.

Our battalion commanders was one of the high-ranking officers most loyal to the supreme command. Few officers offered up such heavy sacrifices as he did on the altar of a small victory for an insignificant piece of territory.

Witness: the numerous medals that he had received.

In truth -- he was lacking one medal. A medal higher than those that he had, but... the name is well-known: clearly more important than the others. The "Pour le Mérite". This medal, which can only be won by personal bravery, was the one he did not have. We were not at all surprised. We, the battalion commander's "suspicious elements", found this to very reasonable: we had a secret, though iron-clad, tenet, that the anti-Semites of the front were all cowards. No one knows why this is; but it is. A fact. These heroes are actually heroes, but their courage is always limited to sacrificing their battalions. They are not very sentimental. They send their men into the most dangerous situations. But they themselves -- they themselves always take shelter behind the veil of their courage...

The heroes who covered for them were almost always -- Jews.

This, in particular, angered them a bit.

Thus, if you want to achieve something -- they achieved it "at any price".

If the battalion commander decided to put an end to the Jews' pranks -- we could be certain that it would come at a somewhat high price, but -- it would be done. And if it would bring glory to the ones he despised, they would be glorified for a moment -- but they would remain, together with their glory,

dead on the "field of glory".

He waited for an opportunity.

The opportunity came quickly: an order arrived to capture the important Hill 383. To capture it no matter what must be done. The battalion commander received the order from the supreme command, and immediately afterwards his strange order was published, to the amazement of all his friends and acquaintances:

"Since we have recently come to know that the most outstanding of our soldiers are the Jewish soldiers, and since Hill 383 is the most important objective along all our eastern front -- therefore, I hereby command that a strong task force be created composed of all the Jews, and that it be entrusted to achieve our victory within eighteen hours! The commander of the task force will be the hero Sergeant Akiva Hack.

Battalion Commander von Feigoanzur"

We read the order with disbelief: Battalion Commander von Feigoanzur declared that the Jews were the most outstanding of all our soldiers! What's going on?...

In truth, the danger was very great. The order to capture the hill -- was hair-raising and took away our breath for a few moments. After all, he could have sent us without all the compliments about glory and admiration.

Whatever -- the order shocked our unit like a death sentence at a trial. This was not the first time that we had tried to capture this hill, and we were always driven back like one hitting his head against a wall. In this war -- whosoever entered into it never returned.

All of them walked around like one terminally ill patient. We looked at each other and remained quiet. In the meantime, we saw that every one of us sat and secretly wrote -- his last will to send home.

Suddenly Akiva Hack came in. They were a bit startled: all faces turned to face him.

"What news do you have?" I asked in a weak voice.

Akiva Hack smiled:

"Nothing: what are you doing?"

He went up to one of us, snatched the piece of paper from his hands and read aloud:

"Don't be angry with me, dear Mother. I am forced to tell you that this is my last letter to you. Why wait later in vain? Forgive me, my only Mother in the world. This is war. You aren't allowed to expect miracles. Forgive me and pray for my soul ... I am already dead, Mother..."

Akiva Hack looked at all of us, then he calmly tore up the piece of paper, gently, then he laughed lightly and said with a quiet, smiling face:

"Not allowed to expect miracles. Miracles really don't occur because you expect them. Miracles occur because of faith."

The man who had written the will scolded him angrily:

"You can wait -- or not wait. Why did you tear up my letter? I'm not exaggerating!"

Akiva Hack went up to him, stroked his head fondly and calmly said:

"Tell me, my friend, do you believe that I am a liar?"

The guy looked at him for a moment and then answered: "Yes, I do believe so."

"And do you never lie?"

The guy hesitated for a moment and then decided:

"No."

"Then why are you writing to your mother that you are already dead?"

"That is not a lie. I know that these are my last hours."

Akiva Hack looked at him. Looked at him with compassion and with slight sadness and then said:

"That is true. But you are lying anyway. Capturing the hill won't kill you, but you yourself will. I tore up your sentence, but you again sentenced yourself to death..."

Then he turned to us and said confidently:

"Get some sleep. The hill will be ours. Wait for an order." He said and went out.

We hadn't yet digested his words before he returned holding hands with the little Jewish boy:

"Say goodbye to them, Yosele," he said to the boy, "and we'll go." The boy said goodbye and they both left our "room" in the trenches.

## 5

What happened here for the next day or two was something that had never been heard of in the annals of the Great War: after such a drastic and urgent order to capture the strategic hill that was crucial for both front lines, both ours and the enemy's -- after such an order to sit and wait for the confirmation from some sergeant until he will deign to come and "permit" us to attack the enemy -- was laughable.

Yet this really was the situation. When the battalion commander gave the supreme order to finally drive the enemy off a position that could be observed for 30 kilometers all along the front, and that the enemy had been digging in for half a year like a lupin plant whose roots had burrowed down and out until no human force could move it -- after this order Akiva Hack stood before the battalion commander and asked permission to first conduct a reconnaissance of the surroundings of the hill. However, since it is not allowed for a sergeant to stand before a battalion commander without the presence of his own officer, the company commander, the company commander brought him to the battalion commander with the request. The request was important:

"Battalion Commander, Sir, one-hundred and fifty men who are marching into the maw of certain death request permission to first conduct a reconnaissance of the way that leads them to hell! This is their last wish: the last wish of a man condemned to death!"

He can't be waved off. There is also a witness who saw and heard everything: the company commander. And the battalion commander knows that the supreme command will not forgive him if he dismisses this request offhand. But that doesn't prevent him from a venomous reply:

"How many men do you wish to place on the card?"

"Place on the card" -- means: to run away and become a prisoner of the enemy.

Akiva Hack stood up straight like a snake:

"I am the one who places and I am the one who will be placed on it, Battalion Commander,

Enlightened Sir: me alone!"

He added with undisguised ridicule:

"Just as I ran away to the enemy last week -- I will do so now."

The battalion commander was momentarily shocked by the chutzpah. But his anger became ridicule:

"Last week you saved your Fatherland: your little brother."

Akiva wanted to reply but the battalion commander signaled:

"Dismissed! It's on your head."

Akiva went -- and we waited for him. Each of us laid down as if we were terminally ill and nightmarish possibilities flowed through our brains and our blood.

## 6

The enemy on the hill on whom we were about to pounce had long been a riddle to us. We always knew with whom we were dealing, but only now was the nature of this iron barrier hidden from us. The legend currently among us concerned the "bloody battalion" that had suddenly taken over the ridge -- and that's all we knew. We only knew one strange thing about them. A thing partly ridiculous and partly incredible. We found out that the commander of that battalion, some Russian major, was inherently crazy. The essence of his madness was -- this Jewish boy, Yosele, whom Akiva Hack snatched a week ago and brought to our battalion commander. This boy was "all his strength and vitality, all his success and great fortune". And the boy -- was in any case crowned by several legends. There were those who said: he is the son of one of the Galician rabbis who was murdered by the Russian battalion, and who before his martyrdom gave him to the commander himself with a final blessing.

Others say: the boy was born before the war to a woman raped by Cossacks.

There is another opinion, the result of the feverish imagination of soldiers at war, that the boy was none other than the son of our Akiva Hack.

Whatever. Anything is possible in life; during war nothing is impossible.

Whichever legend was true -- the boy was always with the Russian commander, "carefully guarded" from defeat and from any "exalted" mishap.

This in itself did not amaze us. We knew about the senior Russian officers, all of whom are stricken with the disease of weird superstitions. One of those superstitions was an unshakable belief in luck that the Jewish boy was capable of bringing to anyone who kept him. And if we had any remaining doubts about this legend -- our battalion commander showed us that it is possible: he, our battalion commander, believed in this lucky charm no less than the Russian commander himself.

When Akiva Hack went "to reconnoiter the hill" -- he again stole Yosele from our battalion commander, took him without permission when he slept deeply, completely confident that finally he would inflict a resounding defeat on his Jews.

Of course when the battalion commander awoke and couldn't find the boy -- his temper flared up so that his mouth was full of white foam:

"I knew it!" he roared angrily. "I knew that this serpent's spawn is his "Fatherland! -- well, now I

won't wait any longer for him! The attack on the hill will commence immediately!"

The order was given -- and we prepared ourselves.

Even before we left the trenches towards the hill -- Akiva showed up. Drenched with sweat he stood before our company commander and reported:

Enlightened Sir! Let's go! The hill is unoccupied. Not one Slavic pup remains there."

The company commander was somewhat terrified. He looked at him, the "known liar" and said:

"Good, but we must report it to the battalion commander."

"Enlightened Sir will report and we will go to occupy the hill."

"Good: go," he said in an ambivalent, doubtful voice, and went to report on the strange victory to the battalion commander.

Within half an hour we were "in possession of Hill 383!"

The entire "position" on the hill was empty. We found nothing except empty food tins.

Did no one yet know the secret of this victory?

We knew that the reason was Yosele. But we didn't know any more than that. And we didn't investigate much. Our happiness released us from investigation and inquiry. The time will come when we will know this too. The happiness was immense, immense and universal. The entire front was happy and laughed at the strange incident. The supreme command who had repeatedly paid a sea of blood for the hill expressed its satisfaction with the sergeant -- again.

Again the battalion commander had salt rubbed into his wound of mortal hatred. Even to the extent that he had not the strength to attend the "dedication of the hill," as was his custom to dedicate with his presence every important territory that was captured. He would always willingly come to such celebrations, proud, with supreme courage, and would distribute medals and compliments to the heroes who had carried out his wishes.

This time he put the dedication off again and again.

We -- we expected him today more than on any other occasion. There is an important but marginal aspect to this: to see him extol the hero of the hill. To hear him assent against his will. His presence was required. The capture of the hill was a greater victory than others of the battalion that cost more blood than this victory, and whose importance was negligible in comparison.

Only on the fourth day did he come -- suddenly -- without previous notification.

Unexpectedly, he suddenly came to the trenches and it was apparent that he was hiding his anger and sorrow.

When he began to speak -- we all felt that not only were anger and sorrow hiding in his words, but also the well-known submission, submission from fear. A lot was held against him recently. It was not difficult to know the reason for his fear. His schemes against us, his Jewish soldiers, his hatred for them that was likely even to sacrifice the Fatherland on the altar of the devil -- these schemes slowly worked their way up to the supreme command. This was a very dangerous game.

Who knew all this like Akiva Hack?

Akiva Hack knew everything and therefore for the first time since we met him, we saw him as an island of restlessness. For the first time. Before we had not seen the signs. For even in the terrible

moments and during the most bitter abuse -- he would walk among us as a symbol of calmness and quiet happiness, sure and exalted. When we were all wrapped up, both in the horror of the fear of death and in the sadness that devoured our soul and flesh: sadness at the anti-Semitism that spreads day by day like a cursed plague -- he would carry out his duties and secretly smile and sing.

