

Chapter I

The Dogs

The Shabbos morning had begun as usual, with the visit to the synagogue. At six years old, the boy's claim to be counted a man was still unrecognized by his father, but he had learned that clinging to his mother's skirts brought down upon him the scorn of his older brother. The little fellow trudged along, half running, half walking in his attempt to keep up with the men. Behind him, dressed in the black silk which had been her entire trousseau, his mother smiled indulgently, noting the blond tint to his curling hair, and the manly way in which he was trying to adapt his steps to those of his brother, who seemed to purposely lengthen his own stride so that his baby brother could not quite keep up with him.

That had been the morning, but now things were different. The little boy who had started out that morning was no longer a baby. He had had his first bout with the world outside the ghetto walls, the Russian world, and he had found it bad.



His mother had turned the corner, certain that her Maishele knew the way home from the synagogue, and that the child would take the next turn and meet her on the doorstep. Instead, Meyer and one of his friends walked on, through the archway which separated the ghetto streets from the rest of the shtetl. Maishele followed them slowly, keeping enough behind so that they would not notice him, but skipping a few steps every so often, so that he could keep them in sight.

His next recollection was that of running and screaming, running and screaming, with two very large, very loud dogs pursuing him. He was running in desperate haste, to escape those bared fangs, and the hateful sound of the *moujik's* voice

encouraging the dogs to leap, to rip, to tear the small *zhid* boy who had dared to stop to look at the farmhouse as he had been passing it. In the distance, he could see his older brother hurrying back toward him, a large stick in his hand, and the sight inspired him to another burst of speed. Sixty years later, the man could recollect vividly the pain in his lungs, as though a huge hand were gripping his chest, and squeezing hard, along with the mixture of pride and apprehension as his brother faced the curs and beat them back.

How the boys reached home that day, one pale and trembling, the other triumphantly waving his cudgel and telling how he rescued his baby brother, was never clearly remembered. Instead was a memory of his mother's face, clear-cut, controlled, a small muscle under her eye twitching as she listened to the tale. But never did he forget the visit from the peasant, who demanded damages for the injury inflicted on one of his dogs. There was a clear picture of his mother, as she stood close by him, doling out money from some minuscule secret hoard, to appease the peasant's wrath.

Maishele wanted to know why the *moujik* must be paid off, but he did not dare to ask. He knew better than to protest his mother's decision while the stranger was present, and an instinctive feeling told him that his mother's strange calm hid depths of feeling which he was not then at liberty to plumb.



In the final analysis, he knew what was disturbing his mother, just as any little Jewish boy living in the Pale of Settlement would have known, from firsthand experience. He knew from the signs and shrugs of his parents, from the sidelong glances the men interchanged when a "goy" was present, from the remarks made by his classmates. He had no sense of guilt in the total transaction. He was not guilty, but the money was paid, and his mother was upset. After the evening meal, his mother settled herself in the rocker in the kitchen, close to the open hearth where the banked fire cast a warm

glow. She sat with the mending basket on her lap, while the child nestled close to her on the wooden foot stool, watching the small blue flames poking their tongues in and out behind the wood. For a long time, she stroked his hair, until he grew restless and moved beneath her hand. With a deep sigh, she put her work aside, leaned down and lifted him into her lap. “Maishele, Maishele,” she said, “It is very hard to be a Jew! Today you learned this.”

“Why, Mammeh, why must we be Jews? Why must it be so hard?” The thoughts which had tormented him began to take shape on his tongue, so that the words poured forth with a passion which he did not recognize. “Why must we Jews live only on this street, and why must the *moujik* be paid? Why, Mammeh?”

“It is God’s will, my little son. . .” But the woman, too, had her secret questions, and to hear them enunciated so clearly by the small boy brought him very close to her in spirit. I must not let him feel my bitterness, this little one of mine, she warned herself. I ask the Eternal for an answer, too—how can I deny him this privilege of freedom of the mind. Must I bind him with the stopgap of easy explanations—God’s will is for all men to live, but here, here in Yanevah, do we live?

She sat forward suddenly, shifting the burden of the child’s body so that he straightened, their two faces very close and very intent.

“Maishele, it is God’s will, but only we can change things. We Jews must change God’s will. This is the only way.”

“Mammeh, how can a Jew change God’s will? The rebbe says . . . the rebbe says that everything that happens is God’s will.”

“This is true. But if a Jew wants to change things, he must try to change them, not just say that it is God’s will, and then forget it. Maybe it is God’s will that we are as we are because we don’t try to change things. That’s what I mean by changing God’s will. Maybe it is His will that we change things.”

Her reply was not too sophisticated for a boy already be-

ing trained in the intricacies of the laws of the people Israel. “If, on the one hand, . . . and then again, on the other”—the playing with words, the mindset, was already familiar and challenging to him.

