My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner

The first full English translation of the classic Yiddish story

BY CHAIM GRADE

Translated and with an introductory essay by Ruth R. Wisse

ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

For nearly a thousand years, European Jews thought, spoke, argued, and lived out their lives in Yiddish. It was the language of an entire civilization, built on the foundations of educational institutions, voluntary associations, and communal organizations that over time became the central repository of modern Jewish culture. It was in Yiddish that European Jewry confronted modernity—confronted, that is, the rise of nationalism, Enlightenment liberalism, Communism, and its own twin impulses for religious reform and religious orthodoxy. That this civilization was brimming over with vitality into the 20th century can be seen by the fact that it managed to simultaneously nurse a decidedly secular literary tradition and cultivate institutions of traditional Jewish learning arguably unsurpassed by any other Jewish community at any time in Jewish history.

That all came to an abrupt end with Hitler's war on the Jews. The destruction of the 1930s and 1940s posed enormous questions, and spurred investigation and answer by those who survived it. Chaim Grade, one of the most extraordinary modern Yiddish writers, offers a very pointed answer to the Holocaust in his 1952 story "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner." True Jewish continuity, Grade seems to say, was not to be found merely in the physical survival of Jewish communities, but in the survival of the theological, intellectual, and moral arguments that have always characterized Jewish life. The Jewish people is structured by its contentions and disputes, and not even the risk of physical annihilation can silence the abiding claims of obligation and freedom that press upon every Jew, then and now.

The story is a true masterpiece, one of the finest expressions of modern Jewish culture. *Mosaic* is pleased beyond measure to bring you Ruth R. Wisse's rendering of the first unabridged English translation of the text, along with her sparkling interpretive and introductory essay.

– Jonathan Silver

Editor
Mosaic

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Young Jewish men engaged in a lively talmudic discussion in the Ramayles yeshiva in Vilna in the 1930s. Taken by A. Sapir, courtesy YIVO.

My Quarrel with "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner"

How I came to translate one of the greatest stories in all of Yiddish literature, a work that I believe uniquely illuminates the debate at the very center of Jewish modernity.

RUTH R. WISSE

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In early January 1960, just after having arrived in New York to begin my graduate studies in Yiddish literature, I had the privilege of attending a lecture by the acclaimed Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade (pronounced *Grahdeh*). Born in Vilna in 1910, educated in a yeshiva of the Musar movement in Bialystok, Grade had returned to Vilna in the early 1930s and launched a career as a secular poet. After World War II and the Holocaust, in which he lost his family, he moved to New York. There, in addition to poetry, he began also to write prose: over the years, a great deal of it. He died in New York in 1982.

At the time of his lecture, Grade had not yet made a name for himself in English. But in Yiddish circles he was highly distinguished not only as a writer but as a lecturer on subjects ranging from Maimonides to Rembrandt. For me, it was thus a thrill to be present at his lecture, whose subject was "The Culture of Eastern Europe," and afterward to be invited (perhaps on the basis of my own family connections with Vilna) to join him and his Yiddish publisher for dinner at the Russian Tea Room.

In that opulent venue, after an excellent talk, with two dinner companions eager to please him, Grade was not pleased—with himself. The lecture, he grumbled, was not a success—*nisht-gelungen*—because, having misjudged the time allotment, he'd had to omit an entire section of his prepared

remarks. For myself, having just read his long poem "Musarists" (1939) about the uniquely demanding yeshiva he had attended until 1930, I couldn't help being struck by how much, in person, he resembled the main character in that poem.

Musar was a program of moral instruction intended to cultivate an ethical personality. Conceived in the mid-19th century as a corrective to the overemphasis on technical analysis that was said to be typical of Lithuanian yeshivas, Musar employed techniques of consciousness-raising to make students not just better scholars but morally better people. But in some yeshivas, like the one Grade attended, instruction had turned harshly ascetic.

The main character of his poem, Chaim Vilner, modeled on the author—boys were often called by where they came from—is publicly shamed and accused of vanity when the head of the yeshiva discovers a comb (!) in his breast pocket. In the yeshiva's attempt to suppress their egos, it had instead ensured that, in words first appearing in the poem and repeated by Grade long afterward, "whoever has learned Musar can have no enjoyment in life."

Given this assessment of his education, it is not surprising that Grade should have left the yeshiva in Bialystok to return to his native Vilna as a determinedly secular poet. This hardly implied a break with Jewish life at large. In the city's Yiddish-speaking neighborhoods, secular and religiously observant Jews shared common courtyards and sat reading side by side in the famously overcrowded Strashun Library. Within a few years, at the same time that he was living with his pious mother in the back of a smithy and courting a rabbi's daughter, Grade would emerge as a leading figure of the literary and artistic group *Yung Vilne*.

Then came the Soviet occupation of 1939, followed two years later by the Nazi invasion. With the Germans about to occupy Vilna, Grade fled to the Soviet Union, thinking it was safe to leave his wife and mother behind. He was, of course, mistaken, and all of his writing thereafter, much of it riddled with guilt over their fate, was about the world whose eradication he had survived.

In 1945, with the end of World War II, he was able to leave Russia. After a brief sojourn in Poland he went on to Paris and then in 1948 moved permanently to New York. There, in poetry, fiction, and memoirs, he drew continually and to lasting effect from his personal knowledge of Jewish Poland-Lithuania between the world wars.

On the evening I spent in his company, Grade spoke a little about himself, saying that he was never at peace: when he studied Talmud, he felt he should be reading Dostoevsky, and when reading Dostoevsky, he thought he should be studying Talmud. The following year, I began to see what a writer of genius could do with such a struggle. It happened when I discovered his 1952 Yiddish story, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner."

That story has become the best known of Grade's works—a classic of modern Jewish literature and modern Jewish thought. Although a somewhat abbreviated version of it appeared in English in the 1950s, and was subsequently adapted for stage and screen, this is the first time it is being made widely available in a complete English translation.

I. Transposition

"*Mayn krig mit hersh rasseyner*" is situated in Paris where Grade briefly lived after the war. His first published work of prose, it appeared in the 1952 Rosh Hashanah issue of the New York Jewish monthly *Yidisher kemfer* ("The Jewish Militant").

But what kind of prose was this? A story? A memoir? The journal's editors called it an essay. Actually, however, Grade had created his own literary form to contain the wars raging inside him: a slice of fictionalized autobiography that harked back to his poem "Musarists," transposing its yeshiva arguments into a postwar debate between two survivors.

The story (I will argue for story) covers three time zones: 1937, 1939, and 1948. Of these, the third, 1948, takes up six of the work's eight chapters, over 85 percent of the whole.

We begin after the war in a crowded Paris subway car as the narrator, the "I" whom Grade intends us to identify with himself, suddenly catches sight of his former yeshiva classmate and intellectual sparring partner Hersh Rasseyner. He is incredulous. In the way that people in those days heard about one another, he had assumed that Hersh must have succumbed in a Nazi concentration camp—yet here they both are, surprisingly reunited.

As the two catch up on the circumstances that brought them back together, each expects that the other must have been, if not transformed, then deeply scarred and changed by what Yiddish calls the *khurbn*, the same term it uses for the destruction of the two ancient Temples in Jerusalem. Instead, their unfolding discussion through the rest of that long day reveals that each has actually become more persuaded of the rightness of his earlier path in life. Though Hersh may have become less abrasive in promoting Musar, and Chaim more patient in defending his freedom from it, the divide that had formed in school between the traditional and the secular Jew remains independent of the Nazi attempt to destroy all Jews alike. Hence, the quarrel picks up where it left off, and stays unresolved when they part again at the end.

The story made an immediate impression in Yiddish, and on English readers from the moment the literary critic Irving Howe and the poet Eliezer Greenberg decided to include it in their 1953 anthology, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, and invited Milton Himmelfarb, their fellow intellectual, to translate the story in somewhat edited form. (At the end of this essay I trace the story's translation history up to its present version.)

In a 1972 essay in the quarterly *Judaism*, the late literary scholar Edward Alexander would sum up the intellectual and emotional impact of the story on its English readers:

> If we had to select a single work to stand as a paradigm of all Holocaust literature, a work of sufficient generalizing power to contain within itself not only most of the religious, philosophical, and artistic questions that the Holocaust raises but also the whole range of conflicting answers to them, we could not do better than to rely on Grade's story.

No wonder that, in keeping with this judgment, the work would also gain prominence in the emerging academic field of Holocaust studies—or that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin and the filmmaker David Brandes would similarly highlight the centrality of the Holocaust in *The Quarrel*, an adaptation of the story for their stage play and 1991 film. Relocating the meeting of these two survivors in Montreal (also a French city), they fleshed out more of the characters' background and their experiences during the war.

The significance of this particular reading of the story will become evident later on.

II. Quarrel or Krig

Most of the commentary on this work has focused on the 1948 encounter in Paris. Without changing that focus, I will pay greater attention here to the first two chapters, which establish the context for all that follows.

To begin at the beginning: Himmelfarb rendered the conflict between the two former Musar classmates as a *quarrel* rather than a *battle*, *fight*, or *war*. But of the several Yiddish terms available to him, Grade used the stronger word *krig*—as in German *Blitzkrieg* or *Bürgerkrieg* (civil war). The antagonists who meet up in Paris in 1948 have been arguing ever since one of them, our narrator Chaim, left the yeshiva. While Chaim himself escaped into the Soviet Russian interior, Hersh had been through a Nazi concentration camp, and both lost their entire families. Yet nothing has changed their convictions. What makes this a story rather than an essay is that the continuity is taken for granted, without comment: their Jewish *krig* displaces the German war that came to put an end to both it and them.

Had Grade wished to dramatize a talmudic-style debate, he could have done that alone. His real subject begins earlier, and the opening chapters, set serially in 1937 and 1939, create the narrative arc that actually defies the category of "Holocaust literature" to which the story has often been consigned.

Here is the opening of the story:

> In 1937, I returned to Bialystok, seven years after I had been a student in the Novaredok Yeshiva of the Musarists, a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism. When I came back, I found many of my old school friends still there. A few even came

> to the literary evening when I spoke. Others visited me secretly; they did not want the head of the yeshiva to know. I could see on their unshaven faces that their poverty had brought them suffering and that the fire of their youthful zeal had slowly burned itself out. They continued to observe all the laws and customs meticulously, but the weariness of their spiritual struggles lay upon them. For years they had tried to tear the desire for pleasure out of their hearts, and now realized they had lost the war with themselves. They had not overcome the evil urge.

Vilna was 138 miles northeast of Bialystok; both cities lay within the Lithuanian part of Poland, or *Liteh*. Though Grade turns only part of himself into the figure of Chaim Vilner, everything Chaim says about himself corresponds to the author's biography. "Rasseyner" and "Vilner," as the boys would have been known in the yeshiva, is how they figure throughout. We are given none of their family background that the play and the film would feel obliged to provide, since Grade's concentration on their argument is as single-minded as the yeshiva atmosphere from which Chaim has escaped.

In the 1930s, the Novaredok yeshiva was the largest in Poland, with a reputation for extremism, not only in a religious sense. The Musar movement had been founded in Russia. When the Bolsheviks took over in 1917, the head of its main branch, Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz, instructed the students to flee to Poland to join the already existing yeshiva in Bialystok or establish new branches in other cities. Some of the boys were arrested, some killed, but the movement grew. The historian David Fishman points out that it modeled itself, consciously or not, on radical political movements of the time. Its militancy attracted young men burning with the same idealism that drove others to political revolutionism—and still others to Zionism, which plays no part in the story at all.

According to Immanuel Etkes, who wrote a book on the movement, Musar's innovation was to "transfer the focus of the problem of ethics from the theological to the psychological realm." Since knowledge alone could not guarantee obedience, students would have to be guided behaviorally to resist the temptations of modernity and ego-gratification. In the attempt to tear out evil by its roots, the Novaredok branch of Musar was hardly less radical than Communism, the latter intent on altering society, the former on transforming the individual.

Grade's first book of poetry, *Yo*—"Yes"—was published in 1936. By the following year, seven years after he had quit the yeshiva, his growing fame had gotten him invited back to Bialystok for a public reading. Describing in *Mayn krig* how some of his former classmates attended his lecture and others visited him surreptitiously, Vilner says:

> I was mistaken in expecting that in Musarist style they would try to "tell me off" (*araynzogn*). They didn't berate me. Some were friendly, but avoided getting into an argument, and others sighed over me regretfully, as someone who had gone astray.

Chaim obviously *expected* some reckoning, In the story, the anticipated rebuke finally arrives with a vengeance when he runs into Hersh Rasseyner, his former friend and one of the most zealous of the students.

Rasseyner's temperament and arguments derive from Musar, not from other branches of East European Orthodoxy, and there are no niceties in Musar behavior. "How are you?" is no idle inquiry, but an ethical probe. Rasseyner knows just where to strike, having undoubtedly learned about Vilner's poetry reading from those who went to hear him, and possessing a low opinion of the beliefs of the "worldly ones" who now dictate his former friend's attitudes:

> Chaim Vilner, you will remain a cripple. You will be deformed for the rest of your life. You write godless verses and they pinch you on the cheek for it like a *ḥeder* child. To add to the blasphemy, you come to spread your godlessness in the very city where you once studied. Now they're stuffing you with praise as they stuff a goose with grain, and spoil you like an only child! But later you'll see, when you've begun to go to the school of those pork-eaters, oh, won't they beat you! Oh, how they'll whip you! Which of you isn't hurt by criticism? Is there really one of you so self-confident that he doesn't go around begging for some authority's approval? Is any one of you prepared to publish his book anonymously? The main thing for you people is that your name should stand on the cover, at the very top! You have traded in our *menuḥas hanefesh*, our tranquility of spirit, for what? For lusts that you will never satisfy, for doubts that you will never resolve no matter how much you suffer. Your writings will make no one better and will make you worse. I have heard that your booklet, your excuse for a book, is called *Yes*. But I tell you, "No!" Do you hear me, Chaim Vilner?— "No!"

We have to remind ourselves that Grade is the sole author of this work of fiction, and that both voices are his. He unleashes Chaim's antagonist to mock his "*bikhl,*" his "*sefer pralnik*," belittling terms of ridicule for the book that had launched Grade as a Yiddish poet. If Musar was out to suppress the ego, this former Musarist knew that according to its standards, Vilner—his stand-in—was guilty indeed.

