

III

WHERE THE GHETTO ENDS

I.

BEFORE LEAVING KIEV I DECIDED TO VISIT THE nearby town of "S." I used to visit this town often as a child. My aunt Rose lived there.

This time I had no special reason for visiting "S." My aunt had died of starvation during the civil war. Her husband, rumors had it, was killed by the Ataman Bulak-Balakhovitch's white guards. Their children left the town shortly after the Revolution. They are now dispersed throughout Russia. I was, however, curious to see what "S" looked like on the sixteenth year of the Revolution.

In the old days it was a typical ghetto town in Russia. The majority of its inhabitants were Jews whose business was petty trading. There were a few handicraftsmen among them—cobblers, carpenters and tailors—but most of the inhabitants either owned tiny stores of all shades and descriptions or peddled penny products in the market place. Their customers were primarily the peasants from the surrounding villages. Even the few self-taught Jewish musicians earned their livelihood by playing exclusively at peasant festivals or weddings. The only industry in

town was a soda water plant owned by one Chaim Kruchnikov who was its only well-to-do Jew.

My host, at whose house I stayed in Kiev, did his best to discourage me from going to "S."

"Why go there?" he argued. "What do you expect to see in 'S'? I can tell you all about it beforehand. The town is a ruin. The few old souls that still remain there will complain to you about their unfortunate lot in life. In a sense they will be right. Working for the Government as a grain collector, I often pass this town on my way to the villages. The misery there is indescribable. What can you do about it? There is no industry in 'S.' The peasant trade is gone because every village has its own coöperative store now. Besides, private trading is no longer permitted by the Government. Some Jews, to be sure, manage to get around the law. But it doesn't amount to anything. The majority of those living in 'S' have nothing to do. Most of them are too old and incapable of doing anything. They are supported by their children who are somewhere—God knows where—all over Russia. As a result the old folks lament and feel miserable."

"Is there nothing the Government can do about it?" I asked.

"What can you do?" replied my host. "You are now in a country that is in the midst of a Revolution. Like all historic tragedies, revolution is double-faced. One face looks forward; it is beautiful and life-creating. The other, black and deadly, gazes backwards. For some, revolution is a victory; for others,

a defeat. I myself was once of the defeated ones. You can take my word for it: Whatever you will see in 'S' is like a drop of water in an ocean if you compare it with the general picture of Russia today."

My host's one-hundred-per-cent Communist harangue surprised me. He himself looked pretty much "defeated." Although a man in his early forties, his hair was snow white. His face was as thin and emaciated as that of a consumptive. The threadbare blue serge suit he wore looked as though it had seen better days. It might have been a relic of his opulent past.

Before the Revolution, my host had been a very rich man. He owned two blocks of tenement houses and was one of the most promising young lawyers in Kiev. A brilliant career awaited him. All that came to an end with the arrival of the Bolsheviks to power.

Now he lives in a two room apartment in one of his former houses, working for the Government and living as the rest of the Russians do.

When I met his sister in Poland—I got his address from her—she cried on my shoulder and bewailed his unhappy life in the land of the Bolsheviks.

"Does that mean you are now a convinced Communist?" I asked. "That was not the impression I have gotten of you from your sister, or are you trying to appear *kosher* before me?"

It seemed to me as though he were anticipating my question.

"All right," he said, "that settles it. I can see that I shall have a difficult time convincing you. I shall not even attempt to do it. Perhaps if you were older

and understood more about the psychology of people you would understand why a change has occurred in my outlook upon life. It didn't come at once. Nor was it easy for me to accept the new order of things. My whole background was against it. I spent many sleepless nights planning and scheming how to cross the border to Poland."

"Where is the key to the riddle?" I asked.

"The key? It is in life itself. These sixteen years have taught me a great deal. You say you are a writer. Well, if you ever write about Russia, I want you to remember one thing: Even though I was a bourgeois, I was a Jewish and not a Russian bourgeois. When Balakhovitch's bandits were killing Jews in Kiev, I was not asked whether I was a bourgeois or a worker. To them I was just a Jew. Now, on the other hand, I am just a human being. I am part of the vast Soviet structure. Events move so swiftly here, there is so much to do that I have very little time to think of what I was. I am only concerned with what I am. That's why I don't want you to go to 'S' first. You will get a perverted picture of Russia. Travel around first, see what is happening to the Jews and to the country in general, then perhaps you will understand why I sound like a convinced Red.