At these moments we recalled that he had repeatedly said both to us and to the battalion commander "that he was the reincarnation of Rabbi Akiva..."

Considering the strange and scattered things that he had said, we didn't even pay attention to this. But when we faced certain death, mixed with the torments of hate from our drugged surroundings, pale like dead men, our souls melting into despondency, and at the same time he sings a well-known or unknown song -- it is impossible for us not to think of Rabbi Akiva's words in the Talmud:

"They cried and he smiled..."

No bad rumor, no hatred, no decree could interfere with his daily prayer, just as no situation could.

Now, after the capture of the hill, for the first time we saw a sort of restlessness in his face. As if he were about to say something. Something important and decisive.

When the battalion commander requested a report not from him, but from our officer, the company commander, he gave the official report, that "all is well", "that the hill was taken with no casualties" and that the victorious hero was Akiva Hack, the Sergeant.

That is not what I asked," retorted the battalion commander with repressed anger. "A hero is not one anointed by his commanders, but one determined by 'headquarters'."

He was silent for a moment and then added with a face that was both flushed and pale:

"We know only too well 'the heroes of the walls of Jericho'..."

There was a suffocating silence in the trench. We all trembled.

At this moment Akiva Hack left his place and without permission from either the company commander or the battalion commander went up to the battalion commander and said:

"Enlightened Sir! I have something to report that only I know."

This he spoke not in the voice of a sergeant, not as a soldier, but as an ordinary person. We were not even astonished at this. We were not astonished because the last words of the battalion commander were not those of an official commander and soldier, but the words of a simple person, full of anger and venomous hatred. At that moment the battalion commander ceased to be a commander and a soldier, and therefore did not scold or reprimand him, but as one preparing for war said in a serious voice filled with ridicule:

"There are always things that no one knows but you."

Akiva Hack added:

"Enlightened Sir is not the first to regret the capture of Jericho without spilling Jewish blood, but only by blowing shofars and with the aid of the God of Israel!"

"Nevertheless," he said with a bitter laugh, nevertheless you strive to be one of our war heroes. Nevertheless you participate, unlike your brothers, in this bloody war, not with the help of the God of Israel, but 'with your sword and bow' [2 Kings 6:22]."

These words caused Akiva Hack to open his heart:

"You are mistaken, Enlightened Sir! In this war too, the God of Israel is at my side. There is no war without Him nor can He be replaced. Both during the great war against the gods of Egypt, the gods 'Chemosh' and 'Baal', and during the war against the 'Glory that was Rome' we fought in the name of our God, the God of Israel. This war only came to destroy your new Rome. And I..."

The battalion commander stopped him again with ridicule:

"Well, which of these wars is holier?"

"This war, Enlightened Sir! Those who served Chemosh and Baal and even those who served Jupiter stood above you, almost to the same extent that we stand above them. Yes, Enlightened Sir: those who served Chemosh and Ashtarot and Baal were holy in their defilement, because they believed in their gods. They served their gods with love, belief, enthusiasm and shocking ecstasy. With joy and happiness they sacrificed themselves and their sons on the altar. Our new Rome serves no God with happiness and sacrifices. Our new Rome only has a stomach. Nothing more. Those who serve Moloch danced with mad devotion around their gods and sacrificed what was most dear to them -- and you... you sacrifice your battalions on the altar of your stomachs... If your holy God of 'faith' were not loyal to himself, it would strike a great statue of itself with a picture of a large open stomach that makes its living from the sacrifices of the sons of 'Judaea Capta'..."

"What do you think? Will you triumph over the new Rome?"

"No. We have already triumphed over her. Neither by sword nor bow, but by the God of Israel, Enlightened Sir."

"And who is the hero of this triumph?" asked the battalion commander laughing out loud.

Akiva Hack was silent for a moment and then said in a low but firm voice with his eyes closed:

"It is me, Rabbi Akiva Ben Yosef, whom you weighed and whose flesh you weigh at the slaughterhouse. It is me" -- he added almost whispering, "It has always been me from the beginning of time. Rabbi Akiva and not 'the Messiah'. 'The Messiah' suffered torments and from his torments new hatred sprang into the world, and Rabbi Akiva came to fix that: he suffered torments to kill off the hatred."

The battalion commander ceased laughing. Apparently these words assailed him: "Well, another Messiah will come whom have preceded with your torments?..."

"Yes, you are right, Enlightened Sir," said Akiva Hack, eyes wide open. "Again a Messiah will come, again from among us, one of us, Enlightened Sir. Because again 'the nations will rage' and again a great evil is approaching us, the Sons of Judah. Your frigid hatred is reaching an extreme. But it must experience a complete worldwide downfall. Because it is frigid, Enlightened Sir. Not in temperature, not in enthusiasm, and not in the holiness of enthusiasm was your hatred born and grew, but in the fridity of frozen ice. Ice does not beget life and cannot even beget venomous life."

"Well, you must suffer torments. Must we flay you with iron combs?" added the battalion commander as if he were familiar with this.

"Yes. It will soon be like that. I will suffer torments, and I will accept them not with love, but with prayer and supplication. With song, Enlightened Sir. A great man does not accept torments with love, but recites a blessing and sings the hymns of God. Does Enlightened Sir know who the only people in the world are who study His precepts with song? It is our nation, Enlightened Sir. The people of Rabbi Akiva Ben Yosef Hack..."

It seemed as if he mistakenly uttered this last word, and as if he wished to take it back, but didn't manage to ...

The battalion commander looked at him carefully: "At any rate this Jew is a strange lad." Then he terminated the conversation:

"Well, fine. If you find the torments of the Jews to be pleasant -- you will soon be granted your wish to see such torments."

With that he took an order from his pocket, gave it to the company commander -- and left.

7

When the battalion commander left, Akiva Hack smiled with compassion:

"The battalion commander says that once in his life he should be 'Pliny the Younger' but -- he is too old for that..."

No one understood what he said, but we saw that it was as if he knew in advance what was in the order that just a moment ago the battalion commander had given to the company commander, and hinted that it would bring to Akiva Hack the "torments of the Jews".

The company commander gave him a threatening look as one who spoke ill of the battalion commander, but it seemed that neither did he have any idea what he thought of his "Pliny the Younger"... He hinted that he should leave and then opened the order, read it silently to himself -- and his face lit up. He gathered the officers around him and in a loud voice read out the order:

"After the visit to the village of Zlatkeif of His Highness, the commander in chief became aware that this situation could not continue. Our gains came at too high a price. The Jews who lived there act as spies for us in the enemy camp, but they also sell us out to the enemy every time. Therefore, I hereby order in the name of His Highness, His Excellency, to put a stop to this filth and to bring here immediately all the Jews who were covert spies, to punish them as traitors to the Fatherland. This will finally remove the 'yellow stain' on our victorious war.  
Signed: the battalion commander."

We heard this and looked at each other in silence. We found the order surprising even for this war, where we had become accustomed to all sorts of surprises. We were surprised because this was the first order that slandered all of us, the Jews, who were loyal to our battalion more than were the other inhabitants of Galicia.

We all knew the meaning of the words: "to punish them as traitors to the Fatherland". This is not a sentence of death -- but an inquisition, torture, "in order to cause them to bare their hearts and reveal their secrets..."

We all knew one other thing: that half of this order -- is a complete lie. First, not only had none of the Jews not sold out our battalion to the enemy, but none had even been a spy in the enemy's camp. Among the spies were all sorts of nationalities in Galicia: Little Russians, Slovaks, Poles, Bosniaks, and all sorts of nationalities and half nationalities and shadows of nationalities -- and only the Jews stood aloof from espionage. Instead of risking their necks in this dangerous work -- they sacrificed everything for the good of the battalion. They pampered us and there was no place so dangerous that they did not bring us food and other necessities of life.

Second, it is impossible that His Excellency would issue an order in such an obviously anti-Semitic style even if he truly hates us.

Third, there is no way that His Excellency would give in order to torture spies, because he himself is totally opposed to such things.

Fourth, His Excellency never visited the village of Zlatkeif for various well-known reasons. The main reason being that the village had lately been the most dangerous place for Their Excellencies. The village of Zlatkeif had been a real "football" for the two enemies, a ball that daily passed from one to the other.

All the officers knew this, which is why they looked at each other. But there were two types of looks: Jewish and non-Jewish. We Jews looked with smoking eyes and pale faces from the insult and from the sorrow at the insult. "They" looked with concealed glee -- and silently smiled at us.

The silence continued for a few moments.

Suddenly, Akiva Hack entered and broke the silence: with no introduction, formal or informal, he said with chutzpah and a smile:

"My mendacious honor has been decreasing these past few days, Enlightened Sirs. They are interfering with my livelihood. I will not stand for that. I request that you give me the opportunity to confirm the order so that it will not be proven false tonight. Please give me the village of Zlatkeif and I will carry out the order..."

## 8

The village of Zlatkeif was one of the miserable Galician villages, suffering, already dismally rotting completely away as a result of the tribulations of the war. The village is not very important, but its inhabitants were crammed together in such a fashion that they were actually suffocating. There was an influx of people from all around, but nobody understood why of all places they came there? It was customary for people to flee the front, but this village was actually located within the front itself. This was probably because the miserable people fled here when the village was still far from the front, and some "adequate livelihood" planted them where they are, and now they had no way to leave. Whatever the reason -- the village of Zlatkeif was in terrible shape after the past few months. The way of life of all the inhabitants became so blurred that we all felt for these creatures neither compassion nor sadness for their sufferings, but revulsion, total disgust and actual nausea. There were hardly any men left in this crumbling village, only females, women and virgins, who had lost their humanity both outwardly and in their filthy inward spirit. The scarcity, the poverty, the starvation, the killings, the innumerable rapes perpetrated by the Cossacks and the other Russian troops who did not distinguish between the sick and the healthy, between an old lady and a young girl, and all the tumult -- stripped the humanity from these miserable creatures and showed them off in their nakedness: ancient creatures, primitive, drooling, soulless, mindless, devoid of ideas, with neither love nor hate, without shame and without any emotion of a living being, whether beautiful or not. They yearned for only one thing: bread. Yearned? -- that is too nice a word for this fever arising from the stomach. The government of the stomach ruled with an unbridled hand. There was no authority in this village. The yellow battalions relieved each other every week and even every day or twice a day, and in the interim the anarchy of the senses developed into a stench.

And the Jews in this village!

Who thought about Judaism here?

The only thing that interested us was the methodical espionage in this village. This trade had become the only livelihood for all the people in the village. Spying on both sides at the same time! Today they gave us the secrets of the enemy -- and tomorrow they told them all that we did.

