

THE PROMISE

Serge Liberman

Two details strike me as I enter the dining-room of my one-time home: first, the dun-brown sepia tone that envelops my father, my mother and all the others gathered around the *Pesach* table, notwithstanding that the polished chandeliers, the silver candlesticks and the *kiddush* cups shine in all their lustrous festive fullness; and, second, that the seating about the table, the cutlery, the dishes and the wine upon it remain in the minutest detail as they were when, on this night fifty years ago, I left it to join the uprising taking place outside.

Now, as then, Father is reciting the *Haggadah* to the accompanying undertone of my brothers, my sisters, their husbands, their wives. Dressed in white *kippah* and *kittel*, with greying beard down to his chest, and the dark folds of scholarship circling his eyes, he is every bit the patriarch. The young ones, meanwhile - my nephews, my nieces all - surreptitiously nudge each other in the ribs, pull their sisters' plaits and grimace demonstratively, having helped themselves all too zealously to my mother's piquantly nose-tingling horse-radish, prepared for the *seder* from the very keenest still to be had from *Chaskiel's* along Leszno. This bitter herb - so Mother says earlier on setting the table - may remind us of the bitterness of bondage in Egypt; but, she goes on to ask, will anyone be left to eat it even a year from now and remember the bitterness of confinement within ghetto walls?

The table-cloth, as it was then, is starched to the purest white; the *Haggadot* are dog-eared and stained through long and loving use; I can almost taste the *matzoh* balls on the stove; while the candles flicker and burn as splendidly as then; save that, the last time, they had also trembled with every rumbling and reverberation outside, and flared sometimes, too, as flares of other kinds lit up our windows with leaping, arching, exploding red-yellow-orange flames.

I have just enough time to take in the scene in all its familiarity, when Father, looking up from his *Haggadah* with his contemplative, type-setter's, dreamer's eyes, smiles in that open, ever-genial, guileless way of his, and beckons me forward.

"So, Shimen, you have come home," he says, clasping his hands as if giving thanks and momentarily shutting those eyes. "Forgive us for not waiting, but we did not know if we should expect you. After all, it's been so long."

He brushes a filament of fluff from his beard and reaches out to me.

Shimen - I - the visitor, the son, the long-gone exile now returned, go up to him, kiss him on a cheek, am kissed in turn.

"How you have filled out," he says, now laying a hand on my shoulder as with his other hand he bids everyone around the table look my way, "don't you all think? You were such a skinny boy when you left, all bone, as white as a candle, and long like a noodle. And now - may the Evil Eye protect you - how well you look, and healthy, tanned in the cheeks, even prosperous. Whatever I said then, however much I tried to hold you back, you were right to leave when you did. Had we all done the same, then..."

He bites a lip and turns up his hands.

"But..," he says, leaving the word to hang, heavy with past and with what might have been future.

Where, in the intervening years, I have greatly changed, Father has not gained as much as an extra grey hair.

Nor has Mother altered at all. There is in her small round plumpish face not a single accreted wrinkle, nor one surreptitious blemish that was not there before, nor any roughening about her nails, or even one rebellious hair seeking release from under her head-scarf. As she was then, so is she now, soft in roundedness, in speech and touch; and shy; and as I turn from Father towards her, she raises a cheek to have me kiss it, as was always her way, touches my hand with the lightness of her own, and says, "Thank you for not forgetting us, *Liebeniu*.. Go, sit down. Your place at the table has been kept for you all this time."

Following her directive, I make my way towards my seat. My path takes me around and behind my brothers and my brothers-in-law, my sisters and my sisters-in-law, as also behind their children, my prankish nephews and nieces, some thirty in all; and, as I pass them, I touch a shoulder here, an arm there, here a shawl, there fingers reached up towards me, or a turned-up brow, a cheek, a curl or a bun of hair. They are all - all - as I had left them then. As ever, there is grease under Avreml's nails, his bicycle-shop clinging to him wherever he may be; on Itzik's fingers are the indelible stains of printer's type; and, on Yankev's eyebrows and lashes, the tell-tale signs of the house-painter's art. Meanwhile, what an *eshet chayil* is my sister Soreh to her Meshulam, shyly quiet scholar making his name as a master scribe! How Rivke dotes both upon her husband, Shloimi, and the children, Isrulikl, Yosl and Shmulek sitting between them! How

blessed is Dovid, my book-seller bother-in-law, to have chosen Leahle for his wife! While no match even made in heaven can compare with that of Avshalom and Rochel, the youngest of my sisters, he coddling her as if with cotton-wool, adoringly safeguarding the infant that is growing inside her, she delighting no less possessively over that same still-unborn child. In short, in short, what gifts and a blessing and a pride they are, all of them, the children too - not least to my parents who, having worked long years to provide, are now given to savour of the bountiful fruit emanating from seeds they have nurtured through three decades of a gentle, steadfast, enhancing life together.