Yet, through Vilner, Grade also gives himself the better of this first exchange. Rasseyner turns to walk away, but "I had once been a Musarist, too, so I ran after him." In a passage twice as long as his accuser's, Vilner charges Rasseyner with fleeing from temptation less out of righteousness than out of fear, and out of disappointment that the world hasn't come running after *him*. He also denies having left the yeshiva to seek pleasure:

> I was looking for a truth that you don't have. For that matter, I didn't run away, I simply returned to my street—to Vilna's Butchers' Street. [. . .] I love the porters with their backs broken from carrying their loads; the artisans sweating at their workbenches; the market-women who work their fingers to the bone to give a poor man a piece of bread. But you scold the hungry for being sinners and all you can tell them is to repent. You laugh at people who work and do business—because

you say they don't trust in God. But you live on what those exhausted women labor to bring you and in return you promise them . . . the world to come. Hersh Rasseyner, you have long since sold your share of the world to come to those poor women.

Having thus vanquished his yeshiva nemesis, Chaim is more certain than ever that in leaving the school and returning to Vilna he had made the right choice. "If, at the time, I said to myself, I didn't know why and where I was going, someone else thought it out for me, someone stronger—within myself. That stronger someone was my generation and my *sviveh*"—translated here as "environment" because there is no exact equivalent for the encompassing Jewish community that this term, absorbed from Hebrew, had come to represent.

Grade appears here to offer an approving picture of *Yung Vilne*, whose very name confirmed the literary group's attachment and devotion to its fellow Jews. He commends the socialist ideals that had replaced religious observance as the standard of right action. One of the poems he probably read that evening in Bialystok was "Mayn mameh," a portrait of his mother the fruit peddler so vivid that shoppers had come to check her out for themselves:

Di bakn—ayngefaln un di oygn—halb nor ofn,
Hert mayn mameh, vi es ziftsn ire kni:
Cheeks sunken and eyes half-open
My mother hears the sighing of her knees:
This long winter morning
We have scurried through the markets—
Now let us rest here at the gate
Till nightfall.

The woman who cannot afford to let her body rest spends the entire day peddling to the passersby the produce that she has obtained from wholesalers. The poem describes her through the appurtenances of her trade: she sways like the pointer on the scale, her body humps like the rotting apples in her basket, and as every part of her body is desperate to shut down, the head sinks until,

Rocked by snow and sleet,
my mother falls asleep on her feet:
In vint un shney farveyt
Shloft mayn mameh shteyendikerheyt.

Grade's mother was raising him to be a rabbi, but he here undertakes a presumably higher calling by showing her dignity in suffering. Material life as it is lived takes precedence over life as it should be lived. *Yung Vilne* was thoroughly leftist, and although Grade himself was never an affiliated Communist, this autobiographical part of the story intimates that he shared the movement's social mission.

III. 1939

The second chapter, situated in Vilna in 1939, a scant two years later, recalls the tension verging on panic that came with the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe. Ignoring the Hitler-Stalin pact that partitioned the region between Germany and the Soviet Union, Grade simply calls it the war between Germany and Poland, and sets the scene as follows:

Western Ukraine and western Belarus were taken over by the Red Army. After they had been in Vilna a few weeks, the Russians announced that they were giving the city back to the Lithuanians. Refugees who did not want to remain under Soviet rule began to arrive among us. The Novaredok yeshiva came also from Bialystok to Vilna. Meanwhile, the Soviets remained. Hunger raged and every face was clouded with fear of the arrests carried out at night by NKVD agents, dispatched from Minsk. I was broken and despondent. Once, standing in a line for a ration of bread, I suddenly saw Hersh Rasseyner.

Only by noting how carefully Grade has constructed this paragraph—the passive form of territories "taken over by the Red Army," the laconic "Meanwhile the Soviets remained," and the curt reference to the NKVD agents "dispatched from Minsk," do we realize how warily he was continuing to navigate the political landscape even as he was composing this passage in postwar New York.

In Vilna 1939, his caution would have been a matter of life or death, for you never knew which envious competitor might denounce you to the Soviet secret police, even from within your own leftist ranks, let alone among writers from an opposing camp. Because he was so close to the Communists, he had no fear about fleeing into the Soviet interior two years later when the Germans were about to enter the city. But Vilna under the Soviets would have been tricky for Grade, a former yeshiva student whose wife's brother was a Zionist and whose father-in-law was a rabbi. Even in New York in the early 1950s it was still unwise to offend the leftists who wielded cultural influence and remained entrenched in Yiddish publishing. In writing this story, Grade walked a political tightrope without appearing to do so.

The changed political climate of 1939 has subtly shifted the story's moral equilibrium. Rasseyner, now married, is more *balebatish*—more settled, as befits the head of a household. He is also more watchful, and Vilner knows why. "He doesn't know whether he can trust me." If Vilner were really an ideologue, he could turn Hersh over to the NKVD. Meanwhile, seeing how dejected Vilner appears, Rasseyner senses that he himself has the advantage. Motioning toward the bridge where some Red Army soldiers are guarding their tanks, he says, quietly:

> "Well, Chaim, are you satisfied now? Is this what you had in mind?"
>
> I tried to smile and answered just as quietly, "*Hersh, because you consider me treyf doesn't mean that they consider me kosher.*"

> *But from the hard, serious expression on his face I could see that my quip had missed its mark. I moved in a little closer and said*: "Hersh, I bear no more responsibility for all that than you do for me."
>
> He shook himself and pronounced a few sharp, cutting words, seeming to forget his fear: "You're wrong, Chaim. I do bear responsibility for you."
>
> He took a few steps back and motioned with his eyes to the Red Army soldiers, as though to say, "And you for them."

Grade may have been a novice at fiction when he wrote this story, but this tightly compressed segment shows how masterfully he already controlled a dense and complicated narrative. As compared with how freely, in the previous chapter, the Jews under Polish rule argue in the middle of the street, the menacing Soviet presence now turns one Jew against another, fearful of betrayal and selective reprisal. Rasseyner speaks his mind only once he is sure that Vilner is still reliably Jewish, and their surreptitious exchange conveys the precariousness they both feel. For Chaim's part, the *sviveh* to which he so proudly pledged his allegiance is now under commandeered Soviet control, and he wonders to what extent he may be implicated in this evil.

IV. Percentages of Words

Let me pause here, drawing on personal experience to clarify how my present translation differs from the excellent earlier one by Milton Himmelfarb. In the above conversation, the italicized passages were omitted by Himmelfarb. Elsewhere, he (or his editors) felt free to *add* words, usually so as to explicate terms or concepts likely to be unfamiliar to English readers; an educative example occurs in the story's very first sentence, where the phrase identifying Musar as "a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism" is Himmelfarb's, not Grade's.

Such editorial decisions take me back to my own first job in Yiddish literature, which happened to be an assignment to translate Chaim Grade's novella *The Well*. When I accepted the commission, I thought the Vilna Yiddish of my parents (Mother a native of the city, Father a long-time resident) would be adequate to the task, but quickly realized that the percentage of sanctified Hebrew-Aramaic (*loshn koydesh*) words in Grade's prose was higher than in any Yiddish writer I had previously read. I sought help where I could, including from local former yeshiva students, but reference books were scarce. In fact, when I later looked up Musar in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the quoted description was from—Chaim Grade.

In search of guidance, I met with the writer Maurice Samuel: a master at interpreting Jewish and Anglo-American societies to each other, a forceful spokesman for Zionism, and a brilliant public intellectual. Samuel was also the premier translator of Yiddish. Rather than going over any single

passage of my work, he took up the term *poresh* that I had with difficulty translated as "synagogue recluse." (Uriel Weinreich's Yiddish-English dictionary renders *poresh* as "one who devotes himself exclusively to the study of the sacred books.") Samuel objected that the English reader should never feel he was reading a translation; since the entire concept of the *poresh* was alien, I ought to introduce his function in my own words, adding a whole paragraph if necessary. Omissions were likewise preferable to abstruse information, and there should be no footnotes or glossary.

Indeed, following that approach, Samuel had interwoven his own commentaries into his translation of stories by Y.L. Peretz (*Prince of the Ghetto*) and Sholem Aleichem (*The World of Sholem Aleichem*), as though he were their co-author. What Himmelfarb does in explaining Musar as "a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism," and in omitting passages like the italicized one above, Samuel wanted me to do throughout.

Despite my enormous respect for my host, I was not about to take this advice, which represented an earlier and more presumptuous (some might say, creative) concept of translation. Given that search engines are now handier and more ample than any glossary I could provide, I have omitted one and made this translation as faithful as possible to Grade's text.

Here is one reason: the sheer intimacy of Vilner's retort that Himmelfarb and his editors considered too internal for the English reader—"*Hersh, vos far aykh iz treyf, iz nokh far zey nit kosher*"—is the very point. It conveys the special quality of Vilna speech, steeped in talmudic turns of phrase—a feature of the East European Jewish culture that Grade had expounded in his lecture. Vilna idiom was studded with examples of chiasmus, antimetabole, and an entire rhetorical lexicon of reversals, including this one that says your enemies do not necessarily consider me their friend: *you* may think I have gone over to their side, but they distrust us both equally.

Vilner wants his insider's wit to charm and mollify Rasseyner, but Rasseyner declines the bait, instead holding Vilner to account for the consequence of his ideas. In replying that he *does* feel responsible for Chaim, Hersh means—and Chaim perfectly understands him to mean—that the Jewish way of life is there to *prevent* one from becoming an accessory to evil. Once Chaim quit that way of life, he became culpable for wherever quitting it led. The particular intricacy of their speech transmits what makes the two of them indispensable to each other: a crucial feature that only a translation capturing this intricacy can hope to convey.

Returning now to the plot, if the first chapter may have led us to think that Chaim speaks *for* the author, representing Grade's point of view, the second chapter shows him writing also in expiation: he allows Rasseyner to condemn Chaim's youthful flirtation with Communism, however idealistic it may have seemed at the time. So, too, in the rest of the story we do well to keep in mind that Grade was at least as intent on arguing Rasseyner's position as he was on presenting what we may take to be his

own. The pair's intimate verbal shorthand is just one of the ways the story restores the presence of a self-sustaining Jewish culture in Europe—a culture, and a sensibility, that stood independently of their surroundings then and have continued to do so for many Jews today.

V. The Debate Begins Anew

The final shift of scene in the third chapter, the technique by which an author moves his readers from one sphere to another, I consider one of the most stunning in Jewish literature:

> Nine more years passed, years of war and destruction, during which I wandered across Russia, Poland, and Western Europe. In 1948, on a summer afternoon, I was riding in the Paris Métro. . . .

Grade had earlier pivoted from 1937 to 1939 with the simple declaration "Two years passed." By just as casually bridging the nine years that followed, the years of the *khurbn*, the great destruction of the European Jews, he refuses to accord them a decisive role in Jewish history or Jewish thought.

The Holocaust was a German initiative. The Nazi party planned and executed the Final Solution that reduced the Jews by a third of their number and all but terminated the two millennia of Jewish life in Europe. It cost this story's two former yeshiva classmates their families, their wives and parents, their friends and native communities: they could never recover any of what they had lost. But what did it really have to do with them and their *krig*? Grade's audacious response is—almost nothing. "Nine more years passed" confirms that the same issues facing Jews before the war remained in place after it, essentially unchanged by all that was destroyed.

As for Chaim Vilner's interlocutor/antagonist, Grade did not choose him at random. One longstanding assumption by translators, critics, and scholars was that the figure of Hersh Rasseyner had been based on a real person; thanks to the research of Yehudah DovBer Zirkind, the identity of that person has now been confirmed.

He was Gershon Liebman, whom Grade in an early draft of the story called by his yeshiva name Kovler. Everything the fictional Rasseyner says about himself corresponds to what is known about the real Kovler-Liebman: that he and Grade were in the Novaredok yeshiva in Bialystok; that, in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, he had gathered around him a circle of students whom he taught and sustained; and that, having survived, he opened probably the first postwar yeshiva in Germany and founded others in France and Morocco. In further confirmation of Liebman as the model for Rasseyner, he was known to have told his students about his encounter with Grade in Paris, when he tried to win him back to religious observance.

But the dialogue and its arrangement are of course wholly Grade's, and the antagonist is only as strong as Grade makes him.

Once the stage is set for Paris 1948, the debate begins anew, free of the yeshiva and, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Soviet threat. At one point, Chaim-as-narrator records being embarrassed by his friend's volubility (notably, Hersh has no such qualms), but they can otherwise converse for as long as and however they like, this being their reward for having survived in Europe.

> Hersh told me briefly that he had been in a camp in Latvia. Now he was in Germany, at the head of a yeshiva in Salzheim.
>
> "The head of a yeshiva in Germany? And who are your students, Reb Hersh?"
>
> "Do you think," he smiled, "that the Holy One has become an orphan? There are still boys, praised be the Almighty, who are studying Torah."

Chaim is so happy to have met his old friend that he does not immediately protest Hersh's crediting the blessings of faith for his ability to gather a circle of students around him even in the camp (as the real-life model for him did). But Rasseyner cannot leave it at that. As he had once taunted Vilner with responsibility for the Soviet occupiers, so he now mocks his ex-friend's cultural affinity with the couples publicly kissing in their Paris subway car.

> "Where are you going? Together with them perhaps?" His eyes laughed at the young couples. "Will you get off where they do? And maybe you still believe in this cruel world?"

To which Vilner replies:

> "And you, Reb Hersh, do you still believe in God's particular providence for the Jews? You say that the Holy One has not been orphaned. But we have become orphans. A miracle happened to you, Reb Hersh, and you were saved. But how about the rest? Can you still believe?"

It was Vilner's final question—how can one go on believing?—that dominated much theological discussion after the war. The enormity of Nazi evil seemed incompatible with any notion of an Almighty, Ruler of the Universe, who had contracted with the Jews at Sinai to carry His law in return for His special providential care. Two powerful memoirists, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, both dramatized how God had failed them at Auschwitz, the former when witnessing the public hanging of a mere boy, the latter at the sight of a Jew by the name of Kuhn praying after a *Selektion* procedure that had spared him but condemned others to execution. "If I were God," writes Levi, I would have spat on Kuhn's prayer."

Chaim makes the same point. "A miracle happened to you, and you were saved? But how about the rest?" In thanking God for His personal providence, was Hersh not inexcusably condoning the murder of all

the others? Is it moral to continue believing in a God who oversees this measure of evil? This indictment seems harsher than Job's by many millions. To it, Chaim will later add the charge of "cloistered virtue" that Satan mounts against Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, denying the do-gooder any moral superiority for simply avoiding a temptation he fears he would be unable to resist.

As the two men trade arguments in successive chapters of the work's final section, secular Chaim appears at first to have the upper hand. The statues of great benefactors of civilization surrounding them in the Hôtel de Ville, where they do most of their talking, help him make the case for the enlightenment that culture and science have brought to the world. "The great writer broadens our understanding and stirs our pity for our fellow man." Expansion of knowledge is an end in itself, and science has improved people's lives.