Slowly this caused us to feel an intense inner disgust.

Once Akiva came up to me and requested that I accompany him into the village when it was free of troops. Both we and the enemy were outside the village. I took a few men with me and we went into the "Galician inferno" (both we and the enemy used this name).

What we saw in that "quiet hour" -- was more disgraceful than any inventive fantasy in the world.

As we passed by a rickety house, we heard the voices of women arguing with each other to the point where they were clawing their eyes out. We heard deafening curses, tussles, insults. We listened for a moment and understood that the struggle concerned a matter of "love"... "loaf of bread"... "bridegroom"... "baby"...

We entered -- and the moral curtain was drawn from our eyes.

There were four people in the house: a mother and her two daughters, one grown up about age twenty, and the other about age twelve -- and one of our Gypsy soldiers who had sneaked here, without permission of course.

The women -- were naked, without a stitch of clothing on. The Gypsy held a loaf of black bread. We had barely stepped over the threshold when the two women set upon us and laid out their complaint. As they were telling their story, they occasionally went back to the honorable knight and competed in displaying their despicable vaginas. I can't relate their words in the speech of normal people, such filth can only be expressed as it appears in the devil's dictionary. The mother blames the daughter, the daughter the mother, for inciting the Gypsy with the bread... the young girl lies on the ground -- also as naked as the day she was born -- and sobs on account of her disease. Her body is covered with blue pocks... the mother had had another girl of eleven but sold her to the same Gypsy for a piece of sausage -- and she died.

With eyes wide open we heard what was going on and goose bumps appeared on our skin.

I went up to the sick girl who began to groan, her words fragmented. When we connected the words we understood that she was feverish, because it was clear that she was talking nonsense. "She gave birth to a boy," she recounted, stuttering, "and they, mother and daughter, ate the dear boy..."

It was a feverish dream, the nightmares of a young girl, totally crushed by the war.

"I didn't taste it," the miserable thing stuttered. "Only my mother and sister."

We stood frozen and felt our strength leaving us to the point where we might faint.

We all trembled -- and he, Akiva Hack, stood and smiled, and quietly said:

"Very good. Everything is as it should be."

Apparently he believed the miserable one. He approached the mother and asked, the flesh of the child sufficed for how many meals?

The mother answered as if this were an ordinary question:

"The creature was small ("das beschefenischel")", she said quietly, "it was very small. She slaughtered

it," and she pointed at the elder daughter. "She ... it was a male child... why do we need males now for heavens sake? For the war?... Besides: that was what his father wanted..."

"Let's go away!" I said to my men and to Akiva. "I can't bear it anymore..."

"Soon," answered Akiva. "Just one moment."

He turned to the mother:

"Who is his father?"

"Who?" the mother answered. "Your battalion commander, the Enlightened Sir, the battalion commander..."

We were horrified. I looked at Akiva Hack's face.

This is very interesting.

Akiva Hack didn't bat an eyelash. He was silent for a moment and then, as if he hadn't heard her last words, asked her:

"Well, living like this? -- Wouldn't it be better to die?"

"Better. Of course, better."

"Do you want to die?"

"Do I want to? Death does not come easily. Either it comes suddenly, or it taunts us and does not come. You don't die from hunger. Bread comes and delays it."

Akiva Hack turned to the Gypsy soldier:

"How did you get here?"

The Gypsy stood at attention all the time and his whole body shook from fear. He stuttered:

"Ah... -- Sir -- Ah..."

Akiva Hack drew his handgun slowly, completely calm, and shot one bullet in the mother and one in the Gypsy, one, two.

"This one too," I pointed to the sick young girl. "It is certainly a good deed to save her from life."

"No," answered Akiva. "We need her."

He gave the black bread to the sick girl.

We went out. As we walked to the front -- Akiva Hack requested permission to stay a bit longer in the village. He stayed and we returned to the trenches.

Why did he stay, what did he do there? -- I didn't ask him. When he returned, he took his violin and began to play and sing a well-known tune with unfamiliar words:

"Do not leave alive anything that breathes..."

"Do not leave alive anything that breathes..."

[Deuteronomy 20:16]

He was not an excellent violin player, but his melodies entered into us and his voice flowed over all our limbs like the chanting of a professional cantor during "UnetanaH Tokef" [New Year and Day of Atonement prayer].

This was what the village of Zlatkeif was like. Now the battalion commander ordered that the "Jewish spies" in the village report to him.

Akiva Hack requested that he be allowed to carry out this order. Akiva Hack stood before him and said in a serious and confident voice:

"Enlightened Sir! In this case punishment is not sufficient. The village must be completely cleansed once and for all! I will cleanse all the filth from our battalion."

"And how would you do that?"

"There is a holy block in our foundations that was created only for cleansing."

"The purifying waters from your Temple?" snickered the battalion commander with stinging ridicule.

"No," Akiva answered. "The idolatrous fire in your Temple."

He too smiled.

We all just smiled like idiots without understanding what he said. And without showing him that we didn't understand, it became a joke and we laughed.

Akiva went to cleanse the village.

He took a company of soldiers and surrounded the entire village with a high barbed-wire fence.

He didn't have much to do, because almost four-fifths of the village were surrounded by such a fence. He only had to close up the open spaces.

When he had finished, he set fire to the whole village.

There was no escape. Anyone who tried to escape and approached the fence -- was shot.

After the devastation he reported to the battalion commander holding hands with the sick girl:

"Enlightened Sir! This is the only spy that I found in the village. She is Jewish, Enlightened Sir!..."

This took place in the presence of all the officers -- and no one understood him, except for the battalion commander himself..

The battalion commander was deathly pale. He wanted to say something but he choked up. Suddenly, he turned this way and that, took something -- and at that moment Akiva disappeared from the room. The battalion commander fired two or three shots after him, and when he didn't hit him -- shot himself and fell dead.

A commotion broke out among the officers, but noiselessly. They all understood that if the battalion commander had committed suicide -- that meant that there was nothing else he could do. A few moments later we found out that there really was no other way:

The supreme command found out that lately the battalion commander himself exposed the battalion to various dangers, not at all for military purposes. He had furthermore attached this girl to himself... The suicide's body wasn't even cold -- when the messenger came from the supreme command to summon the battalion commander to a court-martial...

During this intense, stealthy tumult -- a strange and pleasant Jewish melody was heard coming from

the trenches and spreading out in all directions:

"You shall save alive nothing that breathes..." [Deuteronomy 20:16]

"You shall save alive nothing that breathes..."

"Pliny the Elder," one of us whispered covertly to the dead battalion commander. "Pliny the Elder, consumed by the devastation of Pompeii... but -- no. Not Pliny, that name is too good for him. Better: Nero, the insane emperor..."

"Nero?" answered someone. "The one who is Nero: is the sergeant who himself burned down the village and now fiddles ..."

From outside more than one voice whispered with repressed anger:

"It can't go on like this! This Jew really gets under our skin! If we don't stop it once and for all -- we will all suffer this fate!..."

This was a conspiracy against the life of the sergeant whose daring knew no bounds.

I went up to him and said:

"Akiva Hack, you are insane. Soon they will eat you alive, after all, they are everything and we are nothing, a few individuals ... they will eat us alive, Akiva Hack -- stop playing!..."

Akiva let fall the violin's bow, laughed with a slight smile and said:

"They will eat and they will choke, my friend. Never mind. Everything is going as it should. My name is Akiva Ben Yosef."

He continued to play a gushing melody:

You shall save alive nothing that breathes...

You shall save alive nothing that breathes...

The Emperor Nero converted to Judaism...

And became Rabbi Meir...

La-la-la!...

"You're deranged!" I flung at his face and left.

10

I had just gone out through the entrance to his dugout when I encountered another officer. I could see the emotion in his face and understood that he was planning violence against the sergeant. When we met he stood for a moment, looked into my face, and then said angrily:

"Why does he have to play all the time?"

"Why not? So he plays. It's not the first time that he has played."

The officer had no seniority over me, he was a comrade, and had no power to give me an order, but I felt that at this moment he was suffering because of that. He clenched his teeth in repressed anger and said as he ground his teeth:

"You people stick together as one!" he threw at me in disgust and immediately turned towards the dugout:

150

"Platoon commander (Sergeant) Hack!"

Akiva Hack appeared on the threshold with a cheerful smile, but his eyes conveyed pale, stinging sparks. His eyes were like those of an insane person looking at your face and seeing a different world far away. He stood on the threshold and said in a ringing voice:

"At your command, Enlightened Sir! We are one people! And all of my people await your command. Order us, Enlightened Sir, and another Messiah will be willingly sent to you!"

The officer looked at him, confused from anger and astonishment, and was silent a moment. He could not find words to say, then found a way to express himself:

"Stop playing music!" he commanded in an incontrovertible voice.

"For thousands of years, I have only played music for Enlightened Sir, and there will be some danger to Sir if I suddenly stop. But -- I am at your command, Enlightened Sir! Everyone has the right to throw away his own life!..."

The officer heard these words, but all his senses were clogged up. As if he had heard nothing he said in a grating voice:

"Attention! Senior corporal Akiva Hack! Report! (To a court-martial!)"

Akiva Hack stood, his fingers along the seams of the trousers, the way a soldier should stand in front of a superior, then he calmly said in Latin:

"Ecce homo!" (These words were said by Pilate when he turned Jesus Christ over to the mob: "Here is the man!") He said it the way one said "At your command."

The officer went off and Akiva Hack took his violin, loosened its strings and placed it in a corner, mumbling as if to himself:

"Take a break. When I open your mouth again you shall ask for another owner."

And he prepared to go to the court-martial.

## 11

Akiva Ben Yosef Hack, the renowned sergeant, the affable liar and hero of the whole battalion -- was to appear before a court-martial...

This was the beginning of some terrible deed, "the beginning of an end..."

We were not too surprised that it was going to happen. We all knew and saw where things were going, what was taking shape from day to day and from hour to hour. And we felt that the action could not be covered up, not healed and nothing could be changed. Akiva himself, as he prepared himself according to regulations and went to the court-martial -- had the same smile that usually appeared on his lips and the same words:

"Everything will be alright."

If up till now we had not fully understood him -- at this moment it was clear to us that everything was going as it should: the terrible hatred was going as it should.

The travails of our war that depressed us all to the level of burrowing worms, of the family of moles who no longer know how to feel anything, not even the light of the unblocked sun -- to these travails

was added a new pain with a disgusting and ugly sadness that sliced through the thoughts of one's heart with a rusty scalpel and poisoned every cell of our Jewish blood.

The sadness of hatred.