Had all this only been permitted to continue!

And had my own life since then but turned out so wholesome!

At my place and at the place to my left that had been Hana's, there lie our *Haggadot*, the two of them, both open, both on the same page now as then, still recording the place at which, after the washing of the hands and blessings over the *matzot*, *haroset* and bitter herbs just before the meal, I had risen from my seat, said with a passion I could not anymore contain, "If this is truly a festival of freedom, then let us like our ancestors in Egypt again be free", and, following a volley of gunfire and tumult that made the flames of the candles on the table fairly leap, had left the *Pesach* table and run outside, Hana following me, saying, "If you're going to fight, I'm coming, too", with Father calling after us, and Mother, too, and everyone gathered there calling also, calling also... - calling what?

Calling what?

Warnings? Alarm? Blessings? Advice?

Encouragement? Farewells? Pleas to come back?

Or prayers, perhaps, or laments, supplications, praises?

"And we cried unto the Lord, and the Lord heard our voice!"

Or - "In every generation men seek to destroy us. Blessed be God Who saves us from their hands."

Or - "Oh, God, our God, why art Thou forsaking us?"

Or - "From whence will come our help?"

Or - "Who is like unto the Lord who dwells on high?"

That, I was never to learn. Hana and I were already in the shell-shot street below well before the clamour behind us would have died down.

For the present, however, I sit down, whereupon Father, addressing me, says, "We're glad you've come, Shimen, we've often talked about you and Hana."

Hana and I had then been but three months away from marriage, flying in the face of not a few who wondered and did so not without reason - what sense there was even in contemplating such things as marriage in those days of instant deaths, drawn-out deaths, sudden dismemberment, hurried separations, and enforced partings not for a thousand generations undone.

"I haven't seen Hana since that night," I say. "Not since we linked up with the resistance in our separate ways."

"Then I suppose that while you're here, you will try to find her?" Mother says.

I look about me, scan every face - Mother's, Father's, my brothers', my sisters, and everyone else around the table.

They await my answer.

"Hana?" I say, "She is still alive?"

Though she was always the one of fewest words, it is Mother again who speaks.

Father with nodding head endorses what she says.

"We have looked for her everywhere in our world," she says., "but have not once seen her here. So we have always supposed she must have survived in yours."

"You truly believe so?" I say.

It is Father who now replies.

"Believe us, we have looked."

"After all," he goes after the briefest pause. "She was already so much of the family that we looked wherever we could."

To which I am prompted to answer, "But as far as I know, and with every reason to know, Hana is no longer in my world either."

"Mm," Father reflects. "Then, maybe one of us may still find her. We, in this world; you, in yours... Maybe... Maybe..."

Maybe, indeed. But, truly as far as I know, Hana is no more. We separated that same *Pesach* night at the entrance of a sewer which, after having made contact with the leaders of the uprising, she was about to enter on a reconnaissance mission outside the ghetto wall. I was to remain in the ghetto as a fighter for as long as circumstances allowed. I was then twenty-two; Hana was nineteen.

"Who knows when we will meet again," I had said then, clasping Hana's hands firmly in mine.

"Who knows if we ever will meet again?" she countered.

Another flare of fire, one of several since we had left my home, passed low over our heads.

"But Shimen, *mein geliebte*," she had gone on to say, "if, God willing, we survive, let us then, six months after the end of this war, six months to the day, meet in the Market Square."

I had answered with a leavening laugh, even though my chest bore the full weight of the Urals and Carpathians in one, "We'll just have to survive then, won't we, Hanele *meins*?"

With Father repeating one more time, "Maybe...", he turns up his hands again and says, "There is only the One who knows..."

A pensive atmosphere - a collective quiet out of respect for Father in which no-one speaks until he is done - permeates the room as each deliberates over his reflection.

But not for long. For, with Father having said his piece for the moment, contemplative musing yields to an escalating galvanisation, to curiosity, and to volubility as, with Avreml, Soreh, Itzik and Rivke leaning or skewed towards me, and also Yankev, Leah, Meshullam and Rochel, I am plied with questions as they want to know this, know that, know whatever I may possibly be able to tell.

"What is happening now in your world out there?"

"Is there a war still going on?"

"Have any of our cousins, uncles, aunts survived?"

"Where have you yourself come from?"

And: "Where are you going from here?"

And: "Have you, with God's will, a family, children, grandchildren perhaps?"

That last question can only be from Mother, such things being always chiefest among a mother's concerns, while Father follows with a question that, likewise, can only be a father's: "Do you keep *Shabbes*, Shimen, celebrate *Pesach*, go to *shul*, light *Yizkor* candles for us all?"

I answer each question in turn, now passing an eye over Avreml's pixie face, now pausing over Soreh's wig, meeting as best I can Itzik's fixity upon me, reaching out as if to touch little Isrulikl's spiralled sidelocks.