Yet, gradually, Hersh proves so much the stronger that we suspect Grade of having dramatized this encounter precisely in order to arrange the open expression of a level of venom that he in his own voice, as a "liberal" author, could not otherwise release. "If you make excuses for the man who exults in his wickedness," Rasseyner charges, "then as far as I'm concerned all your scribbling is unclean and unfit: *muktseh makhmes miyus*—forbidden because disgusting." Far from admiring the humanistic pretensions of fine literature, Hersh thinks its expansion of our sympathies for evil is itself evil. "*Condemn* the glutton and drunkard!" Thus does Grade remind his literary stand-in that Judaism's very purpose is to prevent this form of idolatry.

Rasseyner's attack on European civilization is the most sustained such condemnation I know of in all of Jewish literature. Hersh makes it clear that in denouncing his former schoolmate for having crossed over into the secular camp, he is actually indicting not him alone but all that Western enlightenment had wrought. If the continuity and endurance of their argument form the spine of this story, its power lies in Chaim's observation that his friend is "unburdening himself of anger" that he had for too long choked off.

This is the key to Grade's state of mind when writing the story. Grade had been a poet before the war, an acclaimed poet, but when he needed a vehicle for his rage, he gave his inner Rasseyner free rein, imbuing him with all the intelligence, talmudic debating skills, and artistic talent at his command.

In fact, the force of Rasseyner's steadfast belief in Musar lies in what has just happened in Europe. Disdaining the high ideals propagated by those whose statues literally stand above them in the heart of Paris, the Musarist hammers home the difference between great ideas and good deeds. Take, he suggests, the Athenian philosophers in their School of Reason:

> Did they really live as they taught, or did their system remain only a system? You must understand once and for all that when his reason is calm and pure, a man does not know how he will act when his dark

> desire overtakes him. A man is dazzled by his own wisdom and proud of his knowledge, but as soon as a little desire stirs in him, he forgets all his learning. His senses are stronger than his reason. Reason is like a trained dog who follows sedately in his master's footsteps—until he sees a bitch.

By contrast, a man should choose between good and evil only as the Law chooses for him. Since Judaism wishes him to be happy, the habits cultivated by following the Law will guard against temptation when it strikes.

The sophistication and flow of Rasseyner's speeches are almost too much. How did this yeshiva boy get to sound like . . . Chaim Grade? Rasseyner explains that during his confinement he was able to read up on Western sources. Moreover, he had silently continued challenging Vilner during all of his years in the ghetto and later in the camps:

> That's why you mustn't be surprised if I talk to you as fluently as though I were reciting the daily prayers. Believe me, I have had so many imaginary debates with you that I know my arguments as well as the first prayer of the morning.

And this allows the author, through Hersh, to hold nothing back:

> For ages [the wise men] debated, they talked and they wrote: does duty to nation and family come first, or does the freedom of the individual come before his obligations to parents, wife, and children—or even to himself? They deliberated and concluded: there are no bonds that a nation cannot break; that truth and reason are like the sun, which must rise every day. Just try to cover up the sun with shovelfuls of dirt. So there came in the West a booted ruler with a little mustache, and in the East a booted ruler with a big mustache, and both of them together kicked the wise man to the ground and he sank into the mud.

If, to the rational materialist, the Holocaust proved the worthless incapacities of Jewish civilization, Hersh proves the worthlessness of all that tried to bring Judaism down: you dare to ask how I can go on believing in God; how can you go on trusting in *man*?

VI. Rasseyner's Indictment of Secular Modernity

The most invasive change made to Grade's story in Himmelfarb's translation is the omission of most of chapter six, in which Rasseyner's student Yehoshua, whom he had rescued in the camps, comes looking for his teacher. The boy rudely contrasts the self-sacrifice shown by his *rebbe* with the callowness he attributes to Vilner in saving his own skin. This mean-spirited use of the Holocaust to condemn secular Jews drives Vilner into a rage. "Is this what you teach? Hate and scorn for the whole world?"

Rasseyner, who had once been no less abrasive than his disciple, apologizes for Yehoshua's intemperance but then poses a question: if a meteor were about to destroy the world, and we had no longer to live, would we make peace with "the German"? Vilner agrees that they would *not*. By the same token, Hersh asserts, there can be no peace with the Enlightenment that was epitomized in the German. On this, too, both agree: no forgiveness.

Why did Himmelfarb cancel this entire section? Why did Grade bring the boy Yehoshua into the story? Let's again pause to consider how the original resists editorial excisions.

From the beginnings of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature, writers raged against the failings of their fellow Jews. At the same time, the actual, self-imposed censorship of a politically dependent minority constrained them from assailing the Jews' Gentile oppressors.

In Rasseyner, Grade created a character who could discharge all of his own pent-up rage with no liberal inhibitions. Simultaneously, on the positive side, he created in the same character a person who could speak out with the assurance of a man of faith, who at once carries the yoke of the Torah's commandments and looks down on those who want to lighten the load.

"Anyone who thinks he can hold on to basic principles and give up what he considers secondary," says Hersh, "is like a man who chops down the trunk of a tree and expects the roots not to rot." Jewish chosenness entails the duty to conform to a holy Torah, a duty that is not incumbent on other nations. As for Jews "who have discarded Jewish holiness," they "are no more special than the others . . . and less special than those Gentiles who obey the Noahide laws." Unafraid to stare "the German" in the face, Hersh is equally unafraid to go out into the world, there to build his observant communities.

This postwar Hersh speaks with such assurance that Grade may have felt he needed the boy Yehoshua's extreme insensitivity to remind him of why he had left the yeshiva in the first place. Even as he accorded his old nemesis every rhetorical advantage, Grade may have been afraid to let him off *too* easily.

For their part, Himmelfarb and the English editors might well have found the boy's presence unnecessarily intramural—an unwelcome intrusion into the story's otherwise balanced polemic. They may also have thought (in 1952) that "ultra-Orthodox" Jews were too marginal to be taken seriously.

How wrong they were about both—which makes the present, fully restored original text all the more relevant to today's readers than the edited version. Contemporary ḥaredi society, in both America and Israel, includes any number of young men like Yehoshua whom secular Jews continue to find frighteningly offensive. This intervention of the ideal world by the real world is the way Jewish life actually works.

Whatever the editors' intentions in removing him, Yehoshua interrupts the story's indictment of secular modernity, which then continues in Hersh's final blistering attack on the *Jewish* Enlightenment. He begins with the poet Yehudah Leib Gordon who in 1863 issued this call for internal reform:

> Wake my people! Sleep no more!
> Night is over. The sun shines.
> Open wide your eyes, explore
> New surroundings and new times!

Rasseyner may or may not have actually read Gordon's poem (here in Hillel Halkin's **translation**), but he knows its famous conclusion: "Be a Jew at home and a man in public." This distinction—between how Jews may function among themselves and how they are expected to behave as citizens—Hersh likens to the dog who wants to attend two weddings and, scurrying back and forth, misses both. No genuine Jew would accept the notion of a divided identity. He scorns the Jews who dived into the world of Gentiles and landed on their axes, the Jew "who would talk in the most elevated rhetoric about Enlightenment; but what he really had in mind was to become a druggist."

Standing there in Paris, the cradle of the French Revolution and its attendant horrors, Hersh offers in his person and calling the surviving proof that Torah civilizes the human being; Western civilization does not. If, before the war, he had accepted this on faith, now, having experienced the core of evil, he is all the readier to live by an even more stringent set of binding laws.

VII. The Asymmetry of the Quarrel

"I've been listening to you and I sometimes had the feeling that I was listening to myself." As their lengthy conversation draws to a close, Chaim Vilner lets us know how much of himself the author has invested in both of his speakers.

For his part, Vilner counterattacks Hersh's closing argument with reminders that there were both righteous Gentiles who manifested goodness and non-practicing Jews who performed acts of great heroism; Hersh has no monopoly on human decency. Censuring the narrow, divisive, and alienating features of Hersh's Orthodoxy, he blames him for shutting his fellow Jews out of his closed circle. In other words, Chaim levels against his interlocutor many of the accusations already voiced by secular modern Jewish writers against the binding force of Jewish law. His prosecution is also a justification of himself as a Jew.

When all is said and done, however, the difference is that, in order to raise new generations of Jews, Hersh Rasseyner has no need of Chaim Vilner, whereas Chaim Vilner knows that he on his own cannot keep Judaism alive. His brand of Jewishness owes everything to the centuries that went into its making, while contributing nothing sustainable to the

Jewish future. Though the story represents the modern Jewish struggle as in danger of slipping into one of the two extremes, Vilner's own future depends on Rasseyner's tenacity. With Vilna gone and no *sviveh* to replace it, the author, Grade, still retains the tools to preserve its memory, but only Hersh will perpetuate any part of their formative culture. Thus, Vilner concludes with a plea:

> Our paths are different, both in spirit and in practice. The storm that has torn us up from our root, scatters us, the remnant, to all the corners of the earth. Who knows when our paths will ever cross again? May we both have the merit of meeting again and seeing where we stand. And may I be as Jewish then as I am today. Reb Hersh, let's embrace each other. . . .

The Vilna Jew who cast his lot with literature rather than tradition was dependent on a thinning secular Yiddish audience. That audience still existed when I attended Grade's lecture in 1960, but it was already aging without replacement. It is therefore touching that, today, ḥaredi youngsters—the offspring of "Yehoshua"—are discovering Grade on the Internet, which offers them online access to his books in Yiddish. One of his current translators is a member of the Satmar community.

Grade would go on from this work to develop a cast of fictional characters in novels and short stories built around the traditional Jewish dichotomy between the *meykil* and the *maḥmir*, the lenient and severe interpreters of religious law, the liberal and conservative personalities that are (partially) represented in talmudic discourse by the schools of Hillel and Shammai. The pitched battles between the characters in this work and in others by Grade stand in sharp contrast to the dialogues of Plato, where the interlocutors are but a foil for the wisdom of Socrates. The wisest Jews know they have no monopoly over wisdom. As much as its content, the *form* of this standing quarrel distinguishes Jewish civilization from that of Europe.

Grade was bound to complicate his characters because he himself was temperamentally a *maḥmir* with the mental habits of a "Lithuanian" Jewish skeptic, writing in a modern genre for a liberal readership. "My Quarrel" often tends conservative, but, unlike Dostoevsky, Grade does not give that side the clear upper hand. How could he? He had demonstratively shut the door on the yeshiva without attaching himself to any other form of Jewish observance, he had moved to America without really embracing the country, and he had married a woman who disliked Judaism and disliked the Jew in him.

All of that rich information, and much more, awaits a biographer. This story merely hints at how Grade made literature out of the quarrel with himself, and why it must end, as it does, with Vilner seeking conciliation.

Interestingly enough, just as Chaim Vilner asks Hersh to embrace him at the end of the story, Grade's work attracted American advocates who possessed his own high level and wide range of Jewish knowledge. Rabbi Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary was excited to recognize

some of his own rabbinic teachers among Grade's characters, and singled out this story in particular for "translating the abstract colloquy of East European intellectualism into vivid and living discourse." Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard University would invite Grade to teach his advanced students in Jewish history, an experience they treasured. Though Grade never attained the critical or commercial success of his Nobel Prize-winning contemporary Isaac Bashevis Singer, his literary reputation is no less assured, especially among discriminating readers.

The argument of this story will also live on. Had Grade settled in Jerusalem rather than New York, he could have written its sequel with the counterparts of Chaim and Hersh continuing their debate and trading insults in Hebrew. The former would claim that his service to society or in the army contributed more to their country than Hersh's soldiering for the Lord; the latter would invoke the centuries of exegetical transmission that honed the Jewish mind and body politic and ask what the Jewish people would become without it. The Jerusalem of Israel is a fair substitute for Vilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," and the tensions released by modernity are not likely to subside.

But that imagined update also recalls the story's actual context, which is the third party to this intramural stand-off. Two Jews talking is a preferred form of Yiddish literature, making this internal debate equally a judgment on Europe, a judgment made all the more severe because one of the two still tries to defend European civilization. In form and substance, Grade's fearless "Quarrel" has survived the attempts to silence that internal dialogue. Vilner, initially confident in saying Yes to the world, is pushed on the defensive by evils he could never have imagined. In this way the two men's quarrel becomes itself a silent act of war, a subdued victory lap on the bloodstained battlefield of Europe.

Afterword

"*Mayn krig mit hersh rasseyner*" was originally published in the Yiddish monthly *Yidisher kemfer*, vol. 32, no. 923, September 28, 1951.

Milton Himmelfarb's translation of the story appeared in the November 1953 *Commentary*. Himmelfarb may have arranged for the publication in the magazine slightly before its appearance in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Viking, 1953).

In February 1982, Herbert H. Paper, a professor of linguistics at the Hebrew Union-College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, self-published a mimeographed version of the story of his own. In that version, working off the Himmelfarb translation, Paper reintroduced the passages and sections that had been removed. His version is also more literal. In a preface, he explained his reasons for wanting to undertake the labor of producing the story in full, "with nothing left out," and added: "My friend, Milton Himmelfarb, has given me permission to use any parts of his translation freely in my own version. And I have done so."

At first, I had planned simply to tweak this second translation, and just as Paper earlier had received permission from Himmelfarb to use the latter's version as a baseline, so I received permission from Paper's family to proceed. Like him, I, too, have incorporated some of the Himmelfarb text—a text I've several times taught in the classroom. But as I went along, I soon realized that I could rely wholly on neither the first nor the second version. And so I've done my own, while selectively importing the good formulations of my predecessors. I can hardly guarantee that Grade himself, a fierce critic, would have been pleased with the result, but my hope is that the English reader may be less exacting. M

Two boys in Piaseczno in 1931 at a long table over an open page of Talmud. Courtesy YIVO.

My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner

The first complete translation of the Yiddish classic, in which former classmates rediscover one another after the Holocaust and resume their old debates about God, man, and history.

CHAIM GRADE

Born in Vilna in 1910, Chaim Grade was a novelist and poet, known for such works as *The Yeshiva*. He settled in the Bronx following World War II, where he lived until his death in 1982.

1.

In 1937, I returned to Bialystok, seven years after I had been a student in the Novaredok yeshiva of the Musarists, a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism. When I came back, I found many of my old school friends still there. A few even came to the evening event where I spoke. Others visited me secretly; they did not want the head of the yeshiva to know. I could see on their scruffy faces that their poverty had brought them suffering and that the fire of their youthful zeal had slowly burned itself out. They continued to observe all the laws and customs meticulously, but the weariness of their spiritual struggles lay upon them. For years they had tried to tear the desire for pleasure out of their hearts, only to realize they had lost the war with themselves. They had not overcome the evil urge.

I also met some who in the interim had grown more pious, more serious and reclusive. I was mistaken to have expected that, in Musarist style, they would try to "tell me off." They didn't berate me. Some were friendly but avoided getting into an argument; others sighed over me regretfully, as someone who had gone astray.