This sadness was terrible, this pain hurt more than all the pains of the courtyard of death. More terrible than all others, because it came from the devil, it came to you as a human devil of your own kind, your comrade in sadness and death themselves. It was amazing: the fear of death that governed us all, a government powerful enough to encompass in its fold the snake and the sheep together with the wolf and the rabbit. The moment that the roar of artillery resounds over our heads -- we cling to one another as if we were all the sons of one miserable mother, full of sorrow and suffering. There was only one exception here: hatred of Israel. This hatred, which not only does not bend when faced with the fear of death, but to the contrary: the more fear and sorrow increased -- the more it grew and became stronger. As if it grew when fertilized by fear and as if it fed on the hair-raising horror of death.

This sorrowful hatred is too terrible, because you suddenly feel that you are different, that you are the only one to feel this pain. Alone.

After you have thought through the matter -- you will find that you can't even judge it culpable. You feel that it is a clear and just conclusion. The conclusion is that the torments of war that bind us in chains clog his penis without even masturbating, without undermining and without protesting against the inquisition called war, carried out in the name of the nation, in the name of the Fatherland: in your name. The torments settle in and begin to cause you to rot away, clog the breath of life within you when the sun shines, the flowers are fragrant, the birds cheer your surroundings with song, and you know that in the city, people, your friends and acquaintances, are walking free. Joyous, laughing, listening to jokes and attending theaters and enjoying the plays -- and you lie like a dog grinding its teeth in the damp earth and above your head: the melody of death grates in your ears and poisons your blood with a shudder that stings like the venom of a snake.

Grinding teeth has no way to escape.

And therefore -- the blood finds another way out of its terrible confusion: hatred for the weak.

The superior officer furiously abuses the powerless subordinate, and the subordinate -- is the ordinary soldier, and all of them together abuse -- the weakest of the weak: the Jew.

This abuse has grown and increased like a fountain of burning hellfire, and very slowly began to appear at all times, and its audacity in all its decay was boundless and untrammelled. Our comrades finally completely removed all pretense. They no longer eschewed talk, or openly and overtly doing things that attained the level of the devil's jokes.

At first -- whispering and confiding secrets.

Then -- expressing things openly, audaciously, publicly, shamelessly.

Finally -- fictitious allegations.

And the fictitious allegations -- archaic, well-known, banal, boring and laughable.

And among them, new ones.

The way they were developed led them ever downward, to the basest level, and from there to a chasm until the general stinging accusation burst forth.

"All our recent defeats -- have one source: the Jews. It has finally come to the attention of the supreme

command that the goal of the Jews is: to bring redemption to their brothers in Russia and to secure equal rights for them. For this goal -- all means are justified!" explained one of the high-ranking officers.

"You are naive, Sirs," commented an even more senior officer, blinking his eyes as one who knows wonderful secrets, yet covers them up a bit -- "you are naive... Of course I cannot reveal everything, but I will give you the gist. There is more going on here than securing equal rights, my friend. Jews do not do business with such trifles as the red blood of Germans and Hungarians... It concerns Palestine, my friend!" he emphasized in a whisper and fell silent.

All the officers looked at his shining face and nodded their heads at once agreeing yet questioning.

The pig farmer added:

"There are files and documents, my friend. For everything there are clear, truthful, original, black-and-white documents; documents written by the hands of the Jews, in Hebrew script that only Jews can read. They all bear witness that "our 'comrades' of the Jewish faith have sold us to the Entente -- and not cheaply: for their Land of Israel!..."

Everyone understood that this made sense and was quite possible.

One of them slapped his forehead:

"Idiots! How could we not have understood it until now. It is well known that England strives to rule Jerusalem so that she can give the country back to the Jews! -- We are idiots, comrades, really, total idiots. We have already heard the rumor that England promises them -- and they swallow the promise like it's going out of fashion!"

"What?" said the old-timer, the one who had the documents. "What? England promises and they swallow it? Does that mean that you don't believe that they will obtain Palestine? -- You are naive, my friend they will cheat both the English and us, and Palestine will finally be theirs. I'm telling you. Remember. In any case -- they disregard us and are coming to terms with the music and with the Czar."

"Really..." entreated one of the listeners. "Really, what else do you know? -- In any case it will become known tomorrow or the day after..."

The pig farmer needed no encouragement. The secret sprang from his throat: "what do I know? -- everything. I know that everything pivots around one axis: their lying Sergeant ... He is the chief pimp of it all."

This pig farmer was our company commander, who after the death of the battalion commander took up his mantle, and inherited both his hatred and his deeds. He kept watch over this hatred, and incited the hatred with various ploys, swearing to take revenge for the battalion commander and his death that disgraced him and his good friends.

This death -- must not be allowed to escape vengeance.

And the vengeance -- must be commensurate with its cause.

There is no room for half measures. Either -- or. It's not a matter of routine hatred. Something shocking had happened that later became known. For a long time the battalion commander and his friends intended to do something serious to the serpents -- and suddenly, just before the plot came to fruition, just a moment before the explosion -- this bastard, the sergeant, overturned the fate of the battalion commander himself and send him to the next world!...

In truth: the battalion commander was somewhat at fault, why did he have to "go off the rails," and exchange his great "enterprise" for the pocket change of "the torments of the Jews" and such nonsense, only to cause distress to the sergeant. Why did he have anything to do with the miserable village Zlatkeif? In particular at a time... at the time when he himself was covered with the filth of that sick girl...

"Nonsense!" The company commander let fly in anger and contempt for his departed friend. "Idiot! He didn't have the strength to wait a day or two, and to make an end to the serpents all at once, in one fell swoop, as befits him and us!"

"Idiot!" He mumbled to his close friends. And decided to finish the departed's enterprise.

He successfully caused the sergeant to be brought before a court-martial. When Akiva left the front to go to the court-martial -- the company commander rubbed his hands in pleasure:

"Indeed all of you have been living in the darkness with this despicable and deceitful creature. 'Lie', 'liar' -- what lie and what liar? Clearly the whole business of his lies was only to amaze us with his courageous exploits -- none of which actually took courage, but instead were acts of high treason and espionage. Soon all of you will see how much deceit is concealed within this Jew. It will be an interesting court-martial... A court-martial like this happens less than once in a thousand years, my friend..."

None of us knew what the court-martial was about and what the charge was.

Does Akiva Hack himself know what the charge is?

Apparently he does. The last thing he said to us with his well-known smile bear witness that he knows what he is about to encounter. Nothing he said was clear. But it is interesting that his words were actually the same as those of the company commander, as if he was just repeating them without having heard them:

"It will be an interesting court-martial... A court-martial like this happens less than once in a thousand years, my friend..."

The exact words.

We didn't even manage to become very emotional in our fears and distress -- when Akiva returned from the court-martial with news to report.

"Well, children, prepare yourselves."

He passed the order to me:

"Your company will attack the village of Bazara this evening, at a quarter past ten, and within a day you must report to your company commander that you have captured the village of Bazara." This time the order was signed not by our company commander -- but by none other than the supreme command!...

The village of Bazara?

The village of Bazara was precisely the location of the command post of none other than the Russian battalion commander, and to get to this village -- you had to first break through the iron wall of the enemy's front line!...

How did this suddenly come about?

I looked into Akiva Hack's face and asked him:

"What does this order mean? It is totally absurd, my friend!"

Akiva laughed out loud:

"Nothing is absurd before the Throne of Honor of the God of the people of Israel, just as nothing is absurd before the Throne of Honor of the devil of hatred for Israel, pardon the comparison.

"And whose sick mind suddenly came up with this stupid idea?"

"I did," said Akiva with a quiet smile. "As for stupid thoughts -- I am here, aren't I... well, my friend, there is no time for jokes."

He left me and went to gather up my company for the attack on the village of Bazara.

When he had lined up the company in formation ready to depart, he stood before them and asked:

Well, guys, who longs to see our little Yosele?..."

Little Yosele... little Yosele... we had almost forgotten the boy with the curled sidelocks...

Naturally, even replied affirmatively.

"Well, if so, today we will succeed in seeing him among us..."

At that moment the company commander came in and seeing that we were preparing to move out -- his eyes opened wide:

"What's this? Where are you going?"

Even before I had a chance to show him the order from the supreme command, Akiva Hack approached him and said in a metallic, ringing voice:

"Enlightened Sir, I have been ordered to respectfully report to you: we are going to bring documents for the court-martial. Everything is going as it should be, we have a purpose to go and to return, Enlightened Sir. Please prepare the iron combs, but please be careful that you don't hurt yourself!..."

At first, this audacious answer astounded the company commander.

What do it mean: documents for the court-martial?

What is the meaning of: iron combs?

We understood the reference to iron combs though the company commander apparently did not, but from a look at his face we saw that the thing about documents, which didn't mean anything to us -- was apparently clear to the company commander. His face twitched for a moment and he trembled as if he gripped by a momentary stroke, and then he asked:

"At whose command are you going?"

I showed him the order from the supreme command.

This was important. Important and strange for the supreme command to issue an order to one of the company officers -- without his knowledge?

His face showed that he felt disgraced and insulted, but he quickly saved the embarrassing situation: he clenched his eyebrows and as if he remembered something said:

"Ah, yes -- the village of Bazara. Yes, yes ... that's what we decided yesterday..."

Akiva Hack smiled to his face:

"You are mistaken, Enlightened Sir, you didn't decide -- I did. I alone in my tiny Judaism. Everything

is as it should be, Enlightened Sir!"

In a different situation the company commander would dress him down, insulting four generations, but the strange thing is that it wasn't him who sent us but the supreme command. It completely clogged his mind.

He threw him a venomous glance and said:

"March! Carry out the order."

And left.

## 12

I have no desire even to try to relate the preparations for the attack on the village of Bazara. At a time like this, the secret horror comes and boils through our bodies, and for a few moments cooks our blood, then later we shut our eyes and deliver our souls to God. After we have delivered all that is in us, both in the past and in the future, in the present and that which is hidden to the "supreme command" -- we are shocked and with a gesture that means "a command that can't be countermanded" -- we go into the gaping, dark maw of the terrible death.

But now -- a different worm burrows into our brains: what destructive devil is suddenly playing with the supreme command, to impose upon us such a certificate: to go directly into the arms of death with not even a speck of hope that that might bring us some benefit? For it is clear that to capture the village of Bazara in its current state -- is nothing but the dream of a totally blurred mind.

Any of us who had not yet lost hope of life, now is the time!

We cast a final fragmented thought to our far-away loved ones and to our future soon to be orphaned - - and moved out.

And he, Akiva -- smiled to our faces.

The patience of one of my officers who was walking with us -- completely ran out:

"I trust you," he said to Akiva's face, "that you are laden with some terrible crime that alleviates death for you. Certainly some theft or murder burdens you so that it be preferable that you not remain alive. But we are simple, decent people who still hope to return home and continue to live!"