"Our war is over," I answer, "though there have been others since."

"We also have a home of our own now," I answer, "Eretz Israel, in what was Palestine in our time."

And: "Aunt Baile lives in Argentina," I answer, "while Uncle Chaskiel is in Montreal. I don't know of any others who came through."

As I speak, I flip at random the pages of the *Haggadah* and come across a favourite verse of Father's which, every *Pesach*, he had sung with ardour and adoration and unquestioned trust.

"Blessed be God, King of the Universe, who has redeemed us as He redeemed our ancestors from Egypt..."

"Let us pray to God, the God of our fathers, that He bring us to other festivals and holy days that will come to us in peace..."

"Let us sing a new song of thanks to God for our salvation and freedom..."

The last time I heard him sing it, a Molotov cocktail exploded in the street below just as he finished.

I continue meanwhile to answer their questions.

"For myself," I say, "I live in Australia. In Melbourne... It is as far away from here as one can get, and, after what happened here, that is good."

And: "One makes a nice living there," I say. "I'm into men's suits. With my own factory, nearly fifty people working for me, and the best stores in many places among my customers."

And: "I was married," I say, "but things did not work out well. So, now I'm divorced, I have two grown-up sons, they have children of their own... I seldom see any of them..."

And: "As for *Shabbes*," I say, "and *Pesach* and *Rosh Hashana* and... and so on..." - I begin to fumble for words - "I... It's... Well... The war... The war... It changed many things.... The way a man who's been through it looks at the world, and looks at other men, at... at God even. And then Australia, too... The way one lives there, and its people, its spaces, its culture, and its climate, and what it means to be a newcomer, a stranger, a Jew there... One must live in Australia truly to know..."

Father, mild as he is, scans my face, his own at the same time lengthening with a creeping but recognisable sense of dismay.

"Yes..." he says, raising a hand to his *kippah*, "yes..., I hear very well what you are saying. You have settled in some wilderness forsaken by God, you have yourself forsaken God, and no

God-blessed home do you have where you may eat warm soup, or learn a page of *Gemara* or feel a child's or grandchild's kiss on your cheek. Hm? And you are saying, too - no? - that all those things our people died to preserve, *Shabbes*, *Purim*, *Pesach*, the *Yom-tovim*, these today mean nothing to you?"

I am reprov'd, and I sense the breath-held silence around the table as everyone seated there appears to await further answer. Even Rivke, who is ever a talker, hangs uncommonly steadfast to my lips, as do the children who surely understand little of the content but recognise the weightiness of the moment.

I nod my head, shake my head, indicating "Yes", indicating "No", putting an end to this vacillating charade with a clasp of a fist and a sigh.

"When the war ended," I say, "and I learned that you had all gone the way of martyrs, I sat down on a high mound of rubble in what had been the Square and tried to make sense of the war, the deportations, the killings, the ruination of everything that had once seemed so sure, so precious, and blessed. And what made most sense was that your martyrdom, like all such martyrdoms everywhere and for millennia past, was the price paid for our people's obeisance to a lie. It was all for nothing! All of it a waste!"

"A lie?" Father asks. "All for nothing? The best of everything lost. All of it a waste?"

"That there was someone, a Being, somewhere, Who saw, and heard, and cared, and delivered, and protected, and redeemed..."

"And that's a lie?" Father breaks in with a knitting of his brows in puzzlement, but touched also by a clear ascendancy of pain.

"A lie?" he repeats. "To this have you come?"

He raps a middle finger then against his *Haggadah*.

"Listen, Shimen," he goes on. "Just listen to this."

His voice rises to the majestic as he begins to recite, the attentions of my brothers, my sisters and their young ones being less on him than focused squarely, searchingly on me:

"When Israel went forth from Egypt, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion.

"The sea looked and fled, Jordan was driven backward. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like young sheep.

"What ailed thee, O sea, that you did flee, Jordan that you were driven back? You mountains that you skipped like rams, you hills like young sheep?

Tremble, O earth, in the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flinty rock into a fountain."

Throughout the recitation, I hold my head bowed. Even as I listen, I trace, with love intensifying to an acute and throbbing ache, the intricate patterns in the festive table-cloth that Mother had once by her own hand embroidered so devotedly.

On its completion, I look up. Father has kept his own gaze fast upon me throughout, I know, and even now it does not waver. More than being disappointed or angry, aggrieved or pained, he is questioning..

"All this too is a lie, Shimen?" he says. "A lie that, when He willed it, and *because* He willed it, he brought us out of Egypt, as the *Haggadah* also states, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm? And a lie that He did so with wonders and signs?"

The Exodus from Egypt has, for me, long been shorn of any divinity. A slice of history, yes; history in the realms of epic, even; but man-made withal, the centre occupied by Moses and Pharaoh, and the Hebrews in flight and the Egyptians in pursuit; and all as earth-bound and radical in its day as the cattle-trucks shuttling about Europe between natal home and Hades in mine.