There was someone I kept looking for and did not find, my former close friend Hersh Rasseyner. He was a pitch-dark young man with bright, downcast eyes, always sunk in thought, stern and taciturn. Only when he rocked back and forth over Bahya's *Duties of the Heart* could you hear the anguished misery of his voice. There were reports that in his zealous study of Musar he had smashed all the lecterns in the study-house. I heard that he kept to his garret in seclusion and did not even show up at the yeshiva.

But we did meet, unexpectedly, in the street. He was walking hurriedly with his head down, as is the custom with the Novaredok students who do not wish to be "eye to eye" with the world. But he saw me anyway. He put his arms behind his back and pulled down his sleeves so that he wouldn't have to shake hands. The closer he came, the higher he lifted his head. When we finally stood face to face, he looked at me intently. He was so agitated his nostrils quivered—but he kept silent.

Among the Musarists when you ask, "How are you?" the question means, "What is the state of your Jewishness? Have you advanced spiritually?" But I wasn't thinking of that, and simply asked, "Hersh Rasseyner, how are you?" (In the yeshiva, students were called by the town they came from.)

Hersh moved back a little, looked me over from head to toe, and seeing that I was nicely dressed, retorted with a sneer, "And how are *you*, Chaim Vilner? My question is the more important."

I felt my lips trembling and I answered hotly, "Your question, Hersh Rasseyner, is no question at all. I do what I have to do."

Without taking his arms from behind his back, Rasseyner took another step away from me and right there in the middle of the street he shouted in my face: "Do you think that by running away from the yeshiva you have saved yourself? You surely know the saying among us: whoever has learned Musar can have no enjoyment in his life. Chaim Vilner, you will remain a cripple. You will be deformed for the rest of your life. You write godless verses and they pinch you on the cheek for it like a *ḥeder* child. To add to the blasphemy, you come to spread your godlessness in the very city where you once studied. Now they're stuffing you with praise as they stuff a goose with grain, and spoil you like an only child! But later you'll see, when you've begun to go to the school of those pork-eaters, oh, won't they beat you! Oh, how they'll whip you! Which of you isn't hurt by criticism? Is there really one of you so self-confident that he doesn't go around begging for words of approval? Is any one of you prepared to publish his book anonymously? The main thing for you people is that your name should stand on the cover, at the very top! You have traded in our *menuḥas hanefesh*, our tranquility of spirit, for what? For lusts that you will never satisfy, for doubts that you will never resolve no matter how much you suffer. Your writings will make no one better and will make you worse. I have heard that your pamphlet, your excuse for a book, is called *Yes*. But I tell you, 'No!' Do you hear me, Chaim Vilner?—'No!'"

Having said his piece, Hersh Rasseyner began to walk away with a quick energetic stride. But I had once been a Musarist, too, so I ran after him.

"Hersh, now you listen to *me*. No one knows better than I how torn you are. You're proud of yourself because you don't care that people laugh at you for wearing *tsitsis* down to your ankles. You talked yourself into believing that your linen prayer-vest is a fiery partition separating you from the world. You hang on to your fringes like a drowning man to a rope—but it doesn't help you swim against the current. You humiliate yourself because you are afraid that the world, like Potiphar's wife, may find you attractive and that, unlike the righteous Joseph, you won't have the strength to tear yourself away. So you flee from temptation and think the world will run after you. But when you see that the world doesn't run after you, you get angry and cry out: 'Nobody enjoys life.' You want to console yourself with that idea. When you go off to your solitary garret it's because you would rather have nothing at all than take the crumb that the world throws you. Your modesty is really pride—not self-denial.

"And where," I continued, "did you get the idea that I left to seek pleasure? I was looking for a truth that you don't have. For that matter, I didn't run away, I simply returned to my street—to Vilna's Butchers' Street. You think you're flaying me because you scream 'No!' in my face for a book I wrote called *Yes*. You don't understand that I myself say 'No' to the world as it is. And yet I force myself to say 'Yes' because I believe in my street. I love the porters with their backs broken from carrying their loads; the artisans sweating at their workbenches; the market-women who work their fingers to the bone to give a poor man a piece of bread. But you scold the hungry for being sinners and all you can tell them is to repent. You laugh at people who work and do business—because you say they don't trust in God. But you live on what those exhausted women labor to bring you and in return you promise them . . . the world to come. Hersh Rasseyner, you have long since sold your share of the world to come to those poor women."

Hersh Rasseyner gave a start and disappeared. I returned to Vilna relieved of a burden. In my disputation with the Musarist I myself began to understand why I had left them. I told myself that if, at the time, I didn't know why I was leaving and where I was going, someone else had thought it out for me, someone inside me and stronger than me. That stronger someone was my generation and my environment.

2.

Two years passed. In September 1939 war broke out between Germany and Poland. Western Ukraine and western Belarus were occupied by the Red Army. After being in Vilna a few weeks, the Soviets announced that they were giving the city back to the Lithuanians. Refugees who did not want to remain under Soviet rule began to arrive among us. The Novaredok yeshiva came, too, from Bialystok to Vilna. Meanwhile, the Soviets remained. Hunger raged and every face was clouded with fear of the arrests carried out at night by NKVD agents, sent in from Minsk. I was broken and despondent. Once, standing in a line for a ration of bread, I suddenly saw Hersh Rasseyner.

I had heard that he'd married. His face was framed by a little black beard, his motions were more restrained, his clothing more presentable. I was so happy to see him that I left my place in the breadline and pushed through the crowd to approach him.

But he spoke very little and was very wary. I understood why: he did not trust me and was afraid of trouble. I could see that he was trying to make up his mind whether or not he needed to protect himself from me. But he apparently sensed my dejection. He covered his mouth with his hand as if to hide a smirk, and a gleam of derision came into his eyes. With his head he motioned toward the roadway where some tanks were being guarded by Red Army soldiers.

"Well, Chaim," Hersh said to me quietly, "are you satisfied now? Isn't this what you wanted?"

I tried to smile and answered just as quietly. "Hersh, what is *treyf* for you is still not *kosher* for them."

But from the cold hard expression on his face I felt the flimsiness of my joke, so I moved a little closer to him and said, "Hersh, I bear no more responsibility for all this than you do for me."

He shook himself and dealt out a few sharp, cutting words, seeming to forget his fear. "You're wrong, Chaim. I do bear responsibility for you."

He took a few steps back and motioned sternly with his eyes at the Red Army soldiers, as if to say: "And you for them."

3.

Nine more years passed, years of war and destruction during which I wandered across Russia, Poland, and Western Europe. In 1948, on a summer morning, I was riding in the Paris Métro. Couples stood close together in the crowded car, kissing. Short Frenchwomen, as though in a faint, hung on the mouths of their dark-haired lovers. The young men acrobatically held their balance in the shaky subway car without letting go of those lips. One tall well-built young man stuck his arms high into the metal straps and bent down to the girl stretching up to him on her tiptoes. Unable to reach his chin, she nestled her head against his chest.

Elderly Frenchmen in berets sat on the benches, leafing lazily through their newspapers. Mature housewives sitting among their packages kept their fingers in motion while absorbed in thought. They were knitting stockings, wool sweaters, and scarves. One woman, rouged and powdered, sat motionless staring at one of those woolen threads as though she were watching her life unravel. The gray skein of wool resembled a sleepy old tomcat curled up in the lap of a neglected woman.

The car gave a sudden jolt. The couples fell apart and got mixed up. A murmur of complaint and titter of laughter broke the silence. A minute

later, hands and lips groped blindly back into their former embrace. No one spoke. The car was stifling hot from the midday heat and from the rapt passion of the young couples riding to the parks outside the city.

The ardor of the clinging bodies reminded me, involuntarily, of the silence during the daily synagogue recitation of the Eighteen Benedictions. I glared into the faces of my fellow passengers as if willing them to disavow my simile. But none of them paid any attention to the rude foreigner's challenging stare. This annoyed me even more. I felt I had violated a sacred memory.

All at once, I caught sight of a familiar face that had been hidden by someone's shoulder and became visible only once the couples in that corner had moved apart. My heart began to pound. Could he really be alive? Hadn't he been in Vilna under the German occupation? When I'd returned to the ruins of my home in 1945, I neither saw nor heard of him. Still, those were the same eyes, the same obstinately upturned nose; only the broad black beard had turned gray at the edges. It was astonishing to me that he could gaze at the couples so calmly and that a good-natured smile lit up his melancholy glance. That was not like him. But, after studying him for a moment, I noticed a faraway look in his eyes. He did not really see them. He was dressed neatly in a long caftan and a clean white shirt unbuttoned at the throat, without a necktie. It struck me that he never wore a tie. This more than anything else convinced me that it was he.

I pushed my way to him through the passengers and blurted out, "Excuse me, aren't you Reb Hersh Rasseyner?"

He looked at me, wrinkled his forehead and smiled, "Ah, Chaim, Chaim, is that you? *Sholem aleichem*! How are you?"

I could tell that, this time, when Hersh Rasseyner asked, "How are you?" he was not asking derisively about my spiritual condition as he had eleven years earlier. Now he asked the question quietly, simply, with the concern one shows for an old friend who has gone through a lot.

We moved into a corner and he told me briefly that had been in a concentration camp in Latvia. Now he was in Germany, at the head of a yeshiva in Salzheim.

"The head of a yeshiva in Germany? And who are your students, Reb Hersh?"

He smiled. "Do you think that the Holy One is an orphan? There are still boys, praised be the Almighty, who study Torah."

He told me that in the camp he'd been with about ten young students. He had drawn them close to him, taught them the Jewish tradition. Because they were still only children and very weak, he helped them in their work. At night they used to gather around his cot and recite Psalms together. There was a doctor in the camp who used to say that he would give half his life to be able to recite Psalms, too. But he couldn't. "He lacked faith, poor man."

I was very happy to have met my old friend and wanted to avoid an argument with him, so I merely asked, "How do you like Paris?"

"Oh, I don't know," he shrugged lightly as if it was not worth talking about. "For you Paris is probably an experience. This is my sixth or seventh time here."

"What brings you here so often? Are you in business?"

"Of course we're in business." He stroked his beard with satisfaction. "Big business. We bring yeshiva people here and send them off to Israel or America. We take books back from here. With the Almighty's help, I've even flown to Morocco twice."

"Morocco? What did you do there, Reb Hersh?"

"Brought back students from among the Moroccan Jews, spoke in their synagogue."

"And how did you talk to them? You don't know Arabic or French."

"The Almighty helps. What difference does it make how you speak? The main thing is *what* you speak."

Unexpectedly, he said to me, "How will it be with you, Chaim? It's high time for you to start thinking about repentance. We're nearer rather than farther."

I was a little shaken. "What do you mean by 'nearer than farther'?"

"I mean," he said, drawing out his words, "we've both lived out more than half our lives. What's going to happen, Reb Chaim?" He strongly emphasized the word *Reb*. "Where are you going? Together with them perhaps?" His eyes laughed at the young couples. "Will you get off where they do? And maybe you still believe in this cruel world?"

"And you, Reb Hersh," I grew incensed, "do you still believe in God's special providence for the Jews? You say that the Holy One has not been orphaned. But we have become orphans. A miracle happened to you, Reb Hersh, and you were saved. But how about the rest? Can you still believe?"

"Of course I believe," Rasseyner said, separating his hands in innocent wonder. "You can actually touch God's providence. Are you imagining the kind of believer who trusts that the Almighty can be found only in forests and orchards, but not, God forbid, in desert and wasteland? You surely know the rabbi's saying, *'k'sheym she-hu m'voreykh*': as a man must make a blessing over the good, so must he make a blessing over evil.' We have to bow before the greatness of . . . "

"What do you want, Reb Hersh?" I interrupted. "Shall I see the greatness of God in the thought that only He, not flesh and blood, could cause such destruction? You're outdoing the Psalms you recited on your bed in the concentration camp. The Psalmist sees the greatness of God in the fact that the sun rises punctually every day and the sea does not overflow the shore, but you see miracles in catastrophes."

"Without any doubt," Rasseyner answered calmly, "I see God's providence everywhere, in everything, and at every moment. I could not remain on earth for one minute without the Almighty. How could I endure without Him in this murderous world?"

"But I will not say that His judgment is right. I won't and I can't!"

"You can," said Rasseyner, putting a friendly hand on my shoulder, "you can—little by little. Did you leave us all at once? Can a person leave at one stroke? A person leaves gradually and that's also how he returns. First, the repentant understands that the world can't exist without a Guide. Then he understands that the Guide is the God of Israel and that there is no other power besides Him to help Him run the world. Finally, he recognizes that the world is in Him, nothing else exists, as the Zohar says, '*Leys asar ponui miney*, there is no place devoid of Him.' And if you understood this, Chaim, you would also understand how the Almighty reveals Himself in misfortune as well as in salvation."

Hersh Rasseyner had spoken in a warm voice, looking at me with fatherly tenderness and without once taking his hand off my shoulder. I felt a great love for him and saw that he had become more pious than ever.

"Reb Hersh, you're not speaking like a student of Novaredok, but more like a Ḥasid of Lubavitch who is studying the *Tanya*."

Rasseyner shook his head. "For you, who are on the outside, Ḥasidism and Musar are just two opposing points of view, and the first thing you notice about them is how they differ. But for those who observe and practice Jewishness, they are one and the same. If the rabbis once fought over Ḥasidism and Musar it was because they were afraid the new path would draw Jews away from strict observance. But actually, they both strengthened Judaism and their dispute is long forgotten. There is only one Torah: it all depends on how you approach it. When I feel that I am slackening in the observance of a law, I study the code of laws in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, and when I feel overpowered in the struggle of life, I study Musar. And when Musar leads me too far into gloom and seclusion and tears me away from the community of Israel and love for my fellow Jews—then I turn to Ḥasidism."

4.

We left the Métro near the Jewish quarter at the Rue de Rivoli and walked past the old Paris city hall, the Hôtel de Ville. In the niches of its walls, between the upper windows, in three rows one above the other up to the roof, stand dozens of stone figures—some with a sword, some with a book, some with brush and palette, and some with geometric instruments. Flocks of pigeons parked on the statues. Every so often, a small bunch would fly off through the air with a silken flutter and land nearby on an open square and on the nearby streets, where they hopped about, pecking and cooing, foraging for food. Replenished with seeds, they would spread their wings and soar back up to the statues. Back and forth, like the ebb and flow of waves against the shore.

Hersh Rasseyner noticed me looking at the monuments, and gave them a suspicious once-over: “Who are those idols?”

I explained that they were famous Frenchmen: statesmen, national heroes, scholars, and artists.