Akiva caressed him with his black and pleasant eyes and said with a soft smile:

"You are correct, Enlightened Sir. A terrible crime burdens my soul: one great lie weighs upon me. I lied to Pappus when I said to him that I finally wanted to uphold the verse 'you shall love the Lord God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind'. I lied to him. It was not of my own good will that I sat and preached in public..."

His prattle was not new to us. Not for the first time did he "reveal" to us that he is the reincarnation of Rabbi Akiva. We listened and remained silent and went off quietly.

He suddenly stopped, went up to that officer, my friend, placed his hand on his shoulder and added in clear words and determined countenance, as one who speaks from a terminal fever:

"One does not become a saint to one's people by sacrificing his life, his body on the altar of the gods of his people, but by also sacrificing his soul, his place in the hereafter. And not in order to receive a award, my friend. One cannot lie and murder for the eternal life of his people -- will not be rewarded

with a vision of its divinity. Moses said: 'Do not leave alive anything that breathes' [Deuteronomy 20:16] and Moses said: 'You shall not murder' [Deuteronomy 5:17]. All who believe in the eternal and esteemed God of our people -- know that there is no murder in our war for him, there is only -- 'You must purge the evil from among you.' [Deuteronomy 17:7] To build the Temple on Mount Zion and at the same time to listen to the dances of the worshipers of Moloch and Chemosh -- that is a sacrilege..."

He fell silent for a moment and then added in a whisper:

"Death was only created, my friend, to teach us that there is no death in the land of the living God."

His voice became melodious, a penetrating and threatening Talmudic chant:

"Anyone who takes a life but does not believe in the eternal God of our people -- is a murderer. After all, he transgresses on you shall not murder, my friend. Yes, my friend, one who believes in the eternal God of our people, his courage is elevated and he fulfills not only another's 'purge the evil', but also purges his own sinful soul on the altar of the God of the people. And I -- my soul committed a great sin in its time, when I thought that to die in torment from iron combs at the hands of the Romans, not of my own volition -- is a sacrifice. No, my friend. Now I must die again not against my own volition, but willingly. Happily, singing according to..."

I understood him and I didn't understand him. Not for the first time did he amaze us with his exaggerations and lies, which were so beautiful that tears came to our eyes. Whatever, good. We'll see if he will die in torment of his own free will. We'll see.

This is how we thought in a sort of cloud of ridicule. In the meantime, in thick darkness we approaching closer and closer to the enemy's front line...

We began to prepare for the assault.

This preparation was totally ridiculous. What does it mean: we prepared? How can one prepare? About thirty men are supposed to pounce on a wide front, on a living barrier of wrought iron.

I placed my men in formation and wanted to give them an order. One of the routine orders in these situations: spread out, be prepared for "fire discipline" and so on.

Suddenly -- Akiva's hand grasps mine in the thick darkness.

"Cease!"

"What 'cease'?"

"Quiet! I must carry out the order not you."

"That's not true." But I was amazed and stood still.

At that moment I felt him hunt for something and then there was a slight movement -- the sound of a muffled shot, not a shot from a rifle -- a long ray of light like the ray of a comet with a long tail that rises up from his hands, rises and lights up the field with a blue-white light -- and the "comet" lands directly on the enemy's front, illuminating in a clear and blinding light an area of one hundred by one hundred meters...

"You are insane! I am going to shoot you, you bastard! What are you doing? A rocket when we are endangered like this?"

He stared at the enemy's front line and his hand gripped mine as in a vise; he took a long look at the enemy and as if he saw something said:

"Good, we'll go with a frontal attack. No one will touch us."

13

This act, shooting an "illumination shell" or "comet", as the ordinary soldiers called it, is, of course, nothing new in war. These shells are always used to light up the field between us and the enemy, so that we can observe and make sure that no one is crawling up to us to stealthily launch a sudden attack or to spy out our positions. But his shot now was doubly astonishing. First, we were the ones "crawling", spying and pouncing. And, second, this blue-white "illumination shell" was something that for the past few days had occupied the entire battalion. This shell simply did not exist in our stores, and only lately on a few occasions were our positions spied upon using this "blue-white comet". Some invisible hand among us had used the comet to signal the enemy and to reveal known maneuvers, and following these signals -- we always suffered terrible defeats. Our late battalion commander walked to and fro as if bitten by a snake gnashing his teeth, directed of course at us, the Jews.

"Of course, treason among us has become routine! Of course, those are the colors of the Jewish flag!" he would shout greatly angered. "Of course, we have lost the war. By our own hands. This 'Jewish comet' will destroy us all."

Now -- I see Akiva Hack using this "comet"...

Well, all his accusations were true.

It is terrifying.

"I'm not going!" we said almost as one. "If we are to die -- at least let us die with honor and not as despicable traitors. "Go yourself and turn yourself in," I said to him with suppressed anger. "But go, please, and if not, I will strike you down like a scoundrel! Here will be your grave, you are despicable! -- It is my duty to do away with the traitor!"

Akiva again gripped my arm and my handgun and said calmly:

"There traitor is already dead without any action on your part. He himself has fulfilled the commandment 'doing away with the traitor'."

He laughed and added:

"Did you not really know or even feel that the only traitor among us, the owner of the "Jewish comet", was our battalion commander, may he rest in decomposition? Do I really have to stuff it between your teeth? You surprise me, Sir. From where did our recent defeats come from?"

My eyes opened wide:

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying, my friend, that hatred of Jews is stronger than all the love in the world, even the Jew-hating battalion commander's love for the Fatherland. What won't our enemies do to dig a grave for us? I only know of two good friends in this war: two battalion commanders: ours and the Circassian's..."

The entire chain of events that rolled out recently began to shine to me in a clear light, and each link in this chain that was strangling us, all of us with its secrets -- at this moment came out of my throat like little serpents, nesting in my soul and suddenly coming out at the command of a wizard practicing

magic...

This was terrifying.

The battalion commander himself...

Out of hatred for us.

It was terrifying -- and calming.

I hadn't even had time to digest all this nor even to firmly believe these things -- when the Circassians welcome us as long-time friends.

A strange feeling passed through me.

Are these the famous bloody devils?

After a while they led us to their battalion commander.

He received us as his honored guests, while Akiva Hack was received as a loyal and intimate friend whom he cherished.

We stood there astounded.

While the "Cossack" battalion commander began to speak with him -- our eyes bulged out of their sockets. His language against the Jews was vile. We had never heard such hatred from a man born of woman. Every word was a snake's rattle that burned and devastated the soul.

With concealed wonder I looked at Akiva's face and saw: he face became more and more contorted, and it took all his will to hide his disgust at these words.

I immediately understood. The battalion commander thought that he was not Jewish, an anti-Semite like him, as were we.

Later they huddled together in the next room sharing secrets, and a while later Akiva came out holding hands with -- little Yosele.

"Let's go back!" Akiva said to me. "Everything is as it should be."

We took our leave of the battalion commander and we quickly returned the way we had come.

"Be careful, Titus!" we heard the voice of the battalion commander call out to Akiva Hack with a soft and confident smile. "Be careful, Titus, so that the Jews don't see you..."

"Titus..."

As we passed over the boundary between the lines, Akiva laughed at me:

"I am -- Titus, my friend. Whatever, what can I do. If I had the strength to stand up to what you all heard, the filth that he said about us -- I must also suffer that nice name. 'Titus the pet of humanity'. I..."

All the way back I kept silent and did not ask for an explanation of these strange goings-on that my own eyes saw and my own ears heard. Most of it I understood by myself and I told myself that what remained will become clear later. There was a lot I didn't yet understand -- I will wait a bit more.

When we got back -- before dawn -- we immediately felt something seething in camp. What was the

nature of this agitation? -- None of us knew.

A sense of bubbling could be felt even among the ordinary soldiers. Secret whispers and unclear hints -- but they too had no explanation.

But the officers walked around all excited, their faces smiling with ridicule and vengeance. A threatening smile that says: your time has come, my friends...

We had no idea what was going on, but we sensed that something was coming to its climax.

On both sides all the muscles and all the arteries were stretched to the breaking point.

Only when we arrived at the front -- did my soul feel greatly confused: I really had no idea what to tell our company commander. I must report that we captured the village of Bazara!...

What good did it do us? The whole thing was almost ridiculous. Ridiculous, almost laughable. What did we gain from this strange attack? What should I report to him?

I turned to Akiva Hack to demand a way out.

He didn't even let me speak to him:

"Go to your quarters, I will report what we have to report."

The company commander entered, holding the hand of the boy wearing long fringes:

"Company Commander, Sir, I respectfully report: the village of Bazara is in our hands!"

The company commander seemed about to go crazy:

"What? Who remained there to guard it? How is it that we didn't hear even one shot? During two or three hours? Have you gone crazy, Sergeant Akiva Hack? Report (to a court-martial)!" he shouted, piling question upon question, since it was clear to him that the sergeant is making him out to be a total fool.

Akiva Hack answered only the first question:

"The position is being guarded by the Enlightened Circassian battalion commander, Ilia Markovich Lavretzky!"

The company commander was momentarily astounded as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt. Blood drained from his face, he swallowed heavily, his chin began to tremble and his teeth chattered as if he was delirious with fever:

"What?" he roared and ran wildly into the next room without waiting for an answer.

"As agreed by our late battalion commander!" Akiva Hack answered him, and without waiting for permission turned and hurried out.

All this time I stood in the doorway of my room which was next to the company commander's. I clearly heard all of their panicked conversation, and soon after Akiva grabbed little Yosele and hurried outside to the supreme command, while the company commander ran after him like a madman -- a handgun in his hand.

My hair stood on end, he will murder him.

At that moment something happened, something that had no rational explanation:

The company commander ran, chasing after Akiva, furious, his gun outstretched. Akiva Hack, instead of running away -- suddenly stopped, holding the boy with one hand, his fiery face staring directly

into the face of the company commander. He stood still like a statue.

The company commander stood perplexed and instead of shooting him shouted in the stammering voice:

"Why are you running away, the most heroic of all heroes?" he said, and his face contorted with a sort of twisted and strange smile.

Akiva Hack stiffened his stance even more, then said to him quietly, but in a confident voice:

"Company Commander Sir! I suggest that Exalted Sir think a moment on this issue of Jewish bravery. You are heroes for murder and we -- are heroes for death. You are descendants of the emperors of the arenas and the toreadors, and we are the grandchildren of the Maccabees. Is Enlightened Sir familiar with the name Rabbi Akiva Ben Yosef!..." His last words were almost a shout that echoed through the trenches.

The company commander stood as if he had been fossilized.

I closed my eyes so as not to look at him. I was terrified.

I stood like that for several moments.

When I opened my eyes -- Akiva was no longer there. He had gone. The company commander shook his handgun as if he were upset because it was empty of bullets...