"The *Haggadah* is embellishment," I am tempted to say. "The Exodus, yes, that is fact. But that outstretched arm, those wonders and signs - they are invention, folklore, myth. They are fabulous, stirring and make perfect stories for such as *Isrulikl* here or *Yossele*, or *Shmulekl*. I, too, after all, delighted in them once."

I don't say this, however.

What I do say is something else altogether, notwithstanding that we sit, thirty of us, closely huddled around a table commemorating precisely those marvels I privately disown, notwithstanding, too, that Mother and Avreml, Yankev, Rivke, Rochel and all the others sit in their seats, as the saying runs, as if on pins, and notwithstanding that, fully in keeping with their welling fears, I dare with unheard-of brazenness for a Jewish son take Father to task in another way.

For, what I do say is: "If that which happens happens by His will, why then did He will that you, Father, and you, Mother, and you, Shlomi, and you, Soreh, and the children - the

children, why the children? - should be taken when you were all so gifted, so good and loved Him so mightily, and saved me instead, saved me, the least endowed and deserving of all, who, in surviving, has come not only to repudiate Him, but to live with heartache day after day and to know so little of joy?"

Father listens with every attentive earnestness, but not a flicker ruffles his demeanour.

"If, in our time," he replies, "God chose to take us, He must have had His reasons. In His design, every man has his hour and each thing has its place. If you survived, that too was for a purpose."

Never before has voice been raised under Father's roof with a tenth part the vehemence I permit myself now.

"No!" I cry out. "No! To us the highest value is the keeping of life and the cause for greatest grief is the loss of it. So tamely to explain away its taking which is for no other, neither God nor man, to take, is to dishonour the sole possession most truly ours. And if my survival was indeed for a purpose, and not some chance event, I challenge that it be revealed to me that I may not continue so to fail it!"

Father replies with a smoothing of his beard between fingers and thumb in the way of scholars.

"A Jew may repudiate his God, but will never be repudiated," he says. "For He needs man as much as man needs Him. But until God's ultimate purpose becomes known, it is for men to create their own purposes. And for that, Shimen, even now, it's not yet too late..."

"For me, fifty years ago was already too late," I cut across in a way I would never have done before, "when I learned that there is no-one above, and no-one below, and no-one in the wings who directs events down here. Only we, we ourselves; mortal men all, some wise, others less wise, some *menschlich*, others brutish, some choosing well, others badly, some reaping justly that which has been sown, others reaping that which not they, but others called Amalek, Schicklgruber and Haman, have sown for them."

Father nods. He sways. He blinks. Of ten parts of the world's sadness, nine parts weigh now upon him.

"Shimen," he says. "Shimen, my son. Without family, without blessings, without belief, and nothing to trust in, what *do* you have? What is there left in your life?"

"What is left?" I repeat after him. "Time is left. Moments. One after the other, moment by moment till the last; each separate moment unknown for what it may bring, but... but..." - the words that follow do so of their own accord, and with a thrust altogether out of keeping with all I've said till then - "bringing with it perhaps, just perhaps after all, the consummation of that purpose for which, if I am to believe you, I survived."

A touch at my elbow causes the scene to be transformed. For a lingering instant, everyone at the table - Father, Mother, everyone - assumes the fixity of hardened wax. No-one is gesturing anymore; no-one speaking; nor laughing, nor tugging at a plait or nudging a rib. Even the lights of the candles cease to flicker; the silver of the *kiddush* cups lose their sheen; the tablecloth, so white and exquisitely embroidered but a moment before, turns dun-brown and plain; the *Haggadot* around the table fade to unreadability as, with the arrest of the scene into total immobility and surrender to silence, the room's ambience returns to a sepia manifold more profound than that which I encountered on entering.

The vision past, I recognise that where, but a blinking before, there stood the festive table ringed by family re-enacting its ancestral liberation, there stands now the same table that had been ours, which, stripped of its covering, is dark, chipped, deeply scored and desertedly bare, save for a tawdry pink vase containing a most meagre handful of wilting jasmine, and bordered by six equally despoiled dark chairs, the whole room - with its battered buffet and mantel, its frayed and stringy floor-rugs and the coat-stand as well - watched over by a much-foxed and curling, fading photograph of the Pope snipped from some years-old ten-grosz Polish magazine.

"You have seen what you wanted, Pan Obiartz?" says the woman Masha Kupczycz beside me.

Masha Kupczycz is corpulent and flabby, her cheeks sag like white dough, her hands have the same matt puffiness, while her fingers are as broad, short and square-tipped as a peasant's. She has just returned from the kitchen where her kapusta has boiled over. Its nose-assaulting acidity enters with her.

"Thank you," I say, adding nothing and nor giving her reason to expect more.