“Reb Hersh,” I pleaded with him, “look closely at these stone figures. They seem to be smiling at the birds fluttering around them. These once-great men are still pleased to be where there is a constant clamor of children and bustle of grownups. Come closer and see the light streaming from their marble eyes. See how much goodness lies hidden in the wrinkles of their carved stone faces. You call it idolatry, but I tell you that, quite literally, I could weep when I see these sculptures in the parks and galleries. It is a miracle, after all. How could a human being breathe the breath of life into stone? When you see a living man, you see only one person. But when you see a man cast in bronze, you see humankind itself.

“Do you understand me? That one there, for example, is a world-famous poet. The great writer broadens our understanding and expands our sympathies for our fellow man. He shows us the nature of the man who cannot overcome his desires, so that you don’t judge the wicked man only by his deeds but according to the pain that he suffers over those obsessions in the war he wages with himself and with the rest of the world. You don’t justify what he does, but you understand that he can’t help it. Why are you pulling at your beard so angrily, Reb Hersh?”

He tore at his beard and stared at me with burning eyes: “For shame, Chaim! How can you speak such rot? Is your heart so constipated that you can cry with wonder over these plastered dummies when all that’s left of the Vilna Gaon’s study house are its charred walls? Better cry over the destroyed Ark of the Great Vilna synagogue! These artists of yours, these monument-hackers, these poets who sang the praises of their emperors, these clowns who danced and played before their rulers—were these masters of yours ever bothered that their patron, the king, could massacre a whole city with its women and children, and steal everything they had so that he could buy off these masters with the gold? Did our prophets flatter kings? Did they take a whore’s payment?

“And look how merciful you are! The writer shows that the wicked man is a victim of his own bad qualities. Isn’t that what you said? Let’s feel sorry for the renegade and boaster who destroys others and is himself destroyed in the process. Such a pity, poor thing! You don’t expect to convince me that to be a good person and to do good is easier than being an adulterer? But you’re more interested in writing about the sinner. You know him better, there’s something of him in you and in your artists. If you can make excuses for the man who exults in his evil, then as far as I am concerned all of your scribbling is an abomination, *muktseh makhmes miyes*—forbidden because disgusting. Condemn the wicked man! Condemn the glutton and the drunkard! You say he can’t help himself. He *has* to help himself! You’ve sung me a fine hymn of praise to these putrid idols, Chaim Vilner.”

Hersh Rasseyner stiffened and looked into my eyes with the sharp, menacing expression of eleven years earlier when we met on the street in Bialystok. His voice had become hard and resounding. Passersby stopped and stared at the bearded Jew who shook his finger, as if in warning, at the sculptures of the Hôtel de Ville. Hersh did not so much as notice the passersby. I felt embarrassed in the face of these smiling Frenchmen who were looking at us curiously, and annoyed by Hersh's harangue, like a man preaching to a large congregation.

"Don't shout so," I told him irritably. "You really think you have a monopoly on mercy and truth. You're starting where we left off eleven years ago. In Novaredok, you always kept the windows closed, but it was still too bright for you in the study hall, so you fled to your garret. From the garret you crawled into a cellar. And from the cellar you burrowed into a hole in the ground. There you practiced spiritual retreat and persuaded yourself that a man's thoughts and feelings are like his hair: if he wants to, he can shave it off, leaving only beard and earlocks—holy thought and pious conduct. You dreamed up a world and then renounced it. You invented a human being and told him to stand upside down: transform yourself! But even the camps failed to change people. Those who were wicked became even worse. They might have lived out their lives and not realized what they were like, but when they were put to the test, they saw themselves and everyone else—naked. And when we were freed, even the better ones among us weren't rid of the poison we were forced to drink behind the barbed wire. Now, if the concentration camp could not change people from top to bottom, how can you expect to change them with your Musar methods of rooting out the passions and studying remedial texts?"

Hersh Rasseyner looked at me with astonishment. The blazing anger in his eyes had died down, but the flicker of a distant fire remained.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Chaim," he said quietly and sympathetically. "Whoever told you that suffering in itself makes a person better? Take the day of a man's death, for instance. When a God-fearing person is reminded of death, he becomes even more God-fearing, as it says, '*Toyv lolekhes el beys eyvel*—it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting.' But when a freethinker is reminded of death, he becomes even wilder, as the prophet says about the thoughts of the wicked: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' It's clear that external causes can't drag a person back to Jewish life. The heart and the mind have to be ready.

"If a man didn't come to the concentration camp eager to improve himself, he certainly didn't elevate himself there. But the devout person knows that always and everywhere he must keep rising higher and higher or else—as the Vilna Gaon taught—he will keep falling lower. As for your claim that a man can't change—that is an utter lie. '*Umib'sori ekhezeh eloha,* in my flesh shall I see God.' The case of Hersh Rasseyner is the proof that a man can change. I won't go on about how many lusts I suffered from; how often the very veins in my head almost burst from my boiling blood; how many obstinacies I had to tear out of myself; how many habits I had to quit. But I knew that whoever denies himself affirms the Master of the World. I knew

that the worst sentence that can be passed on a man is that he will not be able to renounce his old nature. And because I truly wanted to conquer myself, the Almighty helped me."

"Forgive my saying so, Reb Hersh, but you're as harsh a judge as ever. You call these wise men putrid idols, and won't admit that they lifted mankind out of its bestial state. They weren't butchers of the soul and they didn't talk themselves into believing that human beings can tear their lower urges out of themselves and lop them off. They were very well aware of the suppressed root of the human species; they wanted to illuminate the encrusted mind with wisdom so that people could outgrow their base desires and emerge from the jungle darkness of the brain. You can't banish shadows with a broom, only with a lighted lamp. These great men . . . "

Hersh began to laugh so loud and hard that I had to stop in mid-sentence. He quickly stopped laughing and sighed. "I'm very tired. I've been traveling all night. Come, let's sit down on that bench by the park. Somehow, I don't want to leave you. After all, you were once a student in Novaredok. Maybe there's still a spark of its spirit left in you."

We walked to the bench in silence. On first meeting him, I had thought that he had become milder. Now I was sorry to see that his demands upon me and his contempt for the world had grown greater. I hoped, though, that the pause would ease the tension of our conversation and I was in no hurry to be the first to say anything. Hersh, however, wrinkled his forehead as though he were collecting his thoughts, and when we were seated on the bench he took up where I had left off.

5.

"Great men, is that what you called them? The Germans claim that they produced all the great men. I don't know if they produced the very greatest, but I don't suppose you worldly types would deny that they did produce learned men. Well, did those philosophers persuade their own nation to become better? And the real question is: were the philosophers themselves good men? I don't want you to think that I belittle their knowledge. During my years in the concentration camps I heard a great deal. There were exceptionally learned men among us. The Germans mixed us all together and in our free moments we used to talk. Later, when with the help of the Almighty I was rescued, I looked into their books on my own, no longer afraid that they would do me harm. And I was really very impressed by their ideas. Sometimes I found in their writings, if you'll pardon the comparison, as much talent and depth as in our own holy books. But for them it's only talk! And I'll even grant you that their poets and thinkers wanted to be good. Only—only they weren't able to. And if some did have good qualities, they were the exception. The rest of the population and even their wise men didn't go any farther than fine talk. Talk they certainly can, much more beautifully than we do. And most of the words you use, you borrow from them, from their manuals.

"Do you know why they weren't able to become better? Because they are consumed with a passion to enjoy life. And since the pleasures of life don't die down on their own, they breed violence—the pleasure of killing. As for us, they've hated us from the start because we came into the world saying that certain things are forbidden. As soon as we issued the first prohibition—Thou shalt not murder—they became our enemies. And once they themselves took over that commandment, it swayed some of them but the rest hated us all the more. And that's why they talk such fine talk, because they want to fool themselves into doing fine deeds. Only it doesn't help. They are satisfied with speechmaking. That's how they soothe themselves because what they most care about is having a system. The nations of the world took from the Greeks their desire for order and for elaborate systems.

"First of all, they commit their deeds in public. They take no pleasure in their lusts if they can't sin openly, publicly, so that the whole world will know, like drunkards who can't drink alone but only in company. That way they give themselves the sanction for their sins. They're not hypocrites, they say; they do whatever they want to do in public. War, though, is something they love to wage not only with others but also with themselves—to wrestle with themselves (not too hard, of course) even to the point of suffering and repentance. And when they do repent, the whole world knows about that, too. It's a repentance that takes wild pleasure in itemizing all of their sins; their self-love is extreme to the point of sickness. They even love their victims, because their victims give them the joy of sinning and the sweet pain of feeling sorry."

Hersh Rasseyner had moved away from me to the other end of the bench and had begun to look at me as though it had occurred to him that he might mistakenly be talking to a stranger. Then he lowered his head and spoke as though to himself. "Do you remember, Chaim, that time in Bialystok?" He was silent for a moment and pulled a hair from his beard as though he were pulling memories along with it. "Do you remember, Chaim, how you told me on that street in Bialystok that we were running away from the world because we were afraid that we wouldn't be able to resist temptation? A Musarist can struggle with his nature over a lifetime, yet a single word of criticism will strike him like a knife.

"Yes, it's true! All the days of my youth I kept my eyes on the ground to avoid seeing the world. Then came the German. He took me by my Jewish beard, yanked my head up, and ordered me to look him straight in the eye. I had to look into his evil eyes and into the eyes of the whole world. And I saw, Chaim, I saw—you know what I saw: everything that we lived through. Now I can look at every form of idolatry and read all the forbidden texts, and contemplate all of the pleasures of life, and none of it will tempt me anymore because now I know the true face of the world. You think I don't know the world and that I dreamed up a black lie about it. Oh, Reb Chaim, turn and repent! It's not too late. Remember what the prophet Jeremiah said, '*Ki shtayim ro'oys osu ami*—for My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.'"

Hersh had spoken like a broken man. Tears were dropping on his beard. He squeezed his eyes shut to stop the tears, but they continued to run down his cheeks. His suddenly slumped shoulders and frozen expression told me how much suffering he had endured.

I took his hand and said with emotion, “Reb Hersh, you say that I have forsaken a fountain of living waters for a broken cistern. I must tell you that you’re wrong. I draw water from the same pure fountain as you, only I use a different vessel. But calm yourself, Reb Hersh. Why don’t we go to the stand over there and get a piece of fruit or a cold drink? No? Then let’s just sit on this bench and explain to me something you’ve just said. There seems to be some contradiction there, but maybe I haven’t digested it properly.

“You yourself said that you believe that the nations of the world had men of wisdom and men of action who wanted to be good, but couldn’t. I’m quoting you. So here’s what I can’t understand. It’s a basic principle of Judaism that man has free will. Novaredok actually believes that one can get to the point of doing good deeds without the slightest physical exertion. Well, then, if a man can peel himself from his husk, the way you peel an onion, I ask you: why couldn’t the wise men among the Gentiles be good if they wanted to be? Surely you believe in freedom of choice.”

I was unable to keep a mocking note of triumph out of my question. This roused Rasseyner from his tearfulness. He slowly straightened up and answered calmly with mild deliberation “Chaim, you’ve forgotten what you once learned in Novaredok, so let me remind you. In His great kindness, the Almighty endowed us with reason. Who among us is greater than Maimonides, the Rambam? Yet the Gaon of Vilna once said of him that accursed philosophy had led him astray. We’re not talking now about metaphysics and heavenly matters, but about our earth, relations between man and man. If our sages tell us that we can learn from the animals, then we can surely learn from reason as well. And we also know that the elders of Athens erected systems of morality according to pure reason. They had many disciples, each with his own school.

“But the question hasn’t changed: did they really live as they taught, or did their system remain only a system? You must understand once and for all that when his reason is calm and pure, a man does not know how he will act when his dark desire overtakes him. A man is dazzled by his own wisdom and proud of his knowledge, but as soon as a little desire stirs in him, he forgets all his learning. His senses are stronger than his reason. Reason is like a trained dog who follows sedately in his master’s footsteps—until he sees a bitch.

“With us, it’s a basic principle that false ideas come from bad qualities. A man can justify whatever he wants to do. Is he saying the opposite of what he said just a while ago? He’ll tell you that he was wrong then. And if he lets you prove to him that he wasn’t wrong then, he’ll shrug and say: ‘When I feel like doing something, I can’t be Aristotle.’ As soon as his desire is sated, his reason revives and he regrets what he did. As soon as desire stirs again, his

reason swoons, henlike, in a faint. Like a man in a swamp, he pulls one foot out and the other sinks in. He's got a silken character, an appreciation for beauty, he expresses lofty thoughts and is as scrubbed as the Sabbath, but at the sight of a female ankle his thoughts scramble, all those delicate feelings get muddled like ants before a rain, and his reason gives way.

"That's not all: the person who lives by reason alone often creates his own temptation—he wants to become smarter, steps into the fire, and is consumed. Leaving aside that reason alone can't come to the rescue, it strikes me as ridiculous to ask a man to let reason guide him. Reason can tell him that it pays to be good, that it brings comfort and happiness and good friends, and that we are all like limbs of a single body that dare not harm one another. All fine and lovely, as taught by the sages of Athens and their successors. But if a man is good because it is worth his while, today it may pay off and tomorrow—not. And if it still pays off tomorrow, you can't force him to stay in line. Suppose he says it's better to indulge himself for a single year than to sweat and suffer over a lifetime. If a man has no God, why should he listen to the philosopher who tells him to be good? The philosopher himself is cold and gloomy. He is like a man who celebrates a marriage with himself.

"The only way out is this: a man should choose between good and evil only as the Torah chooses for him. The Torah wants his happiness and knows better what is good for him. The Torah is the only reality in life. Everything else is a dream. Just as God showed Moses a fiery tabernacle in the desert and said, build just such a tabernacle for Me, that perfect man was forged through the letters of the Torah. Ordinary beings should imitate him in every detail. Even when a man understands rationally what he should do, he must never forget that before all else he is doing it because the Torah commands it. That's how he can guard against the time when his reason will have no power to command him.

"Wait a moment, we're not done yet. The Torah is no guarantee, either. A man may tell himself: 'I don't live according to reason but according to the Torah.' And he is certain that when temptation comes, he'll look into the appropriate book to see what he should do, and follow its teaching. He persuades himself that he is free. Actually, his freedom is bounded by his will. He is like the bear in the zoo: the guards have surrounded him with large boulders and filled a moat with water so that he thinks himself in the Arctic Ocean. But just let him step outside the fence! There's your man who relies on his free will. Even a man of Torah will not be able to withstand temptation unless he struggles with himself day and night. He Who Knows All Secrets knew that our father Abraham would be ready to sacrifice Isaac, yet only after the sacrifice had been readied did the Angel say to Abraham, 'Now I know.' From this we learn that until a person has done what he should, the Torah doesn't trust him. A child has the capacity to grow, but we don't know how tall he'll grow. His father and mother may be tall as trees, but he may turn out to favor a dwarf grandfather. Only by good deeds can we drive out bad deeds. Therefore, the Jews cried out at Sinai: '*Na'aseh*, we will do, only do, always do, *v'nishma,* and now we want to know what the Torah tells us to do.' Without deeds, all deliberation is in vain.