Whether it was loaded or not -- I do not know.

He went into his quarters and after a moment -- the sound of an immense shot exploded in there.

I rushed after him and found him wallowing in his blood.

What -- him too? The second one...

I was not at all surprised. After the previous incidents I was not surprised; certainly he too was privy to the battalion commander's secrets, and the latter's fate was his fate too.

What would become of all this -- was not clear to me; but even after listening to Akiva Hack's opinions and wisdom, and after these actions, I felt that all these incidents were squeezing his neck, Akiva Hack's, like a snake, to remove him from this world...

Yes, I felt that something in his life was about to break down.

More and more I felt that in spite of all the surprises that clearly illuminated the filth of those who wait in ambush for his soul -- despite all this, he will be the victim.

It didn't seem to me like a sacrifice of death. Not the fear of death, not death creeping up on Akiva and on us, but something else; something terrible: some wonder that will cause our hair to stand on end and blunt our teeth.

Not just me -- we all felt that way, every one of us; suddenly we saw that all of us were bound to him as if he were a shelter, a formidable fortress, with love, with amazement and with childish wonder. Without our noticing it, we felt as if some patriarch of our ancestors appeared, and was suddenly embodied in this strange person who for a while walked among us as a guest, a guest from the far reaches of the Jewish experience, to instruct us which path to take in the maze of the life in which we lived.

We all felt this way, all the Jews of all types. From the worst among us, from the total apostates, from those with a tenuous involvement in their Judaism, to the fanatical observant ones who are meticulous

in checking their fringes and reciting their prayers even in the trenches.

He is lying? -- Well, what of it? A lie is not the worst thing in the world. And on the other hand: what does it mean "to lie"? Perhaps everything is true in a different way?...

Nevertheless -- we were all involved with him and his soul, with his beautiful crazy ideas and theories, which we did not understand -- but they were already among us doing what they had to do.

In the meantime we felt that it would not be long before he left us.

And now, when he had left us for a moment to go to the supreme command -- we all sat silent, motionless, and every one of us -- as we told each other later -- each one of us thought of him and recalled the entire chain of lies that we had heard from him from our first encounter until today.

The lies continue to demand that we excuse them.

Yes, this chain of lies is coming to its end, to its last link.

And there -- at the end -- a terrible surprise awaits us, an angry and cursed tragedy.

The last lie...

## 15

We didn't have to wait long until we found out that for the past few days a roiling abyss had opened up beneath us.

That same day I was given an order from the supreme command whose contents were: a serious charge has been leveled against us. And the charge -- is threatening, terrifying.

The issue was strange and very weird:

Not far from our front on the left flank between the two fronts was a small grove. The reconnaissance company found six dead Hussars who had died a strange and humiliating death: the six men were each hanged by their legs on two trees, and their bodies were sliced through to the neck. There was also abuse: their severed organs -- were in their mouths...

They were found at night, and immediately photographed.

Who had done this?

Without a doubt the Cossacks had done it.

No. "The Jews had done it": on the ground at the foot of the trees they also found a Russian Cossack, strangled, wallowing in his blood. The Cossack must of been killed during the struggle with the Hussars. However, when they checked the pockets of the Cossack they found a note written in Hebrew script. The contents of the note -- treason. One of the Jewish officers had given the Cossacks the secret Army maneuvers in general, and in particular, in great detail, the way the Hussars would take.

It was clear beyond any doubt.

Because what non-Jew knows the Hebrew alphabet?

This was finally a clear proof of the damage the Jews were doing to the war.

And the supreme command? They shook their heads: "strange, but there is no denying the fact and

there is no other interpretation. It's sad, but it's a horrible fact."

You could choke on this.

I read about the "fact" and I felt a sort of smell wafting from my throat to my nose.

One of us was sobbing.

In any case the rumor circulated:

The lying Sergeant had been arrested.

Arrested?... We felt in advance that this was the end.

No, we didn't feel it. Throughout the sequence of events it was clear that other hands were meddling here in the dark. Not only that, but the expectation of the court-martial had two aspects, two possibilities: either a capital trial -- or achieving extraordinary greatness. The second possibility was decisive for us, for our souls. He would receive a medal that no sergeant had received during this war. That is what we waited for after what we had seen and heard.

Suddenly -- a serious charge. With Hebrew writing.

In truth, who here writes in Hebrew? It's impossible to conceive that one of us betrayed us in such a despicable way, or sold himself for some honor or whatever.

No. It's not that. In my mind I flipped through all the men in our unit and found not one.

Now that he has been arrested -- there is no hope, we are all lost.

"Why was he arrested?" one of us asked. Isn't it true that the handwriting isn't his?"

One of the officers who hated us ridiculed:

"Why are you pretending to be innocent? Who but you know everything?"

One Jewish officer, not of a lower rank than he is, stood before him and informed him that he should be brought before a court for this insult.

The other laughed:

"Stop it, my friend, it is unnecessary. All of you are already being brought before a court against your wills. Your court-martial will soon begin. Your nice court-martial!..."

The Jewish officer wanted to say something to him but suddenly Akiva Hack showed up.

His legs shook when he saw us.

He reported to us -- as if continuing the words of the officer:

"Our court-martial has begun. Our nice court-martial. But not at all against our will," he addressed the officer.

I held my breath and waited for him to continue.

He remained silent.

"Well, why are you silent?"

"My stature has risen."

"A medal?"

"No. My Jewish stature. There is no greatness but in the lap of the Almighty."

"A capital trial?... Are you crazy?"

Akiva Hack tensed his lips with a smile, his face became pale and his eyes blazed, but they were quiet and happy:

"No, my friend, again a capital trial? I was not reincarnated for that. Once was enough. They sentenced me to the iron combs -- now I do it myself."

At that moment I thought that in my excitement I would hit him on the head. Instead of speaking clearly -- he again started on his nonsense, on his iron combs. I completely despaired of him.

"Even the insane do not cooperate at the door of death!"

"Woe is he whose cooperation comes from his eternal existence, my friend."

"Listen, Akiva Hack, I am asking you to speak clearly. Not theory but facts! What is the status of the court-martial?"

Akiva Hack took out a document and gave me a copy of the order.

The order was somewhat strange: to dissect the dead Cossack officer into small pieces, to put him in a sack and to carry him to the enemy, together with a letter that informs them that if they abuse us again, every one of their prisoners who shall fall into our hands will suffer the same fate as this Cossack.

I read and became dizzy.

"To dissect him? How? To dissect the human body?... Well, so be it, but what about your court-martial, ours? According to this order we are innocent of the contemptible charge?"

"Innocent."

"So? Are they too innocent?"

"They have always been innocent."

I immediately understood that the whole matter had been cleared up -- but that the supreme command intended for the terrible scandal be covered up.

"How was the matter cleared up? Using which documents?" I asked him.

"Using our only document: Yosele."

He explained everything to me: Yosele had uncovered all the schemes of the battalion commander who was in collusion with the company commander and other senior officers.

"And what about the Hebrew writing?"

"It was Yosele's."

They used his handwriting. They forced him to write what he wrote.

I looked again at the strange order.

"Because our new commander already knows about this order?"

"No, you must give it to him immediately, and I too must tell him something, don't ask what."

I didn't ask.

I left him and went to our new commander to give him the order.

When I gave him the order -- he bit his lip, thought for a moment and said:

"Gather your men and bring them here."

I collected them, all of them.

The commander came, informed the whole company of the order and asked:

"Well, boys, who among you knows how to do this?"

The Hungarians scratched their heads: the task was a bit too hard. To dissect the human body? To bash his head so that he will never be resurrected -- no problem! But to dissect him?

"What are we, cooks?" said one of the Hungarians with a pale smile.

The commander was disconcerted. What should be done? To whom should he assign this pretty task?

"We'll wait a bit," he said, stammering in his confusion. "Let's wait a bit."

He left us. In a moment he returned with Akiva Hack who reported to him:

"Enlightened Sir, I respectfully report: the court-martial has reached a decision with a condition. I have to bring a 'certification of my loyalty to the Fatherland and of my bravery'. I must demonstrate an instance of total bravery that will dispel any doubt that I am worthy of my position. I await your orders, Enlightened Sir."

That is the one thing he didn't want to say to me.

"A certification of his loyalty to the Fatherland and of his bravery".

This was a common practice among us. More than once, someone who was suspected of something was required "to bring a certification of loyalty and bravery". But where Akiva Hack was concerned, this was a shameless, despicable requirement. Sergeant Akiva Hack, the foremost hero among all the battalions from central Europe: his deeds up until now should have sufficed. Another "certification".

Of course this was only a way to make the scandal go away.

The company commander looked at him, his eyes showing some embarrassment. At first he had no clear idea if this sentence pleased him or if it was making fun of him. He thought a bit and said:

"Very well, Akiva Hack."

A thought suddenly sparked in his mind.

"This has come at a good time, Akiva Hack," he said to him. "This sentence comes at a good time. I have a task for you. A task for a hero like you. If you carry it out -- it will be the first sign of your loyalty to the Fatherland."

Akiva Hack knew what was wanted of him. His eyes suddenly shone as if with a mysterious but baseless dampness.

He thought for a moment, then stood at attention and said:

"Enlightened Sir! You all know that that is not an act of bravery. According to your understanding and the criteria of brave acts, it is not a act of bravery. Still, you are correct, Enlightened Sir: for us it is unsurpassed bravery..."

The commander stared at him:

"What are you prattling on about?"

Akiva Hack's forehead lit up like a meteor:

"You, Enlightened Sir, have demonstrated such bravery in Rome, in Hispania, in Poland, in the Ukraine. Soon you will demonstrate it in your own Fatherland. And everywhere.

"Well, well, shut up and carry out the order."

Akiva Hack carried out the atrocity. We stood there and watched; others wished to assist him, but he protested and refused calmly, thanking them. While he prepared himself he mumbled as if to himself, in a whisper, a soft tune:

"This is not bravery that comes from enthusiasm. Nor is it bravery that puts you at risk. Nor is it from hatred. But... to do a deed that destroys your soul and any beautiful feelings within, a global death, that rends the roots of your spirit, rends -- that is bravery..."

Then he stood for a moment, turned towards us, his comrades, and said in a soft voice with pure, warm pathos and in a confident ringing voice:

"A saint for his people is not one who sacrifices his life, his body on the altar of the God of his people, but one who sacrifices his place in the hereafter..."

He added in a graceful tune:

"It was done but not to receive an award."

"It was done but not to receive an award..."

A few moments later we heard his voice:

"Enlightened Sir! The order has been carried out!"

He took a deep breath, looked directly at the commander and said:

"Thank you, Enlightened Sir, for this holy teaching. Thus the lamb becomes a lion. And a lion will never be sacrificed on another altar. The lion is not used to being a sacrifice."