"As for my sister, if you ever see her again tell her not to shed crocodile tears over my unhappy fate. Let her stay in Poland. There is where she belongs."

Subsequently, he told me a story about his sister which is still typical of life in the ghettos of Europe. It is somewhat melodramatic and I repeat it here

merely because it once more (by way of contrast) emphasizes the break that has occurred in the psychological make-up of the Jews in Soviet Russia.

My host's sister is the wife of a well-to-do Jewish-Polish business man. She left Kiev together with the evacuating Polish army in 1919, when the Bolsheviks were advancing on the city. Her life in Poland, to use a popular expression, is just a bed of roses. On the few occasions that I visited her house, it was full of Polish military men and grand dames. That is her function in life; to entertain Polish dignitaries and to hide the fact that she is a Jewess. Indeed, she is not a Jewess, but as the Polish assimilators call themselves, "a Pole of the faith of Moses."

The drama occurred when her son, a medical student, fell in love with a Jewish working girl who had no dowry to offer him. The "aristocratic" mother set everything in motion to prevent their marriage. She would probably have forgiven him for marrying a girl without a dowry, but a working girl—that was putting a blot on her good name!

"Just think," said my host, "my sister who was always lazy, who has never done any work in her life, considers herself superior to a working girl. Why? That is another of the many reasons that made me turn towards the Revolution. In Soviet Russia, there are no castes. Only those who work are the 'aristocrats.' But that is only half of the story. When all of my sister's schemes to stop the marriage failed, she used a sure trump. She accused Manya of being a Communist. That worked. You know how they

treat Communists in Poland. Manya's life became a veritable hell. She was hounded day and night. Finally, in desperation, she risked her life and crossed the border. She is now living in my house. She is a good friend of my daughter, Sonia. I am trying to make up for some of the wrongs that my sister has done to her."

During my stay in Kiev I saw Sonia and Manya often. Both girls are members of the Komsomol (Young Communist League). They work on the railroad where the Government needs the most efficient and trusted people. Like all Komsomol officials in Kiev, because of its proximity to the border, they carry small guns, ready to defend their country at the first call of the Communist Party. On their day off they live, laugh and love. Above all, they are free people. That is what the Revolution has given them.

But, as my host said, revolution is a historic tragedy. There was the town of "S" which is the most tragic spectacle that I have seen during my sojourn in the Soviet Union.

2.

Disregarding my host's passionate plea, I decided to go to "S" after all. It was a sunny day in the early part of September when I arrived there. From the first glance, I was at once convinced that my host was right. In fact, I hardly recognized the town. The little Jewish stores were gone. Peasants no longer crowded the narrow, dusty streets, buying herring,

textiles or tar with which to smear their boots on Sunday. Everything was changed. A depressing silence reigned all around. It seemed as though not a living soul remained in the town. As I came nearer to the houses, however, I noticed old men and women sitting on the steps of their huts, dozing in the sun. My footsteps, kicking up clouds of dust, disturbed the tranquillity of the atmosphere. Heads turned towards me.

"Is that the letter carrier coming?" someone asked.

In a moment the word letter carrier ran around the village. The people awakened.

"The letter carrier is coming . . . The letter carrier is here . . ." was repeated from mouth to mouth.

Soon, they realized their mistake. Disappointed, their faces assuming an indifferent expression, they sat down again to dream in the sun. No one spoke. And indeed, what was there to speak about? Everything was already said, long, long ago.

With much difficulty, I succeeded in drawing an old acquaintance of mine into conversation. She was Anna, formerly a dealer in live poultry. I remembered her as a middle-aged woman, about thirty-five, forever haggling over the price of chicken with the peasant women. On the few kopeks she would earn by selling these chickens to the richer families, she had to support a family consisting of a consumptive husband and six children. During the War, as a result of typhus, starvation and other ills that befell the Jewish ghettos, she lost four of her children. That broke her spirit completely. Now, at the age of fifty-

one, she looked like an ancient woman, her eyes constantly tearing.

"Tell me, Anna," I asked, "why are you so excited about the letter carrier?"

She looked at me with surprise:

"Why? . . . I am expecting a letter from Yakov. Don't you remember my oldest boy, Yakov? He is in Moscow now. He is working for the *Gosizdat* publishing house."