"That is the outlook and the Musar path of 'the old one,' Reb Yosef Yoizl—may his merit be a shield for us—and thousands of Novaredok students steeped themselves in it day and night. We labored to make ourselves better, each of us filed and polished his own soul, with examiners gathering evidence of our improvement like pearls. But you laughed at us. Then came the German—may his name be blotted out—and murdered our sainted students. And now here we both stand before the devastated Community of Israel. But you face a *khurbn* of your own—the destruction of your faith in the world. That's what hurts you and torments you, so you ask me: why weren't the wise men of the Gentiles able to be good if they wanted to be good? And you find contradictions in what I said. But the contradiction you find is in yourself. You thought the world was striving to become better but you discovered that it was striving for our blood.

"There is no shred of contradiction in my approach. The wise men of the Gentiles—even those who truly wished it—could not have become good to the very roots of their souls because they didn't have a Torah, and they didn't work all their lives to perfect their behavior. They deduced their ethics with the human mind. They followed their reasoned assumptions the way you walk across a frozen river. But when Hitler's tanks and savage armies overran their wisdom and the wisdom of their sages, the ice of their reasoning cracked and all their goodness drowned.

"Along with their goodness to others, their own self-respect drowned, too. Think of it! Over the merest insult, they dueled with swords, they fought with fists and pistols. To keep public opinion from sneering or some fool from calling them cowards, afraid to die—they went to their death. For generations their pride grew like a cancer until it consumed their flesh and sucked out their marrow. For ages they debated, they talked and they wrote: does duty to nation and family come first, or does the freedom of the individual come before his obligations to parents, wife, and children—or even to himself? They deliberated and concluded: there are no bonds that a nation cannot break; truth and reason are like the sun, which must rise every day. Just try to cover up the sun with shovelfuls of dirt. So there came in the West a booted ruler with a little mustache, and in the East a booted ruler with a big mustache, and both of them together kicked the wise man to the ground and he sank into the mud.

"I suppose you'll say that the wise men wanted to save their lives. I can understand that. But didn't they just insist that freedom, truth, and reason were more precious to the philosopher than life itself? Take that wise man whose statue stands up there with his instruments for measuring the stars and the planets. When everyone else insisted, 'The sun revolves around the earth,' he said, 'Not so! You may draw and quarter me, chop me to pieces! The earth revolves around the sun!' What would he have said to his grandchildren today? If the spirit of life were returned to him, he would crawl down from his niche and strike his stone head against the cobblestones and recite Lamentations."

6.

Hersh Rasseyner had been speaking slowly, like a yeshiva master trying to explain a difficult passage to his pupil for the hundredth time, pausing briefly now and then so that I could better understand what he was saying. Little by little, he began to sway as during our late after-Sabbath discussions in Novaredok in the weeks leading up to the Days of Awe, which would end in a shout with great spiritual fervor and an elegiac *niggun*. He began to speak more quickly, his voice grew excited, and he ended his sentences like a man hammering nails into the wall. He shouted at me as if I were deaf, as if I were a dark cellar and he was calling to someone deep inside me.

The square and the neighboring streets had grown quieter and the flow of people had thinned out. On the benches of the little park passersby sat silently, exhausted by the humid heat of the day and getting some relief from the breeze in the blue twilight of Paris. The birds were no longer flying back and forth. They sat atop the statues, as though trying with their feathered bodies to shield them from Rasseyner's wish to knock them off their perches as Abraham did to the idols of his father Terah.

Hersh suddenly stood up and stepped forward, straining to see. A young man was walking by, deep in thought. Rasseyner's face broke into a fatherly smile and he called softly, "Yehoshua."

The young man stopped abruptly. "*Rebbe*," he said, joyfully stretching out his hand. The two embraced.

"You wrote that you would be coming to our school right from the train. You must have gone first to put your bags away. But where have you been all day?"

Hersh continued smiling kindly, without answering. The young man looked at me. Seeing that I was cleanshaven and bareheaded, he turned to his teacher as if asking: could this person have detained you? Meanwhile, I looked him over. He was in his twenties, a bit overweight, blonde, thick-lipped, pale, and with the plump cheeks suggestive of tuberculosis. The uncreased fedora, as if just lifted from its wooden form, was pushed back high on his head, and his forehead was sweaty. The new suit was too long and too wide, as if meant for its wearer to grow into it and fill it out. I had to smile. The young man had the look of a true Novaredok student looking to marry or preparing himself for a mission to some unfamiliar big city.

"Who are 'they?'" the young man asked his teacher about me in the polite manner of a Lithuanian yeshiva student.

His teacher was in a quandary. "'They?'" he hesitated. "'They' once studied in our yeshiva in Bialystok."

The young man's attitude changed instantly. He approached me, and his mild eyes flashed with chutzpah. This had made me a turncoat and traitor, implying a rift in the family.

"He once studied in Novaredok?" the young man repeated, feigning astonishment. He drawled out the substituted "he" for "they" to emphasize his scorn and added, "If my teacher hadn't told me that he was once a yeshiva student, I wouldn't have guessed it about him. No one would have seen it in his face."

The boy's insult was apparently too much for his teacher. "On the contrary," Hersh answered very softly, "They are still very much involved in Jewish matters. They are a writer."

"A writer?" the student sneered. "What does he write?"

That stung. I wanted to leap right back at him, but I held back. I didn't want to give Hersh the impression that I could feel insulted by some youngster. Moreover, I had been apart from this community for many years and wanted to get a good look at the Novaredok succession. It was also clear to me that the young man was one of Rasseyner's pupils from the concentration camp, so I controlled myself.

"The main thing," the yeshiva-boy intoned as though he had been listening to our earlier conversation and wanted to bolster his teacher, "the main thing, after all, is not what one writes, but what one does."

Hersh, who had first squirmed uneasily as if his student were disrupting his plans to rehabilitate me, now beamed with pleasure, evidently pleased with the way his student was chewing me out.

"And what great deeds are you accomplishing?" I taunted him. "Zealously studying the works of Musar?"

The young man had no doubt decided to show his teacher that he could be trusted to deal with an infidel. He answered, spitefully, "Would you have been willing to risk your life for your writings as for a Torah scroll?"

"What do you mean by 'risk my life for my writings as for a Torah scroll'?" I turned to Hersh who was somewhat unhappily wrinkling his brow and modestly stooping his shoulders.

The student jumped in: "When we were moved from one concentration camp to another, Reb Hersh . . . ," he stopped and corrected himself, "our teacher sneaked a Torah in with him. No one dared to bring even a pin, because you could be shot for it, but the *rebbe* brought over a Torah and we had a quorum for prayer on the High Holy Days. Would you have risked your life for your writing as for a Torah?"

Hersh broke in. "Yehoshua is not asking if you would have had enough courage to do it. Am I some kind of hero? I risked my life for the sanctity of the Torah and the Almighty came to my aid. Yehoshua is asking whether you consider your writings so holy that you would risk your life for them?"

"You do understand, Reb Hersh," I turned to him, "there is no point to this line of questioning about me. I was never in a concentration camp. And as you yourself said, until a man has actually withstood temptation, the Torah doesn't trust even our father Abraham.

"But my friends in my writers' group—those in the Vilna ghetto who survived—they did risk their lives for their writing, as you put it. And they also put themselves at risk to rescue the manuscripts of great writers of the past. I'll go further: you risked your life for a Torah scroll, but you wouldn't have done so for secular books. Maybe you didn't approve of the Germans burning them, but you yourself would have burned them if you could. It's clear to me now! My friends saved Jewish sacred texts, rare volumes, with the same devotion as they saved Herzl's diary and a letter from Maxim Gorky.

"Incidentally, Reb Hersh, you should know that this neighborhood we're in is the old part of Paris, and right here at the Hôtel de Ville where we're sitting was once the *Place de Grève* —the gruesome public square where they used to torture and execute those condemned to death. Over 700 years ago this is where they burned Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, on the denunciation of great and zealous rabbis, including Rabbi Jonah Gerondi. Only later, when the priests also began to burn the Talmud, did the same Rabbi Jonah feel that it was heaven's punishment for his war against the Rambam, and, filled with remorse, he wrote his *Sha'arey T'shuvah*. In Novaredok, they studied his *Gates of Repentance* with such fervor they almost tore their lungs to shreds, but they never learned its moral: not to be such fanatics."

Hersh's student jauntily stuck his hand into his pocket, pushed the fedora to the back of his head, and scraped the ground impatiently with the side of his shoe. When I had finished, he moved closer as if looking for a fight, and jeered:

"And would you have risked your life to save your closest friend, your student? I was once so weak that I was transferred to a prisoners' block where they kept the sick before sending them to the gas chambers. Neither my friends nor my own brother took the risk of saving me. But Reb Hersh crawled through the whole barbed-wire enclosure at night and carried me on his back out of the death-block. Did you flee from Vilna with your family or did you escape all by yourself?"

I leaped up in a fury: "Did Reb Hersh save his own family? You're just a boy!" I moved toward him and he backed away in fright. *Yingl* was a term of insult in the yeshiva, like removing a young man's adult fedora and replacing it with his childhood cap. "*Yingl*," I cried, "Do you know anything except tearing down other people? Your brother who didn't save you, did you save him? And suppose I had carried you out on my back, would you have become what I am? What if a Christian had rescued you, would you have converted to Christianity?"

The young man became confused. He looked to his teacher for help, but Rasseyner's silence confused him all the more. His teacher looked at me fearfully, nervous lest I ruin a young soul. Troubled, he swiftly took his student aside to try to explain matters. The young man drew away, throwing me a venomous look.

"Is this what you teach?!" I scolded Rasseyner when we were alone. "Hatred and scorn for the whole world?! You've appealed to him more with this than with the Torah scroll. Punishing yourself and denigrating the world—that was always your spirit, and I see that's also how you're training your little pupil. You shout at me: return and repent! But you consider me a pariah. You said before that the controversy among Ḥasidism, its opponents, and Musar had long been settled. It was all a single Torah, depending only on how you approached it. But what was it that made peace among you? It was your hatred for the Enlightenment. So now I thought that the day had finally come when you would also make peace with the Jewish Enlightenment because of our common tragedy. It seems I've made a mistake: for you, nothing has changed."

Hersh had been sitting there drained, as if he were through with the whole debate, but my last words brought him back to life. He began gesturing with his hands. "Stop for a minute, Chaim, just hold on. Suppose we were to learn that a huge meteor was approaching earth and that in a few days it would collide with our planet and destroy it forever. Would we, in these last minutes, have to make peace with the German because of this meteor that is about to destroy humankind and all other creatures? I want a short answer: do we make peace with the German, or not: Yes, or No?"

"No, we would not be required to make peace with today's German even at such a time."

"This, Chaim, is precisely what applies to the Enlightenment. How can we make peace with it when the German himself is—the Enlightenment. May the Almighty forgive you as I forgive you. You've got it all wrong. Not only do I not consider you a pariah, as you put it, but I believe there is a great deal of Jewish warmth in you. It's just that your views are twisted, so I'm discussing all this with you. And don't be put off by my pupil. He's young, he was in the camps, and besides, he's not well. It wasn't through contempt for the world that I drew him to Jewishness; young as he is, he saw the face of the world for himself. And it wasn't because I saved him from death that he attached himself to me. God forbid! He was drawn by the power and the truth of the Torah.

"Hear me out, Chaim. If you're wondering about my eloquence, I myself am surprised by my unexpected powers of speech. But I'll tell you a secret: I *have* to talk to you. I talked to you all those years when I was in the ghetto and later in the camps. Don't wonder at it, because you were always dear to me from the time you were a student in Bialystok. Even then I had the feeling that you stood with one foot outside our camp. I prayed for you. I prayed that you would remain Jewish. But my praying for you couldn't help because you yourself didn't want to be pious. You left us, but I never forgot you. They used to talk about you in the yeshiva—your reputation reached us even there. And I'm sure you remember the time we met in Bialystok. Then, when our yeshiva was in Vilna, under the Bolsheviks, we met again and that time you were very downhearted. In the ghetto, they said you had been killed while trying to escape. Afterward, we heard from partisans in the forest that you were living in Russia. I used to imagine

that if we were both saved, a miracle might happen. We could meet again and I could talk to you. That's why you shouldn't be surprised if I talk to you as fluently as though I were reciting the daily prayers. Believe me, I have laid out my side of the debate with you so many times that I know the arguments by heart."

"Reb Hersh," I said, "It's getting late. You'll miss the time for afternoon prayers."

"Don't worry about my *minḥah*, Chaim," he laughed. "I prayed at noon. In the camp it became a habit with me not to delay carrying out any commandment. I reasoned that if any hour were to be my last, I didn't want to come to heaven naked. And even if I hadn't yet prayed, I would have figured out something: I wouldn't have left you."

"I get it: you wanted me to repent so that you could share in the reward for my praying."

"Chaim, if you were to return to our fold, I would sign over to you my share of the world to come for my own praying. Do you still have strength and time to hear me out? You do? Good. So far I've been talking to you about the Gentile wise men and their theories. But first we need to be clear in our own minds about our relation to them and to the whole world. And I want to add another preface: if something I say strikes you as too harsh, don't take it amiss. Even though I'm talking to you, I don't mean you personally; I mean secular Jews in general. So don't be angry, and be a Novaredoker—for a little while.

7.

"Your Enlighteners used to sing this rhyming verse: *hevey yehudi be'oyholekho ve'ish betseysekho*, 'Be a Jew at home and a man in public.' So you took off our traditional caftan and shaved off your beard and earlocks. Still, when you went out into the street, the Jew pursued you in your language, your gestures, in your life and limb. You tried to get rid of the terrible nuisance. No great loss: so the Jewishness left you, as an elderly parent whose children don't treat him respectfully goes off to the study-house and then, when there is nothing left, to the home for the aged. Now that you've seen—woe to us!—you've seen what happened to us, you've turned your slogan around: be a man at home and a Jew in public. You can't be pious at home because you're lacking in faith, but out of anger at the Gentile and nostalgia for the murdered father, you want to parade your Jewishness in public. Only now you are pursued by the man you try to be at home—such as he is.

"The parable of the prince and the ascetic fits you nicely. A dog is invited to two weddings, one near and one far. He figures: I won't be late for the one nearby. So he runs first to the farther wedding—and comes too late. Out of breath he runs back to the one near home and arrives after the feast. When he tries to push through the door, he gets a beating. The upshot is

that he comes out empty. You once studied in Novaredok, so you know that the moral was applied to those who wanted to have the pleasures of both this world and the Torah.