Without waiting for a second order, he took the butchered body, put it into a sack and tied it tightly.

Meanwhile the commander had disappeared for a few moments. Then he returned with a letter in his hand.

At that moment the skies darkened. A tremor of horror went through our bodies and we stumbled as if tripped by gravestones. Then, without intending to, we whispered:

"He will carry the butchered body?..."

Weighty tears burst out of our hearts, which dissolved in a moment like a lump of snow, not from the shining light of a burning sun. No, but...

We knew what would happen now, it would be neither death, nor escape from the world of despicable lies, nor that thing just called "dying".

We knew the enemy standing before us; we knew that the man who would deliver the letter together with the body -- is:

We didn't even have the strength to complete the thought.

The commander gave him the letter and with a ridiculing laugh said:

"Well, famous lying Sergeant, Sir! What lie are you going to tell us now? We have always listened willingly to your wonderful stories."

Akiva Hack smiled to his face:

"Lie? Enlightened Sir, lie?..."

He thrust his hand into his breast pocket, took out a beautiful, leather-bound little book and gave it to him:

"Here you are, Enlightened Sir, the only big lie on earth. There is no lie in the world, Enlightened Sir, but there are people who are vigilant in turned every sublime truth into a lie! This truth -- he pointed to the book -- the wonderful, glowing Jewish truth, which upon its first appearance was called 'Mount Sinai', you have transformed into the lie you call the 'Mount of Olives'. And just as all my life I have told you 'lies' which you didn't believe, so it will be now when I show you one 'lie', the greatest lie during my entire existence in this world and the next -- and again you won't believe me!"

He took the sack and walked in the direction of the enemy's front line.

The commander examined the little book and saw: he was holding the Bible including the New Testament...

I went up to Akiva Hack as if to stall him:

"You're crazy, the order doesn't require you to do this!"

He turned his proud head towards me and calmly said:

"You are fools, my friend, why is an order needed? Who turned every holy war in the world to sacrilege? An order. Not an order, my friend, but ecstasy. I must fix that: Rabbi Akiva Ben Yosef died unwillingly, killed by the Romans, while Akiva Ben Yosef Hack must die willingly, joyfully, ecstatically."

He looked at us and added in his intoxication:

"A great and terrible iniquity is approaching us from all corners of the world. This war is nothing more than the appetizer of the corrupting devil to Israel. We must first offer a sacrifice on the great altar. It is not our God who demands the sacrifice -- we must bring it of our own initiative. Without this sacrifice a new generation which will dedicate its life to God will not be born..."

A great and heavy silence came between us.

Akiva Hack left us in order to die.

And what a death...

We closed our eyes so as not to look at him.

From within the dark silence we heard a voice speaking to us. In a calm, gentle whisper:

"All my life I was worried, when this would come and how I would carry it out..."

We did not see his face, we only heard his voice.

The voice was completely different. It was then the voice of a very old man.

"All my life I was worried..."

When we opened our eyes -- we looked at each other, questioning, wondering.

"What is this?"

An old man stood before us...

I thought for moment that I had gone crazy.

Someone whispered into my ear:

"Is that his father?..."

The old man held a thick book under his arm.

Where is the sack?... Isn't that a book?...

The voice receded from us:

"All my life I was worried.. Hear O Israel..."

The voice was singing a secret, swirling tune...

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By the time we had recovered -- he was no longer there.

There were a few officers here, including the supreme commander who suddenly appeared, causing a commotion to break out:

"Who carried the sack? Akiva Hack? Who sent him? Who ordered him to go? Swine! Who did this?"

Our commander's face became waxy.

"Not I, exalted Sir!" He stuttered weakly. "He himself..."

He has already gone there, away from us...

He went straight ahead without turning right or left, and without looking back. He marched forward -- and a gust of wind brought to us the echo of the fragmented sounds of the same tune that we knew so well:

"For dust you are... and to dust you shall return..." [Genesis 3:19]

We all stood frozen in place, looking after him with bulging eyes.

"He is singing?" asked the supreme commander in amazement, as he watched him through the binoculars.

"Yes," we all blurted out at once.

"He is always singing," noted one of us.

"Wonder of wonders... He's insane."

All the officers looked at him through their binoculars. The enemy was far from us, about four hundred paces.

He made it there.

We stood and watched with bated breath and icy hearts. We watched... And everything that happened there could be clearly seen through the glass: he made it there. They surround him. He gives them the letter. Then the sack. He takes off his coat. His prayer shawl and its fringes are exposed to them. One of them checks the shawl and the fringes... Then they check the sack. And again the shawl. They look at each other...

One of them raises his handgun to shoot him. Another stops him. They talk with him. He stands motionless and talks. One of them punches him in the face.

He does not move.

Again someone goes up to him and talks with him. Then -- there is a great disturbance among them.

Two of them go away. One comes back bringing a long stake. They sharpen the stake and thrust it deep in the earth. They take hold of him and remove his clothes.

He stands naked. The sun is burning hot.

A cool breeze wafts gently over our faces.

Our supreme commander lowers his binoculars and says with frayed nerves:

"Open fire! Shoot them, the dogs, let them die with him."

We raise our weapons and prepare to fire... At that moment... Akiva Ben Yosef himself suddenly turns to face us and gently looks at us from there. He shakes his head... "No. Don't."

Our hands weaken.

The supreme commander looks at us, then thrusts his eyes again in the binoculars, watching and shaking.

And they -- take hold of him, lift him up onto the sharp stake... and set him down onto the point...

One of us faints.

"Move away, despicable dogs!" the supreme commander scolds us.

We step back for a moment, then we creep up to watch stealthily.

They skewer him on the stake. The stake goes deeper and deeper inside him. They hold his legs and to hold his arms down, down.

He does not move.

The stake goes into his body and they pull, with all their strength, forcefully...

"Blood," whispers one of the officers in horror...

"Blood."

Suddenly -- a strong but very pleasant voice... the wind brings to us a pleasant voice. He is singing...

The voice grow stronger and fills the field, the air, the world and the universe:

"Hear, O Israel -- the Lord -- our God -- the Lord is o-one-on-on..."

"Blood!" Again one of us whispers.

I look and see: blood flows from his mouth, his eyes, his ears, his nose and the lower parts of his body.

Our officers lower their binoculars and look at each other.

"Here you have a lie..." mumbles someone.

I slump to the ground and my brain clouds over.

The singing weakens and becomes a whisper...

O-n-e...



## On the Brink

Let no one dare to kiss me upon my death,  
lest he die twice  
From my grandfather's will

For Maria Reflovich, a victim of faith

One of the longest nights of horror.

For thirty-six hours straight we have been killing each other. Night and day, unceasingly, without rest, without food, with nothing to drink and with no sleep.

The darkness completely stupefied us. For this time even the flashes of the shells gave us no light.

We are going crazy in this godforsaken darkness. With bayonets, swords, we stab, skewer, gouge each other wildly, shouting, with anger, biting, cursing, groaning, snorting, our clothes damp with sweat, rain, mud in which we sink up to our ankles, knocks us down on our hands and faces, and we laboriously get up, and again butt, grapple, hit, stab in the air, in the mist, in the darkness, without strength, for no purpose, without thinking, hoarsely groaning on our last legs.

Sometimes we skewer each other instead of the enemy. The enemy fades away, one after another, and our hands move by themselves...

Even to fainting.

Suddenly -- an order: rest.

An order like this does not need a detailed explanation. Wherever it reaches us -- there we obey.

We collapse onto the ground and a moment later -- are asleep.

"Paul!" I ask for my servant.

"Present!" I hear him close to me in the darkness.

Uncertainly he crawls to me.

"Please, Enlightened Sir: here, here. The mud over there stinks. Here is a good place."

He grabs my hand, leads me one step back and shows me: "Here. Lie down here; I'll be at your side."

I collapsed and lay there. In the mud. Beneath my head -- something soft. Soft and pleasant and somewhat warm.

Apparently my servant found a good place for me.

My eyes shut themselves. I feel that I am about to fall asleep.

Except that the ground underneath me seems to stir, seems to move, up and down...

Never mind. It is the beating of my heart. My nerves are so on edge that my heart beats slower and my brain clouds over in a sweet fog.

My servant is already snoring.

Suddenly -- a slight murmur nearby. The slight noise of movement. Men. As if they suddenly stood up and ran away. Fleeing every which way.

What's going on?

I'm asking and I'm not asking. And I don't move.

Whatever happens will happen.

Even my servant's snoring ceased.

Did he also run away?

Sleep is so sweet. It's none of my business. Whatever will happen will happen.

Suddenly -- a kick to my head.

"Get up, damn it!"

Through the thick darkness I barely open my eyes and still, I see clearly:

A Russian officer, a Cossack, is kicking me. A tall Cossack. In one hand he holds a long bayonet and in the other -- a severed head hung by its hair on his thumb.

I didn't panic. What could I do? I got up and went off with him.

Where is my weapon? I could shoot him.

No servant, no weapon, nothing. My entire company ran off.

I walk in front of him. Towards their front lines.

Why didn't I escape?

I was too late. My men ran away and left me. Alone.

I walk in front and he behind me. On one side a second Russian appears and on the other side another one.

I am a prisoner.

They are conversing. I don't understand a single word. At least, if they had been speaking Russian, I would have understood a few words, but they were speaking a totally foreign language.

I listen and observe: they are speaking the Cossack language to each other.

Yes-yes, the Cossack language.

Is there in fact a Cossack language? Of course there is. They are talking Cossack, and as we walk on we approach a large tall tree.

Around the tree was light.

From where does the light come?

From the tree itself, from between the branches.

"Halt!"

I stop.

"Go the the tree!"

I go over to the tree.

"Turn around!"

I turn around with my back to the tree.

Two Cossacks grab my arms, twist them around to my back, and crush them against the thick trunk. I want to scream but they put me at ease:

"Don't be afraid, Sir, don't be afraid, it won't hurt."

In truth, I feel no pain. My arms are contorted around my back, hugging the thick tree, actually broken -- yet I feel no pain.

The third, the one who kicked me in my sleep, stands before me, draws his handgun and says:

"Sir, now you die."

I already knew that I was going to be executed, and still, I shiver and my heart beats madly inside me.

He raises the handgun and says: "Open your mouth, I am going to shoot you in your mouth."

My eyes bulge out of their sockets, my mouth twists and my whole face is contorted like that of a small child when he sees a raging bull approach and has no where to hide.

"Open your mouth, Sir."

"Please don't, Sir," I stammer, crying. "Please don't."

I am ashamed both because of the fear and because of cowardice. But he brings the handgun up to my face and smiles.