“Mammeh, do you mean that we should not have paid the *moujik*—was it against God’s will to pay him? What would happen if a Jew did not pay a *moujik*?”

“No, my child, we live in a world where Jews must pay. This will remain as long as Jews live in Lithuania, and peasants are peasants. But there are other places, lands where the sun shines, lands where there are no *moujiks*.”

The silence vibrated between them. It had never occurred to the boy that one could live anywhere but in Yanevah, in Lithuania. Who ever had heard of such a thing? To live in another place—perhaps even as far away as his grandfather, whom they had once visited? The thought was stunning in its impact. Lands where there were no *moujiks*, no dogs of *moujiks*, lands where the sun shone

“Does the sun shine in Russia, Mammeh, where Zaide lives? When you were a little girl and lived with Zaide, did the sun shine all of the time?”

“No, child, the sun does not shine in Russia. The sun shines in Germany—Germany is free. The sun shines in France. The sun shines in America.”

The youngster slid abruptly from his mother’s arms, and ran out of the room. He had had enough of conundrums, enough fear, enough excitement. He would take out these new ideas and think about them again at his leisure. He needed to find the right words to ask the right questions of his mother. At the moment, he had neither words nor questions, but the desire to understand the world burned within him.



Leaving the heated room and plunging into the hall was always a shock to his senses. He ran headlong through the cold, into the freezing bedroom where his brothers were

already huddled beneath the feather-filled *pareneh*. Shuddering, he tore off his shoes and outer garments and hurried himself under the cover. It was an unwritten law that the first one into bed had the right to choose the position he preferred. Ordinarily, he managed to go to bed before his brothers, so that he would have to face only one pair of dirty feet, as the three of them fitted themselves into the bed. But this night, although he hated the unwashed smell that came from under the quilt, he was content to pretend that he was alone, and since his brothers were both asleep, he was relieved of the usual horseplay and vying for position that took place as the three of them settled in each night.

“The sun shines in America.” He mused upon his mother’s words. He had heard of America before this—Reb Green next door, who had been a peddler as well as his teacher, had recently vanished and was now in America. He visualized Reb Green, heavily bearded and already paunchy, walking the streets of a place where the sun was shining and dogs did not pursue little boys. He allowed the sun to shine behind his eyeballs, so that all was a warm glow and the street was lighted with the beams of the sun as Mr. Green walked out of his sight into America.



Other talks with his mother followed, but none came as quickly to his mind as the first awakening he had experienced when his mother told him about the sun shining in other places.

The little boy seemed to stretch up suddenly. His recollections of the growing process were hazy, except for the day that they had stewed prunes for dessert on a weekday, as a celebration, and his father and his brother Meyer left for America. The coins from his mother’s hoard had stretched enough to provide the passage money, and father and Meyer were going to the New World to make enough money so that they could buy ship tickets for the rest of the family. All of them would go to the land of the sun, to America.

In bed that night, he tried to find a picture behind his eyes of Meyer and his Papa walking with the sun upon them, in America, but he did not succeed. Papa was not a sunshine figure, and his oldest son was also aloof and uncommunicative. "Papa and Meyer are going to America, and they will send money to bring us there, too," he repeated over and over to himself, to make the facts pretend to fit together.

The following are excerpts from a report obtained at the Nahum Goldman Museum of the Diaspora in Israel.

JANOVA: A small town on the bank of the River Vilya, in the Kovna District, Central Lithuania. It is on the Warsaw-Petersburg Highway. There are remains of an old Jewish cemetery there on the left bank of the river dating to the beginnings of the 18th century. In 1847 There were 813 Jews, and 50 years later they constituted the majority of the total population, 3,975.

In 1905 nearly all of the town burned down and was rebuilt in stone instead of the wooden houses. During World War I (1914-1918) Jews were exiled from the town. At the end of the war, many of them returned, together with their rabbi, Rabbi Yizhak Shilman. Jews who had emigrated to the U.S.A. and to South Africa helped financially to rebuild a Talmud Torah, a small Yeshiva, a hospital, and there were seven central prayer houses. In 1921 there were 1,800 Jews in the town.

Gentiles and Jews worked in felling lumber, preparing it for building materials, and for carpentry or in rafting the wood downstream for export. The town was a center for the many surrounding villages; Jews marketed their own farm produce and also served in transporting goods and people to the big cities, at first in carts and later in lorries.

Manufacture of furniture, a factory for matches, a flour mill, and a factory for sweets and beverages were in Jewish hands.

During the Holocaust years, the Jews of Janova were subjected to severe hardships, mass murder in a common grave, and only a few of them escaped the atrocities of the Nazis.