Panie Kupczycz, though, is not without things to say.

"It's funny, but on seeing you," she says, "I keep thinking how all of us, wherever we end up, we want at some time or another to go back where our feet first learnt to run."

I sense rather than see her imposing bare-armed corpulence as I move towards the door. The kapusta sets my teeth on edge. I have never liked the stuff; much less do I like it now,

befouling, as it does, the space, the ambience, the chattels, the recollections of the past where, once - not for a blinking so much as reflected upon by her, I wager - my own feet had indeed first learnt to run.

"Just next year," she prattles on, "my Juszek and I, we plan to visit the village we lived in before we came here. My mother, sweet Jesus Christus be kind to her" - in the hallway mirror, I see her cross herself - "my mother she'll be ninety and our whole family Brzrezinski, seventy of us now, counting all her great-grandchildren, maybe even more, we'll all be getting together to celebrate, 'cause it's not many that reach ninety in this world, is it? And of course, it will be good to see the village again, it truly will, 'cause the past it really does hold on to a person, don't it, Pan Obiatz?"

Panie Kupczycz might well say more on seeing me out, but no more do I find compelling reason to linger on in this place. I have been, I have seen, I have remembered, I have revived the dead in the present. For, as long as memory remains no-one fully dies, memory being as much the Jew's surest salvation as also his special genius.

And so, much as the past does assert a hold, on descending the stairs, I shed increasingly that worn, irrecoverable, sepia-invested past, to be confronted instead by an onslaught of momentarily blinding shimmering white light rebounding from the broad summery boulevard outside, along with all the lush efflorescence of colour to be had there, and movement, and by the sturdiness of the facades lining the streets of a city once grand, then rubbed, and since resurrected and restored in ways my former brothers and sisters and a whole people around them besides could never be. Its stolid buildings, uniformly august and imposing, rise to right and left proudly impregnable, their long tiers of windows splintering the noonday sunlight into shafts of stinging barbs even as the wavering white-blue surface of the Vistula visible beyond the cross-streets, fragments it into a myriad prisms. Alongside and before me pass successions of cars, taxis, vans and bicycling messenger boys; gaggles of tittering made-up shop-girls, too; and office clerks delivering papers, mothers in pairs wheeling prams, elderly couples strolling on swollen feet, a policeman, a pair of red-headed children, a street-sweeper, a club-footed mechanic, not one of whom gives me, unmistakable stranger that I am, at the very least a sidelong glance. While a single room may contain any number of Obiatz souls, not the whole length and breadth of this reconstituted quarter can anymore accommodate a single Obiatz shred. Not that, having once been indigenious, I am now an outcast. What I truly am is worse. Along with all that was - the family's one-time initialled serviettes; the shingle on the outside wall and the home of Gedaliah and Yehudit Obiatz within; the Avreml Obiatz Bicycle Shop, the Itzik Obiatz Printing Press, and the Yankev Obiatz Decorating Firm - I, Shimon Obiatz, one-time child, apprentice, resistance-fighter and, now, visiting returnee to his home, Shimon Obiatz simply *isn't*

Nonetheless, even as one who isn't, I walk on. I carry no guide-book, nor map. Nor have I need to ask directions. I walk wherever I choose, subject solely to mood, the streets as familiar to me as the veins lining my hands. Here, in the attorney Melech Shulkes' doorway, Leib Becher was mown down by gunfire; here, outside Peisi Telushkin the *melamed*'s Gitl Heskes threw herself under a tank, blowing both herself and tank apart; and here, from a flaming window three floors above Sztaingrib's bookshop, Sholem Gleichtseit hurled himself down dashing skull and the last of all possible hope to terminal oblivion.

And what of Shulkes, Telushkin and Sztaingrib themselves in that time?

"To think that, once, a king invited us here and now a nation of philistines gone blind are annulling his vision."

"Whatever portion we are dealt... If the *Ribbono Shel Olam* had intended things to be different, they would have been..."

And: "They may take our bodies, burn our books, but the souls that reside in each - these, never!"

The Old Town Square which I now reach is alive with a multitude of bright, lively kiosks selling black *kawa*, *pierozkis* and cake with tea and rum to folk variously strolling or hurrying through or sitting on seats backed by tub on tub of plants and flowers almost wholly surrounding the square. In its centre, violin orchestras, buskers, street-artists and red-bloused dancers display their art. Toddlers and older youngsters in sailors' outfits, summer dresses and brightly-patterned caps begin here their earthly explorations; old men sit bent over chess-boards, their wives over embroidery. It is as hard to believe now as it ever was that here, in this one-time city of kings, side-by-side with indigence of the meanest sort, miscreants had been publicly flogged, statesmen had dined, composers and poets, delving inward, had bared and illuminated the nation's soul, while astronomers, looking outward, had scaled the heavens' farthest reaches for humanity's wider illumination.