"You shouted out in the public square: 'The nations of the world hate us because we are different. Let us be like them!' And you became like them. Not just like them: you became the front ranks of their civilization. Wherever there was a famous scientist, thinker, writer—there you found a Jew. And precisely for that reason they hated us all the more. On no account will they tolerate our being like them. In the Middle Ages, the priests wanted to baptize us to consolidate their power. The kings and the masses fumed because we, the most persecuted of people, had the audacity not to want to be like them. They used to delight in the torments of a Jew who tried to separate himself from the Jewish community—with his family mourning him as though he were dead and the entire community lamenting as though it were the fast of *Tisha b'Av*. In our day, though, when they saw how easy it had become for a Jew to leap over to their camp, they stationed themselves at the barriers with axes in their hands, as though to fend off wild beasts. But you were hungry and blind, so you leaped—onto their axes.

"Even the Holocaust didn't open your eyes. I heard a Polish Jew—one who was there in Russia where you were—tell me of his dream that after the war there would be peace and harmony between Jews and anti-Semites. Those who believed in the goodness of the Gentiles explained it like this: the Polish Lithuanian Jew-haters did not intend to murder, kill, and wipe out every last Jew, young and old, grandmother and infant. They only wanted to drive us out—Jews to Palestine! Jews to Madagascar! You thought that now, once they saw that their hatred led to the mass slaughter of all Jews, they were surely remorseful. Especially since they themselves suffered greatly at the hands of the Germans.

"But far from becoming better, they've grown even worse. You've seen in Poland, haven't you, how the one-time gentry, yesterday's thieves, and today's suppliers all trade with Jewish property in Jewish markets and in Jewish shops? And if a former Jewish neighbor turns up, they want to rough him up in case he intends to claim his goods and his father's house. Remember the pogrom in Kielce and the murders on the trains. They forgive the German for destroying their cities and even for killing them; what they don't forgive is that he didn't manage to cremate all the Jews. And they don't forgive themselves for having taken so long to realize that Jews can be trampled like mud underfoot without fear of punishment.

"You, Chaim, made your calculations without taking the owner into account. You thought that when you returned home, Esau would embrace you and there would be hugging and kissing with no holding back. That he would say to you: '*Yeysh li rav*, I have much, my brother; let what is yours be yours.' But today's Esau is not the Esau of the Bible, and neither are you Jacob. You returned without two plentiful camps, and you certainly cannot say like Jacob: 'I dwelt with Laban, but I observed the six-hundred-thirteen Commandments.'

"When you ran away from being Jewish, you disguised your flight with high-sounding phrases. An enlightened man would talk in the most elevated rhetoric about enlightenment; but what he really had in mind was to become a druggist. He yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt, to dig into the pot with no one observing him, like the miser who can't stand anyone else around when he's eating. With the nations of the world the main thing is the individual—his sovereignty, his pleasure, and his peace of mind. But they also know that if they acted on the principle that 'might makes right,' one man would devour the other. So they settled on a government of individuals: leave me alone and I'll let you alone. With us Jews, the individual is not the essence, it's the community that counts. What's good for *klal Yisroel* must be good for Reb Yisroel.

"Until your revolt, Jews lived as one—in prayer and in study, at celebrations and funerals. But you incited the tribes: every man to his tent, O, Israel, let everyone make Sabbath for himself, as the nations do. What's more, not only did you want to live as individuals, you wanted to die as individuals, too. To avoid being confused with the other dead when you die—after 120 years—you spend your lives erecting monuments to yourselves: one through great deeds, another by imposing his power, a third through a great business that carries his name, and you and your kind by writing books. You didn't violate the commandment against idolatry. No! God forbid! You were your own gods. You prophesied: 'Man will be a god.' So naturally he became a devil. It bothers you that we have no buildings like this one here with its greenish moldy stone men mounted in all its crannies. You'd probably want a monument up there for yourself. It strikes me that you're looking at this building as if you were searching for an empty niche for yourself, like that dummy there.

"Why are you uneasy, Reb Chaim? Didn't we agree that you wouldn't be angry? I don't mean you personally. I'm only speaking generally. But if you really feel I mean you, then I do! The wicked are as the unquiet sea. Every wave thinks it will leap over the shore, though it sees millions of others shattered before its eyes. Every man who lives for this world thinks that he will succeed in doing what no one else has ever been able to do. Well, you know how far you got! But instead of looking for solace in the Master of the World and in the Community of Israel, you're looking for the glass splinters of your shattered dreams. And as little as you'll have of the world to come, you have even less of this world.

"Still, not all of your secularists wanted to cast off the yoke of the Torah altogether. Some grumbled that Judaism kept getting heavier all the time: the commentary of the Gemara on the Mishnah, Alfasi on the Gemara, one commentary on another, and commentaries on the commentaries. Lighten the load a little, they said, so that we can carry the rest more easily. But the more they lightened the burden, the heavier the remainder seemed to them. I fast twice a week without difficulty, and they can hardly do it once a year. What the father rejected in part, the son rejected in its entirety. And the son was right! If there's so little, he doesn't need it at all. A half-truth is no truth. Every man, and particularly a young man, needs a faith that will command all of his intellect and enthusiasm. Devout Jews cover a

boy's head with a yarmulke when he's one year old in order to accustom him to fulfilling the Commandments. But when a worldly father suddenly asks his grown son to cover his head with a paper yarmulke on a Friday evening and to make kiddush, the young man rightly thinks the whole thing is absurd. If he doesn't believe in Creation, and if the Exodus from Egypt is not much of a miracle, and if the Song of Songs is for him only a song of a shepherd and a shepherdess—God help us!—and not a song of love between the Assembly of Israel and the Holy One, Blessed be He, or between the supernal soul and the Almighty—why then should this fully-grown ignoramus bless the wine and observe the Sabbath? Anyone who thinks he can hold on to basic principles and give up what he considers secondary is like a man who chops down the trunk of a tree and expects the roots not to rot. '*K'nesher yo'ir kinoy*,' the Torah carries us as an eagle carries its young. But how can the eagle fly if his wings have been clipped?

"I've already told you, Chaim, that a Musarist very clearly remembers any criticism that is addressed to him. Do you remember telling me on that street in Bialystok that we try to escape by withdrawal because we would rather have nothing of this world than only a little? You were right. We want a more onerous code, more commandments, more laws, more prohibitions. We know that all the pleasures of life are like salt water: the more you drink of it, the thirstier you become. So we want a Torah that will leave no room in us for anything else.

"Suppose the Master of the World were to come to me and say, 'Hersh, you're only flesh and blood. Six-hundred-thirteen Commandments are too heavy for you. I'll remove some. You are not obliged to observe them all, and have no fear—you'll receive a full portion of the world to come and you will be present at the Resurrection of the Dead.' Do you understand, Chaim, what it means to be at the Resurrection of the Dead and see life restored to all those Jews who fell dead before my eyes in the concentration camps? Oh, dear God in Heaven! It would be very bitter for me if the Father of Mercy were to ask less sacrifice of me. I would pray to Him: '*Av haraḥamim*, I don't want my burden to be lightened, I want it to be heavier.' Because as things are now, my burden is still too light. What point is there to the life of a refugee, of a Jew who was saved from the crematorium, if he isn't always ready to sacrifice his bit of rescued life for the Torah?

"But you, Chaim, are you as bold in your demands on the world as I am in my demands on the Master of the Universe? When you were studying with us, you were so proud and mighty that you wanted to burrow your way to the very bottom of the truth. You wouldn't accept the notion that there was an ultimate truth we cannot know. You once told me arrogantly, 'I don't want a Torah of laws that I can't understand through reason!' And now are you satisfied to crawl under the table of life hoping for a bone from the feast of *treyf* pleasures, or a dry scrap of this world's rewards? Is this all that's left of your challenge and pride in the battle of life? I look at you and think, I'm still very far from being what I ought to be. If I had reached a higher stage, my heart should be torn with pity for you.

"When it came to demonstrating their courage and common sense, both the agitator who rejected everything and the straddler who left something in doubt began by slandering the Jewish community on the grounds that it was choked in the cobwebs of casuistry; lived in a cemetery of ghost stories; traded with chaff and wind in empty marketplaces; and believed that the world ends behind that abandoned flour mill on the hilltop. The clever writer described it artfully and the vulgar laughed. Let's not forget the secularist moralists with their modish goatees who justified themselves with the verse from Proverbs, 'Whom the Lord loves, He rebukes,' which is to say that they attack us only because they really love us. But they groveled before everything they saw elsewhere. They called us *mayofesnikes*, lickspittles—registering their contempt for us because we're forced to appease our protectors. But with their own souls, like rags, they wiped the boots of every squire. Above all else, both the blatant renegade and the man who prayed and sinned in secret lest he antagonize either side—they both joined in ridiculing the idea of *Atoh v'khartonu*, that we were the Chosen People. 'Some chosen elite!' they laughed. 'What is so special about us?' The truth is that you are actually no elite and have no special status.

"The rest of the world is provided with the seven basic Noahide commandments, one of which is the prohibition against spilling blood. (Just look at how carefully they have avoided spilling blood!) Our whole chosenness consists in one thing only—our duty to conform to an onerous Torah, which is not binding on the nations of the world, just as our Kohanim, our priests, were selected from among us and bound by special prohibitions and obligations. But those who have shed Jewish holiness are certainly no more special than the others. You are not anything special—and yet you have to be! You may not want it, but the Almighty does! Thousands of years ago the God of Israel said through the prophet Ezekiel: 'And what you have in mind shall never come to pass when you say "we will be like the nations, *nih'yeh khagoyim*, like the families of the nations, worshiping wood and stone." As I live, declares the Lord God'—do you hear, Chaim, the Almighty swears by His own life!—'I will reign over you with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with overflowing fury will I rule over you.' I am translating this into Yiddish for you because you're a Yiddish writer, so inscribe it on your forehead.

"You don't seem very impressed. A biblical verse is no proof for you. But the German is proof, isn't he? Today, you don't want to remember your mockery because so many Jews have been cut down. But tomorrow, when the destruction will be forgotten, you'll laugh again at the Chosen People idea. That's why I want to tell you something.

"When I was in the *lager*, on the ground, and the German was kicking me with his hobnailed boots—had an Angel of God come down and bent over me, and whispered into my ear: 'Hersh, in the twinkling of an eye I will turn you into the German. I will put his uniform on you, give you his murderous face, and he will become . . . you. Just say the word and the miracle will come to pass. He will lie in the mud and you will kick him in your . . . in *his* bloodied face.' If the Angel had asked me—do you hear, Chaim?—I would never have agreed. Not for one minute would I have consented to be he, the

German, my torturer. I want the justice of the law! I want revenge on the wicked! But I want it as a Jew. With the Almighty's help I could stand the German's boots on my throat, but if I had to put the mask of his murdering face on mine, I would have choked to death, as though I had been gassed. And when the German screamed at me: 'You are a slave of slaves!' I said to myself through bloodless lips: 'Thou hast chosen me . . . '

"I want to ask you only one question, no more. Every Jew knows what has happened. '*Kol beys Yisroel*—the whole house of Israel shall bewail the burning that the Lord has wrought.' All Jews mourn the third of our people who died as martyrs, for *kiddush ha-Shem*. The person of feeling knows it was not just a third of the House of Israel that was destroyed, but a third of himself, of his body, his limbs, his soul. He is now a true cripple. And so we must make a reckoning—you as well as I. Anyone who doesn't make a reckoning is monstrous, as bestial as the beasts in the wild. Let's make the reckoning together. May we apply the principles of justice and mercy to forgive the murderers? No, we may not! We dare not forgive them to the end of all generations. And suppose in a hundred years one of the murderers were to rouse one of his victims from his grave and say: 'Your innocent blood is choking me and I cannot die. Forgive me. It's now a hundred years since I killed you, and by now you would have been dead in any event.' The martyr would not be permitted to forgive the murderer, not on his own behalf or on behalf of his children who weren't born because their father was murdered. Were he nonetheless to pardon the murderer, his fellow martyrs would not permit him to re-enter Paradise, or even allow him to enter Hell. To forgive the murderers would be another murder, only this time—brother would be killing brother.

"Yet as everyone knows, the torturers are in no way interested in asking forgiveness. Among the postwar judges, those who were victorious in the war, many feel sorry that they hanged even a handful of the hangmen. And the softhearted nations have a new reason to hate us. Because of us cruel Jews, they say—on our account they had to kill Germans. And they themselves, the Gestapo-crew with their henchmen of every nation, strut around free as birds, laughing into their fists. They are certain they will never be brought to judgment.

"Neither you nor I, though, has the right to sleep at night. We have no right to flee the wailing, the eyes, and the outstretched arms of the murdered. Though we break under the anguish and affliction, we have no right to flee their cry. What then? I know that the reckoning is not yet over; far from it. It has never occurred to me that anyone in the world other than a jealous and vengeful God would avenge the babies that the Gestapo stuffed into the trains to Treblinka, trampling their delicate little bodies to get as many children as possible into the cars. That is why I haven't the slightest shadow of a doubt that the great and terrible day—behold, it is come! When I hear people bickering over politics and calculating the position of the Great Powers and the relations among the countries, I know that there is another set of books written in fire and blood. There's no use asking me whether I want it that way or not—that's the way it has to be! That's what allows me to go on calmly doing the work of the Creator.

"But you, Chaim, how can you eat and sleep and laugh and dress so elegantly? Don't you first have to make your reckoning, too? How can you press your way into that world when you know it consorts with those who murdered members of your family? And you thought that the world was becoming better! Your world has collapsed! Have you learned anything from this, or not? You must ask me the same question: and what have *you* learned? Here's my answer: I have greater faith than ever! If I had only as much faith as in the past, that would be an offense against our sacred martyrs. My answer is: more and more self-sacrifice for the Master of the World, cry out until the spirit is exhausted, '*ki alekho hoyragnu kol hayoym*— 'it is for Your sake that we are slain all day long.' Go about, until the soul departs, with your heart exposed and your hands raised to Heaven: '*Tateh*, Father, only You are left to us!' But what has changed with you, Chaim? Have you gone forward or backward?"

8.

Hersh Rasseyner spoke with a dry heat that his words fanned into flame. I realized that he was unburdening himself of anger choked off for too long. Finally, he grew quiet, his lips clenched as if he were forcing himself to speak no more. The silence emphasized the tautness of his gaunt body. He crossed one leg over another, his left elbow bent at a sharp angle digging into the ankle of the leg that lay on top, three fingers tightly clutching his beard, and with his head dropped he glowered at me from under his thick brows.