Suddenly Anna had a desire to speak about her Yakov. Her tongue loosened. "Of course, you remember Yakov. He is a man now. A wonderful boy. I am on his *Izhdivennie* (support). He sends me money every month. But," she added sadly, "he is too cruel to Mother. I haven't seen him already for four years. He doesn't even think of coming here. And what else have I got left in life besides his letters?"

"How about your other son?" I asked. "Is he gone, too?"

"You mean Lenia? No, he is still here but I wish he should already be in the ground. Probably because of my sins the Almighty has punished me with such a *momzer*. He is barely sixteen years old, and he is already a member of the G.P.U., running everything and everybody in town. That my son should be a policeman . . . I don't know where to hide my head for shame."

Suddenly Anna began to cry. The women who had by now surrounded us began to cry with her.

At that moment, the trouble-maker appeared in the doorway. He was a typical Jewish boy, under-

sized for his age, dressed in a khaki Komsomol shirt and a narrow Caucasian belt encircling his boyish waist. His face, however, was so serious that it added to his appearance a certain amount of dignity and importance.

"Mr. American," he said in English, giving me his hand, "I am pleased to meet you. How are things in your country now that Roosevelt is elected president? Do you think that there will be a war? And what do you think of the U.S.S.R.; how does it impress you, I mean?"

"It is all well," I remarked, "but I doubt if I am so pleased to meet you after what I have heard about you."

"Coming as you do from the big world, I didn't think that you would jump at conclusions so quickly. That's what they do in capitalist courts when workers are tried. It is true that I am not liked much around here. My mother, as a matter of fact, is my worst class enemy. But why? Simply because she got it into her head that I am a member of the G.P.U., which I am not. Even if I wanted to join the G.P.U. they would not take me. First of all, I am too young. Secondly, I must prove myself worthy of being a member of that organization which is the chief guardian of our Revolution. What I am, however, is an active member of the Komsomol.

"Here is how the trouble began: One day I found out that Reisl, the former grain merchant's widow, a petty bourgeois of the worst order, has been getting dollars from America . . ."

"Not such an unusual discovery," I interrupted him. "Thousands of Russian people get dollars from America."

"Sure that is no discovery. Nor is it a crime. For that we have the Torgsin stores where you can buy only for foreign money. As you know, the Government needs foreign money to keep the Five-Year Plan going.

"All right, you've gotten dollars, go to the Torgsin, buy all you want and have a good time. But listen to what happened: Reisl is still a petty bourgeois. So she went to the Torgsin, bought flour and baked some cakes which she later sold to people around here illegally and at high prices at that. That is already speculation. I knew about it. As a Komsomol, it was my duty to expose her. What would you do in my place?"

"One day, when I couldn't remain silent any longer, I went and told her to stop her counter-revolutionary practice because if she didn't I would have to tell the G.P.U. about it. You should have seen what happened. She ran out into the street shrieking that I wanted to arrest her and take away all she'd got. That is a lie no matter what she tells you. But all the women around here believe her. Since then, even my own mother is always cursing me. I don't care. I shall soon leave this hole anyway. I am being sent to the Komsomol training school. Even now, I've got to rush to attend to some administrative business."

Lenia departed. I was once more surrounded by the women. They were no longer suspicious of me

and each one was eager for a sympathetic ear into which she could pour her tale of woe. Another acquaintance of mine told me her story. It was a repetition of what I had already heard from Anna. Her daughter is a teacher in Moscow. Her son is somewhere in far off Siberia, Biro-Bidjan. They send her money but she has seen neither of them for many years.

This, without exaggeration, was the story of every inhabitant of the town. The Revolution has robbed them of their children. The youth has deserted them. It has gone off to the cities, where new industries are rising, where there is activity and life. The former ghetto youth is today dispersed all over Russia.

And the strong and fit among the older generation; they, too, left the town. They either went to the cities or joined the Jewish agricultural colonies. Only the aged, lazy and sick remained in "S." They are its last inhabitants. The old-time congested ghetto is transformed into an asylum for old folks and misfits. When those die, the ghetto of Russia will cease to exist.

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That night, I left the town of "S." There was nothing to do or see there. I boarded a train for the Crimea, where, I was told a new Jew was being born—a new Jew and a new life.