In the midst of it all, I pause, look about me, sit down. Along the Square's perimeter stand kiosks, pastry shops, crafts stores and an art gallery, a hair-dressing parlour and fruit

stands. Across the street from one of its corners looms an old-age home beside a wide-fronted sheet-glassed furniture store, and, opposite the other corner, at some fifty metres' remove, the local police station dwarfed between a reception-hall on one side and an orphanage on the other. I skim meanwhile over dozens, scores, a welter of faces which mesh and meld in a sweep of alienness that compounds my own displacement there, my non-being, my own sense of invisibility.

Overhead, the sun at its zenith has for some time been beating upon my balding scalp. More than once, as a child here, I would fall victim to the heavy afternoon heat and drift into a brief, limp and profound sleep. And now, too, as I remember this, I feel a warm, stickily clammy moistness about my brow, beneath my underarms and clinging down the length of my back.

From where I sit, partly skewed with an elbow crooked over the back of my bench, I continue to look about me, when I am diverted from my languid exploration by a woman's voice scarcely an arm's-reach away.

"Shimen! You don't recognise your Hana?"

I turn, come to face the woman square-on who, sitting at a table just off to a side, is, like Father, like Mother, like the others of my former Obiatz home cut off, set wholly apart at the centre focus of a wide wash of darkly-matted sepia that shuts out all else that has been there but moments before. Whatever light there is - and that, the most pale of ochreous yellow - comes from an unseen off-centre source; there is no shadow save that in the folds and crevices of her face; nor covering of any kind that might suggest either ceiling or sky.

In her turn facing me, she is filled-out, grey and heavy-featured, dressed in a shapeless grey much-weathered cotton skirt, a matt-blue blouse, an over-stretched cardigan hanging from her shoulders and a thin ruffled ash-black scarf dangling from her neck. With one last swallow, she downs her *katwa* and remnant piece of black forest cake, pushes plate and saucer aside, and rises from her place. She approaches now, taking two, three, four slow and heavy steps, drawing me too into her coffee-permeated, encapsulated, all-else-encapsulating sphere.

"Hana?" I ask, I say, myself now quickly naturalised to it. .

The curve of her nose is hers, the roundedness of her cheeks, too, and the contours of her lips, her cheeks and chin, no less, save that all these, along with her hands, her waist and her swollen ankles have yielded, even as mine have done, to the shapings dictated by accumulated years.

"So, at last you've come," she says.

She sits down beside me.

"Could you but know how I've been warming this seat for your return."

"Hana?" I say again. "You've waited all this time?"

"What do you mean 'All this time'?" she says, "Against eternity, what are fifty years, and what indeed is eternity itself if not but a minute when the awaited moment finally comes?"

"And so you have waited every day?" I say, scanning her every shadowed curve and crevice, where, once, my hands had more delectably done the work of eyes.

She nods.

"A promise is a promise, Shimen," she says.

"And you want to say that you have kept yours," I say, "while I for my part did not?"

"And *did* you?" she asks.

Did I?

History takes on a darker, greyer, harder tint of its own, It is a play-through of burnt-out buildings, precarious ruins, barbed wire fences, army trucks coming and going, people scaling stony mounds, scraping for past possessions, scavenging for food.

"Yes, Hana," I reply. "You may not believe me. But I did."

"You *did*?" she says.

"In this very square," I begin to elaborate. "In this very place. In November '45. On the twenty-first. Six months to the day after the end of the war. As we agreed."

"But you didn't wait."

"I didn't wait?" I say. "Oh, yes, I waited. I waited, right here in the midst of all the rubble that was here at the time, with everything around desolated, levelled, charred. And with scarcely a place to sleep, a crumb to eat, a tap to shave by. Neither your home, nor mine still stood, I needn't tell you, but I waited. But then people carried tales of further pogroms, there was talk of more war, I could not trace even one other Obiatz anywhere who may have remained alive or one other Bleifuss in your own family who could tell me whether I might still venture hope for your return."

"And you left."

"Papers came through for transfer to a DP camp, with the likelihood of moving on to Paris. All the same, I waited, Hana, I did; and kept on waiting, even as friends, strangers, officials I approached to ask if they knew anything of you, they all called me crazy, a fool, yes, a fool for

holding myself to a promise to meet a fiancée at a time when the truest promise any man could ever keep was one made with the Angel of Death. Until one month after coming here, just after daybreak also of the twenty-first, I let myself be talked into joining a convoy heading west..."

Hana closes her eyes, bites a lip and sways as if some suddenly risen breeze has just touched her.

"While I," she says, "and how the jackals must be laughing - while I arrived here, it can only have been just two hours later, at eight, the message I gave Yankev Belkin of course not having reached you."

"Yankev Belkin? A message?"