"Don't, please, Sir, please why are you doing this? You're making a mistake. Please don't. Why? I'm not the enemy. I love you. I..."

"Open your mouth!"

I open my mouth.

Why don't I insist? Why don't I stand straight and die a good death as a hero should? It's of no importance to me.

He smiles:

"Now you're going to die. In your mouth. Do you want to die?"

"No, dear Sir, no. To live. I..."

"Shut up, open your mouth. I'll shoot through the roof of your mouth."

And he shoves the handgun into my palate.

Two scalding tears run down my cheeks. My body shakes and trembles. I close my eyes and wait.

The cold steel touches my teeth, my tongue and my palate.

I wait, sweating.

He removes the handgun from my mouth and smiles:

No, not in your mouth. In your neck."

I open my eyes in resignation and smile. He is making fun of me.

He tightly presses the cold steel to my neck.

I close my eyes, my muscles clench and I wait.

"No," he says, "straight into your bloody heart."

I open my eyes.

He opens my clothes, uncovers my shirt and aims the barrel of the handgun at my heart.

"Here, here is your sick heart."

My heart stops beating, and I feel that I am suffocating.

"Please, Sir, you're a good man, you keep to the straight and narrow, you are intelligent. Please don't."

"I am a good man, straight and narrow at your heart."

He presses the steel to my heart and smiles.

And now I see that he is not a Russian officer, but a brother, yes -- a brother. A brother who works in the German army...

Istavan! You! I blurt out with calm joy. "Istavan, You! Tell them to let me go and not to do what they want. They are hurting me."

He answers me calmly:

"I have been dead a month and you haven't even mourned me. You shed not one tear. Our mother too died, four months ago. And you are smiling? Do you want to die? You too will die."

He leans over me and kisses me.

He is not my brother. My brain is feverish, an apparition. A Russian murderer, abusing me. Terrible. I must die. Leave my mother and my nice brother.

"Yes, a shot in the stomach, a shot in the stomach -- do you know? -- A shot in the stomach causes great distress: food spills out of your guts..."

I know, I have heard from far away the screams of a dying man shot in the stomach, screams that cut through the blue black clouds.

My guts began to quake. I sobbed voicelessly:

"Please, Sir, I beg of you. From the goodness of your heart. I promise you. You are a good man. You are my brother -- Istavan..."

"Yes. A good man. Show me your temple, turn your face to the side. A shot in the temple."

I turn my head to the side.

What is this? -- It is not Russians who are restraining my hands but a woman.

Her, her. Margit. All my great warm love bubbles through my blood:

"Margit -- my golden bird. Dearest orphan. My sweet bride. My hope and my joy -- he wants to kill me..."

She neither turns towards me nor does she listen to what I say.

"Margit. It is you. Isn't it? Margit Vardasi..."

She lets go of my hand and collapses onto the ground. Into the mud.

I wish to go to her and pick her up, but I can't move. My hands are bound, twisted around the tree...

Suddenly, I calm down: ah, it is a dream. Thank God. My blood cleanses me like a warm healing spring. Of course this is a dream, what a fool I am. Of course this is all a dream. How could Margit come here? To the battlefield?

Yes: in my dream I see them all. I am dreaming. But I know that I am dreaming. I see her lying on the pale ground, yellow, in the mud. Dead -- a dream.

Except that I feel the cold oppressive steel on my temple...

No, not a dream. He is going to kill me. A shot to my temple. I wait. One more moment, an explosion, the bullet will penetrate my brain, I will die.

"Please, Sir, I ask just one small favor: please kill me at once. Shoot me and kill me. I want to die. Instantly. Don't make me suffer."

He removes the handgun from my temple and says:

"No. I won't kill you with the handgun. Not with a shot, not with a bullet, I'll kill you with my bayonet. I'll stab you like you killed Artur. I'll stick the bayonet into your throat."

He turns to one of his soldiers standing in line behind him and says:

"Give me your bayonet."

The soldier gives him his rusty bayonet. He aims it at my throat. He starts to shove it in. Slowly, step-by-step. I don't feel any pain yet. But my blood is boiling, bubbling. My heart becomes weak, empty, and dies. I feel the tip of the bayonet on my palate, my brain becomes foggy, I close my eyes...

"Oy..."

He pulls the bayonet out, looks at me with horrible open eyes, stares at me through red pupils and shouts with a terrible angry whisper:

"You buried my heroic father in mud, in a latrine: my father!"

I open my eyes -- it is not the officer shouting at me, but a thirteen-year-old boy. A young pale boy sheds tears of anger:

"My enlightened father! Into a latrine! In the village. I know where. In the village Lazarovka. At von Velitzky's manor! Attention! I'm going to make you into a sieve!..."

He begins to wave the point of the bayonet at me in front of my face, my eyes, my brain, my stomach, my throat, rapidly, with innumerable thrusts. I stop breathing, begin to choke, tremble all over, my body pushes up against the tree and the bayonet turning here and there with terrible speed, sometimes touching me, my breath becomes shorter...

"Sir, comrade, father, please, brother, Margit, Istavan, my love, my mother, please, don't torture me, kill me instantly. Grant me this wish, please, stab me with the bayonet, oy -- oy..."

He sticks the bayonet into me, into my mouth deep into my throat, into my head -- oy, I feel pain. My heart stops. A warm bubbling, pleasant and terrible, ascends from my feet to my brain. I stop breathing. Death -- a strange death, burning terror flows through my blood -- I am dead. The end. Everything is lost. Everything...

He draws the bayonet from my mouth and says:

"The end. Dead. A despicable carcass. Let's go, he will rot here."

I fall dead onto the ground. Good. So what? I feel a sort of light mild pain in my throat, nothing more. I am absolved, from all fear and trouble. From terror, from torment, from the war, from the dark nights, from hunger, from the mud -- and from death!... That's it? Nothing more? And now?...

I take a breath, relieving, restful, calming and blessed:

Ah-h-h...

At that moment, an inner happiness of limitless light and an unfathomable joy entered me.

"Exempt from everything, everything. Free, free forever. Follow any wind."

Margit stands up and comes over to me.

She closes my weak eyes and kisses me.

I wish to stand up and lay before her my unbounded joy -- but I change my mind: no. Perhaps this is all just a dream. Let it continue. How pleasant!

She undresses me.

Then -- my skin, filthy from wounds and blood.

Then -- my tired flesh and bones soaked with pain -- and says:

"Dear Patai. Patai. Were you terrified? You suffered. It seemed terrible to you. I too panicked at first, dear Patai. You are free now."

She caresses me and says:

"They are still standing here. But you need not fear them. They no longer control you. Let's stand together up there."

I hug her and climb up on the tree.

I am as light as a feather. No clothes, no flesh, no body, nothing, no brain, no bones, no aching heart, nothing, climbing up, up.

But the officer and his men notice, they chase after me as I climb up the tree:

"He's alive!" they all shout. "He's alive! The bastard! He escaped!..."

Some of them climb up the tree, others aim their weapons in order to shoot at me. Thousands of muzzles of rifles are pointed at me -- I stop in order to take a breath. A horrible terror assaults me: if they kill me now -- it's the end of everything!

"Margit!" I groan. "Margit, Margit!"

Suddenly -- flashes of shots!... Silence.

The shots make no sound, they don't touch me.

They enter me -- but they didn't touch me.

I tremble all over, a light bubbling like a mist passes over me and I spread wings -- and fly! Fly in haste! A moment later I limit my thoughts to: what will they do to me. Then, like a child in the bosom of its mother after a horrible event -- a loud laugh. Broad and happy it burst from my entire being:

"Ha-ha-ha!"

How ridiculous! Is this death? How ridiculous!...

And I wake up.

It was already morning when I woke up. A damp ugly morning.

I wish to turn over on my side when I suddenly hear:

"Enlightened Sir, an order!"

I open my eyes and in front of me stands my servant and another soldier who hands me an order from the commander.

I take it from him and read:

"...Tonight, General Artur Gotthagen disappeared with his servant. We know that he was murdered in a most cruel manner by his own servant who hated him. Order: Immediately find the body of the general and capture the murderer. Whoever captures him will receive a medal with the highest distinction. The name of the murderer: Andras Bandari. On his forehead: a scar. Signed: The commander."

I hadn't even finished reading the order when my servant reports:

"Enlightened Sir. I will go and bring back His Excellency's body! I know where it is. Please give me two men."

My brain is muddled. I give him two men and slowly say:

"Go, and transmit the order in full to the First Sergeant."

I wish to lie down and go back to sleep.

Suddenly I notice -- there is a dead body under my head, which had been my pillow throughout the night.

"By the thunder of hell!"

Several documents could be seen in his pocket. I examine them and find a letter:

"Dear Andras, the love of my life who is dearest to me!

This will be my last letter. I cannot remain alive. I am tired. And miserable. A miserable orphan. During the past few days I went to see your dear virtuous mother, the last refuge in my life. She received me as if I were her child and I was happy. Suddenly, she too died. On that day, as she was being buried, a notification came from the German army that your brother Istavan has also fallen. Last night I dreamed that you too died. Why should I keep on living? Goodbye. If somehow you remain alive -- come to my grave and die there.

Your miserable beloved: Margit Vardasi."

I rubbed my eyes. What is this?

Istavan. Margit. Vardasi. Andras...

I never knew these names. But they are known to me.... known... from where....

I checked the address on the letter:

"To the soldier serving with General Gotthagen. Andras Bandari, etc."

With great effort I concentrate and am able to understand.

The dead body which had been my pillow during the night was Andras Benari.

He himself was the servant of General Gotthagen's, the murdered officer whose body is being sought by the commander.

And so: he is the wanted murderer.

Margit Vardasi is his lover. Yes, Margit...

She is the one who told him that his brother Istavan died in the German army...

I know all this.

While still contemplating this amazing situation -- my servant returns with the two soldiers, bringing the body of the dead general. The body was terribly filthy with feces.

"Where did you find the general?"

"Here, not far away, just a few steps. In the nearby village of Lazarovka. In the latrine. In the courtyard of von Velitzky's manor.

I turn over his report in my mind:

The village Lazarovka. Von Velitzky's manor. The latrine.

Without being asked my servant adds:

"From you, Enlightened Sir, you told me."

"From me?"

"Yes, from you, you let me know. In your dream, you shouted in your sleep. I woke up and heard you talking."

Instantly it all became clear to me.

I looked again at the dead body laid out below my head and see: a long scar on his forehead.

I felt his chest -- it was almost still warm.

Did this man really die while I was sleeping on him?

His wounded mouth was filled with clotted blood. He had been stabbed in his mouth.

My servant added:

"And now, Enlightened Sir, if only I had found the body of the murderer?"

I stood up and show my servant the dead body:

"Here it is."