Meanwhile, the blue of the evening sky was darkening. The stone figures around the Hôtel de Ville had shrunk as though frightened by what Rasseyner had said, and quietly burrowed back deeper into their niches. The former city hall was now half in darkness, as though a huge mythological creature had flown down from nearby Notre Dame Cathedral to this Execution Square. The street lamps, now lit, cast a matte green glow over the neighborhood. A thin drizzle began to fall. Shiny black autos slid quietly over the asphalt. Lighted windows were reflected on the wet pavement. The people walking along the other side of the street seemed to be moving with a silent secretive pace behind a thin silken curtain woven of the summer rain.

From our shadowy corner near the empty park I glanced across the street. Under the electric lamps the raindrops looked like millions of fireflies joyously plummeting earthward from the sky. I felt the urge to meld into the human stream flowing along the surrounding lighted streets. I stirred, and felt little pricks of pain in my stiffened limbs. The light rain stopped as quickly as it had begun. Hersh sat near me in numb deafness, his shoulders protruding sharply and his head sunk in darkness. He was waiting for my reply.

"Reb Hersh," I finally said, "As I sat here listening to you, I sometimes thought I was listening to myself. And since it's harder to lie to yourself than to someone else, I will answer you as though you were my own conscience, not just to get it over with and not trying to win a debate. And I don't feel obliged to answer to you for everything. I don't consider it a

special virtue not to have doubts. As I see it, just as the greatness of people of faith lies in their artlessness and wholeness, so the heroism of secular thinkers lies in their ability to risk and live with doubt. You didn't discover your truth; you received it ready-made. If asked about something in your behavior whose meaning you don't know, you answer: 'The deeds of my fathers are in my hands.'

"As a rule, a man is a rebel in his youth; when he's older he seeks tranquility. You had tranquility in your youth, while I don't have it even now; it is just as you once predicted. But is the tranquility of your soul any proof that the truth is with you? For all your readiness to suffer and make sacrifices, there is an element of self-satisfaction about you. You say of yourself that you were born in Joseph's coat of many colors—with the truth. And your parable about the dog who wants to attend both weddings is both coarse and snobbish, and false to boot.

"They used to call 'the old one,' Reb Yosef Yoizl—the founder of Novaredok—the master of the holes. It was said that he lived isolated for many years in the woods in a hut that had two holes in the wall; through one he would be given dairy foods and through the other meat foods. When he returned from his withdrawal into the world this became his philosophy—milk or meat, one or the other, but not a *pareve* Judaism in between. His disciples, you included, took this teaching from him.

"And we, too, are after wholeness, not a middle-of-the-road compromise. What you say about our wanting a small Torah so that it would be easier for us is simply idle talk. On the contrary, we make it harder for ourselves by taking on a double responsibility—to Jewish tradition and to secular culture. We don't want the two to live in our home like an estranged husband and wife, so we try to bring them together in harmony where they don't have to surrender their rights or their character, or anything but their foolishness. The moral of *this* fable is to find the essences of Jewishness and of secularism that can coexist.

"You said that for Jews the essential thing was always the community and not the individual, until we came along and destroyed the principle. We wanted to be like the Gentiles for whom the 'I' is more important than anything else. And in order to hurt me you wanted to convince me that I wanted to climb up on the Hôtel de Ville and put myself there as a living monument to myself. You let yourself mock me because you claim to be acting for the sake of heaven. So I won't waste time telling you about the powerful and wealthy Jewish leaders who made the community of Israel into their footstool.

"As for what you say that until we came along the principle among Jews was always the collective—I agree. We secularists want to free the individual. You say that a man should tear his individual desires out of himself like weeds. But for several hundred years men have suffered torture and death so that the masses should consist of free and happy individuals. It's now too dark for me to show you the monuments of people who were beheaded because they insisted on liberty, equality,

and brotherhood for all. But why look for heroes elsewhere and in the past? For days on end I could list for you the names of our own boys and girls who spent their youth in black dungeons because they would not be deterred from trying to make the world better. You yourself know of Jewish workers who fought oppressors and tyrants. You just can't admit that freethinkers can also sacrifice themselves—so you cry that they left Jewish tradition only to enjoy illicit pleasures. That's just not true. In my own neighborhood I knew as many 'seekers of righteousness' as there were in the yeshiva in Novaredok—perhaps even more. Because you, Reb Hersh, denied the world, it cost you nothing to withdraw into a garret. But these young people who dearly loved life sacrificed themselves—to better it.

"What right then do you have to complain to us about the world? You yourself said that we dreamed of another, better world—which contradicts your accusation. We carried into the world *our own* vision of what the world should be, as the Jews in the wilderness carried the Ark with the Tablets of the Covenant so that they could enter the land of Canaan with their own Torah. You laugh an empty laugh: you say that we deceived ourselves. Let me ask you this: do you renounce Judaism just because the Samaritans and the Karaites distorted and crippled the Torah of Moses?

"But why should I apologize to you? You seat me among the murderers and demand an accounting of me for the world. I can be as harsh an accuser as you. I can cry out against you and demand your apology. It's *your* fault that we moved too far away from Jewish tradition! You bolted every door and gateway, and let no one out into the open. If someone stuck his head out and you couldn't drag him back in by the feet, you shoved him right out and locked the door behind him with a curse. With no place to return to, he went even farther than he himself would have wished. From one generation to the next you became more fanatical. Your hearts are blocked and your ears are deaf to all of the inventions of the world. You laugh them off and call them pointless. If you could, you would put people back in the pillory, as the Vilna Gaon did to an Enlightener who dared to say that the writers of Midrash were not proficient in Hebrew grammar. Even today, if you could, you would expel people for the smallest transgression. But because you can't, you develop a short memory. You pretend not to remember how you used to persecute anyone bold enough to say anything different from you without basing himself on the authority of the ancient sages, or even with their authority. All your life you studied Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto's *Path of the Upright*. But do you know how greatly its author was persecuted, how much anguish they caused him, how they combed his writings for a hint of heresy? Have you any idea? And you yourself, didn't you rummage through your students' belongings looking for secular books? Even at this point, doesn't your voice carry the sound of the shofar of excommunication? Aren't those the black candles of excommunication burning in your eyes? And do you really think, with all your protestations, that you love Jews more than do the writers for whom it was bloodily painful to write critically of the Jewish community? And when you could get away with it, didn't you bury them near the cemetery fence, with no tombstones to mark their graves?

"How estranged you feel from all secular Jews I see in the fact that all this time you've kept repeating 'we' and 'you.' You laugh at us poor secularists for suffering pointlessly: we don't want to be Jews—but we must. You say that we have no right to be included in the Chosen People. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! According to you, the Germans erred in mistaking us for Jews. But it's you who are making this ugly mistake. The enemies of Israel know very well that we're all the same. They say it openly. And we're the same not only for the enemies of Israel, but for the Master of the World as well. Do you hear me? The same! In the world to come, your soul will not be wearing a yarmulke, a beard, or earlocks. Your soul will arrive there as naked as mine. According to you, the real tribe of Jews is a handful of Hersh Rasseyners. The rest are one-quarter-Jews, one-tenth-Jews—or not even that, since you say that Jewishness is indivisible, all or nothing. So you make us a thousand times fewer in number than we already are.

"You were right when you said that it was not a third of our people who were murdered, but rather that a third was hacked out of the flesh and soul of every Jew who survived. But, Reb Hersh, as far as you're concerned, was it really a third of our people who perished? The gist of what you say—again and again!—is that anyone who does not observe your kind of Judaism is not a whole Jew. Therefore, the number of incinerated bodies doesn't equal the number of dead Jews, is that it? You see to what cruelty your religious fanaticism must lead.

"Consider this and answer it for yourself. Those other Jews who did not brood over the higher destiny of Man or sustain the world with their goodness like the 36 anonymous saints, but who lived a life of poverty for themselves, their wives, and children; Jews who went to work in the morning without saying the morning prayers and ate their black bread without making the blessing for bread; Jews who labored on the Sabbath and didn't observe the prescribed behavior on the holy days; Jews who waited patiently and submissively at the table of this world for a crumb to fall their way—that's what you, the Novaredok hermit, taunted them with—the Jews who lived together in neighborliness, in petty quarrels and small reconciliations, and perished together the same way: do you admit them to your Paradise, or not? And where will they sit? At the East Wall together with the Musarists, or at the door with their feet outside?

"You will no doubt tell me that the simple man is saintly and pure because he perished as a Jew. But if he survived, is he wicked and a pork-eater because he doesn't follow your path? Is this your mercy and love for the People of Israel? And you have the gall to speak in their name and say that you're the spokesman of the sainted dead! . . . Why are you getting up? Do you want to run away? Didn't you assure me that you used to dream about meeting me and talking it out with me? Can you only talk but not listen? Novaredok Musarist, sit down and hear me out.

"If secular Jews are so alien to you, how can I protest the bleakness of your hatred for the entire non-Jewish world? But let's not quarrel anymore, Reb Hersh; let's think about this calmly. Do we have a right to despise the whole non-Jewish world? You know as well as I do that there were some

who saved the lives of Jews. I won't get into a reckoning of how many such people there were. It's enough for me that you know of some. I want to tell you about one such case.

"In 1946, in Poland, I attended a small gathering in honor of a Pole, a Christian, an elderly doctor who had hidden ten Jews in a small room behind a book-lined wall. At that small get-together, sitting around a table in a half-darkened room, we didn't praise the doctor, we didn't talk about noble and exalted things, about humanity and heroism, or even about Jews and Poles. We simply asked him how it was that he wasn't afraid to hide ten Jews behind the wall of his office. The doctor was a small gray-haired man. He kept smiling boyishly all the while and thanked us in embarrassment for the honor that we were doing him—some honor! He answered our question in a low voice, almost stammering: when he hid the Jews he felt sure that, since it was a good deed, nothing bad would happen to him.

"Here in Paris there's an old woman, a Lithuanian. I know her well. Everybody knows that in the Vilna ghetto she saved the lives of Jews and also hid Jewish religious books. The Germans sentenced her to death, but by a miracle she was spared and sent to a concentration camp in France. Since the liberation, she has hung out among Jewish survivors. This woman is an old revolutionary, an atheist; that's to say, as opposed to the Polish doctor who is a devout Christian, she doesn't believe in God.

"Imagine these elderly people, the Pole and the Lithuanian, Christian and revolutionary, sitting near us on this bench and listening to our conversation. They don't say anything, they just listen to what you've said. They are frightened by your accusations, but not angry, because they understand that your hatred grows from the calamity we suffered. Neither do they regret having saved the lives of Jews; they only feel an ache, a great pain in their hearts. Why do you think they saved the lives of Jews? They received no money or goods for what they did. The devout Christian didn't try to convert anyone. The revolutionary didn't want to make anyone into an atheist; on the contrary, she hid our sacred books for us. They saved the lives of Jews not out of pity for us, but for their own sakes as well. They wanted to prove to themselves—no one dared know—that the whole world is not made up of only criminals and people indifferent to others' tragedy. In saving the lives of Jews, these two old people wanted to save their own faith in human beings. But now you come along and reject everything in the world that is not piously Jewish.

"This pair are not piously Jewish, are they? I ask you: where in your world is there a corner for these two old people? You drive them out into the dark night. Each one came to our bench separately. They hadn't known one another and they will leave separately, hunched over their canes, ashamed to face the other because they were deceived in their dreams. They had thought that we were all part of one better world, and you spit on that world. What will the Jews they rescued say about your driving off their rescuers? Do you intend to pluck them, the righteous among the nations, out of the category of the Gentile and put them in a separate class? They didn't risk their lives so that Reb Hersh Rasseyner, who hates everyone, everyone, could make an exception of them.

"But you ask me, what has really changed for me after this *khurbn*? And what has changed for *you*, Reb Hersh? You answer that your faith has been strengthened. I will tell you to your face that your answer is carping and trivial. I don't accept it at all. Job's eternal question of *tsadik v'ra loy*, of the righteous man who fares ill and the evildoer who fares well—multiplied by a million murdered children—is a question you must put to God. The fact that you know in advance that no answer will come from heaven doesn't relieve you of the obligation to ask the question. If your faith is as strong as Job's, then you must have as much courage as he to cry out to heaven: '*Heyn yikt'leyni loy ayakheyl*, though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him—but I will argue my ways before Him!' If a man hasn't sinned, he isn't allowed to declare himself guilty. As for us, even if we were devils, we couldn't have sinned so greatly that our punishment should have been a million murdered children. That's why your answer, that you are an even greater believer, is no answer at all as long as you don't demand an accounting of heaven.

"Reb Hersh, we're both dead-tired and burned out from a whole day of talking and arguing. You ask what has changed for me. The change is that I want to make peace with you, because I love you with all my soul. I never hated you and never looked for your faults, but what I did see I didn't leave unsaid. When you became angry with me for leaving the yeshiva, I became angry with you, but right now I'm driven by my love for you. I say to you as the Almighty said to the Jews assembled in Jerusalem on the Holy Days: 'I want to be with you one day more, it is hard for Me to part from you.' That's what has changed for me and, on the whole, for all Yiddish writers. Our love for Jews has become more anxious and deeper. I don't renounce the world, but I must tell you in all honesty that we want to dig out from within ourselves the hidden inherited resources of our people so that we can continue to live. I plead with you: don't deny us a share of the inheritance. However loudly we cry out against heaven and demand an accounting, our outcry harbors a quiet prayer that the Jews who are estranged be moved by the divine presence—the reflection of those destroyed in the flames. Their Jewish image still hovers in the gas clouds in the hollow of our world.

"And our cry of impotent rage against heaven has a deeper meaning yet. Because we absolutely refuse to give our assent to the world's bloodiest crime against us, because we categorically deny its verdict, no slavish or perverse acquiescence can take root in our hearts, and no terrible despair that the world has no meaning.

"Reb Hersh, we are old friends from the yeshiva. I remember that once I lost the little velvet bag in which I kept my t'filin. You skipped breakfast and spent half a day looking for it, but you couldn't find it. I got another bag for my phylacteries, but you're still looking for that old one.

"Remember, Reb Hersh, the texts inscribed in the head and arm boxes of my t'filin are about the Community of Israel. Don't think that it's easy for us Yiddish writers. It's hard, very hard. The same catastrophe befell us all, but whereas you have a ready answer, we have not yet silenced all of our doubts, and who knows if we ever will. We continue to serve our fellow

Jews, though they often turn their backs on us. You should know that the only joy that's left to us is our work, what we create, and in our struggling to create we try to draw near to our people.

"Reb Hersh, it's already very late, let's take leave of each other. Our paths are different, both in spirit and in plain day to day. The storm that uprooted us is scattering the remnant to all the corners of the earth. Who knows when we shall ever meet again? May we both have the merit of meeting again in the future and seeing where we stand. And may I be as Jewish then as I am today. Reb Hersh, let us embrace—" M

Chaim Grade

Born in Vilna in 1910, Chaim Grade was a novelist and poet, known for such works as *The Yeshiva*. He settled in the Bronx following World War II, where he lived until his death in 1982.

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