"Another from my camp. An official appointed on liberation who was sent on a mission ahead of the rest and who agreed to take a message for you that my transport west had to be delayed. Yankev Belkin never got this far. I learned long, long after I myself came back that he'd been murdered by peasants when he took it into his head to revisit his village that happened to be just a hop from his official route."

"And you've been waiting for me since?"

"I've been waiting since."

"Because of a promise?"

"A promise made on the threshold of hell but, for that very reason, sealed for me in heaven."

"And you have had no other?" I go on to ask. "No husband? No children? Nobody?"

"I have what I have, and what I have I have," she says.

She then glances at her watch and rises.

"And now I must get back. I've eaten and the children are waiting. But you may come with me if you wish."

Still within the sphere of the brownness that enfolds her, I accompany Hana wherever she may be heading, telling her, as briefly as the passage allows, something of Melbourne, of my factory, of certain *landsmen* there whom she might still recall. So does she lead me through the Square and across the street to the orphanage on the other side. I remember her as the younger lively girl she was as my fiancée at that brightly-lit, embroidered festive table that, now seating a couple Kupczyk, had once seated a joyous, thriving family Obiatz.

The orphanage is a two-storeyed building which we enter through a heavily hinged rough-hewn doorway. The entrance hall opens upon an office on one side and a waiting-room on the other and smells pungently of naphthalene. Vapid wall-paper the shade of dried-out seaweed covers the walls; the ceiling is a lattice of crevices, its one-time whiteness is blotched the blue-green of ingrained copper, while our steps, Hana's, mine, clatter over-loudly on the naively primitive mosaic of its tiled floor, causing me to tread lightly like some trespasser in the place.

No sooner do we pass through a double doorway to the large common playroom beyond where another supervisor is helping a huddle of girls build a doll's house than a cluster of children come running and take hold of Hana's hands wherever they can. Where the hallway is heavy with the pungency of naphthalene, this playroom is strong with detergent and wax.

"*Chocha* Hana! *Chocha* Hana!"

On their approaching, I see - and, barring a trick of light, I swear it - I see Rivke and Shlomi's Isrulikl in their midst, and Soreh and Meshullam's Pinchasl, and Bina, and Anusz, Chava and Feige and those others about our one-time *seder* table as well. But, as I watch Hana kneel in the hub of that huddle and enfold those little girls, those little boys, variously dark and blond, dumpy and slight, ruddy and pale, what I hear, as she touches one after another, is "This is Heniek, this is Julek, and here we have Marek and Masha, Sonya and Staszek, Zosia and Franciszka, my children, each and everyone, along with all the others, *all* the others, Shimen, you see around the room."

There are some thirty-five, forty in all.

"We might yet have had our own," I say.

Hana looks up.

I catch something of the sparkle I once knew.

She smiles, faintly, to be sure, but both with her lips and her eyes; that is, genuinely, with the nearest to pleasure that she allows herself.

"But, Shimen, they are, they are!" she says.

"Ours?" I say.

"Ours, yes," she replies, smoothing one child's hair, drawing another nearer to her within the crook of her arm. "For, every day, whenever I look at them, I see you. In one, your eyes; in another, your brow; in another still, your chin, the shape of your lips, your fingers, your walk, your laugh, and so on. In this way, though we are apart, and so far apart, yet, through them do I live - through them have I long lived - all the time with you. Which is why..., which is why..."

She pauses, hesitates, turns briefly away and then looks back, reflectively scanning me over, as if questioning, should she or should she not complete what she has left suspended there.

"Which is why..." I prompt.

She takes deep breath, resolves: "Which is why....," she goes on, "and this I know, though you have told me none of it, your marriage had to fail, your sons were not the sons meant for you, and their sons, though of your flesh, were not of your vow, not of your soul, and hence always to be to you like strangers."

A little girl holds up a doll to her.

"Very pretty, very pretty," Hana says, placing a finger on the child's quaintly snubbed nose, "but not as pretty as this little darling Basha."

Her little darling Basha is alive, she shines as she gives out a short happy tinkling giggle.

"And now?" I say, looking at Hana who is rising again, with the children still clustered about her.

Over their heads, I extend my hand to help her.

"Now?" she repeats.

Doughy though it is, her hand is soft, smooth, tentatively compliant.

"I... I mean...", I begin, "I mean... You! Me! Us!..."

"Us?" she repeats. "Us?"

I roam over the contours, crevices and shadows of her face.

"Hana, you want to stay here always?" I ask. "Always?"

Hana tosses her head and sniffs.

"Shimen, what is this 'always', tell me," she counters, "when for such as us, how much longer can this always truly be?"

"As long as," I say, "as long as may still be left to us, Hana. A day, a year, ten years. Come back with me, Hana. Apply for papers. We didn't manage it till now but can we not maybe still make a home together?"

She eases her hand loose from my clasp.

"Make a home together? Over there? In Australia? Me? Already a rag in Moses' times. Seventy years-old with varicose veins, creaking bones, asthma in winter and burning feet. And you... forgive me, Shimen... yourself no spring chicken either anymore. With men's troubles, very likely, prostate, heart, who knows?"

"As we are we are," I say. "and, if we are to take each other, we can do so only as we are."

The little boy Marek tugs her by a hand.

"*Chocha* Hana!" he says, "can we go back to play with the train?"

And then, Franciszka, a petite precociously coquettish black-eyed beauty: "*Chocha* Hana, please come see my picture first."

Hana lays her hands lightly upon their necks, nodding acquiescence to each in every way maternal.

"Soon," she answers, "very soon. We'll play with the train, Marek, I will look at your picture, Franciszka, and, Zosia, I haven't forgotten the basket we were making, or the paper planes, my own so-handsome Staszek."

"Hana!" I press. "So we missed out once. But we survived! We survived, Hana! And if we survived, then, in that, perhaps some purpose still remains? Together still to make something of our lives. To seize the occasion that opportunity has finally granted us?"

Hana shakes her head. She reaches out, touches my cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"We have met," she says. "Moses took forty years to fulfil God's promise to the people. With us, *the Ribbono Shel Olam* intended it should take fifty, but it has been kept. I am satisfied."

"*The Ribbono Shel Olam*?" I repeat after her.

"Maybe it is Him," she replies. "Or maybe, when I think of Yankev Belkin, or what happened to the message I gave him, maybe it's chance. And sometimes I think... I think, maybe chance itself is God. And at still other times I think, maybe He's just a child Himself, like one of these here, who likes to play skittles with us for his sport. I don't know."

I recall the traditional spilling of a drop of wine at the *Pesach* incantation of each plague:

Blood.

Frogs.

Lice.

Beasts....

"Once, there were ten plagues," I say. "Better that there should be no God than He should be an eleventh."

"Whatever the truth," Hana goes on, "my home is here. My family," - she describes a circle that takes in the children - "my family, too. Anywhere else, I would be out of place, in a wilderness. I would be a stranger, I would be lost. While you, Shimen, you... I can't expect you to remain."

I fancy I hear Father, bearing those nine parts of the world's ten sadnesses on his shoulders, say again, "Shimen, Shimen, my son. Without family, without blessings, without belief, and nothing to trust in, what *do* you have? What is there left in your life?"

Having little of true value, meaning, human anchor, even Hana am I to be denied.

"As you say," I answer Hana. "I can't remain. I came to recover and pay honour to something of the past. I have seen what I wanted. It is best now to leave it where it belongs."

Hana nods.

"Yes," she replies. "Leave everything, and everyone, where it belongs."

With that, she points at her assistant towards the back.

"Wanda must be getting hungry. It's her turn to go out. I had better take over... I'll see you out."

Together we pass again through the double doors and down the drab naphthalened green-papered hallway to the street outside. The children - Marek, Masha, Heniek, Staszek and the others - accompany us.

Nothing has changed outside. Still, the same subdued greyness, the same on-going traffic of vehicles and people passing every which way, the bustle, the music, the spray of colour in the Square across the street.

On the footpath, Hana extends a hand. With the other, she plays with a button of her blouse, folds down a thread of her much-weathered cardigan, smooths down a part of her rumpled skirt.

"Goodbye, Shimen," she says. "The next world, neither for you, nor for me, can be too far away now. Perhaps there we may yet be given to meet again. But still I must ask... I must..."

For the briefest of moments, she shuts her eyes, then looks me over as if indeed seeking answer.

"Why," she says, "why, when we had made that promise that, for me, had the very force of heaven behind it, did you not continue to wait?"

I remember the *melamed* Peisi Telushkin.

I take her hands and hold them for as long as I still may.

"If things were meant to be different, Hana," I say, "I can only guess they would have been."

"No, Shimen, they *were* meant to have been different," Hana replies, "but one man's caprice was enough to turn them instead into what they should never have been. And now... In the next world, may we fare better there..."

"Amen," I say, "Amen," sealing the pact with a word that long and hollow decades have not but once heard me say.

Back at the Old Market Square, I return to the bench I occupied before and resume my position with an arm crooked over its back.

Out of Hana's vicinity, I find myself again in the midst of light at its whitest, and of colour and of brilliantly shimmering luminosity which sheds itself on all with every unstinting generosity. Around me, the flowers, the *kawa* of the *kavarnies*, the pastries, the cakes, the fruit in their season and the Vistula nearby again pervade the surrounds with their sweet-scented redolence, the fiddlers play, the lushly-costumed dancers still spin in their polonaises and mazurkas, men surrounded by watching spectators think out their next moves bent over their chess-boards, the women in turn bend over their embroidery, and the children, playing with their fathers, laughing and giggling on the laps of their mothers, add to the exuberance, the joyfulness and abandon of a people secure, at ease and at home where others, but a twitch of time before, had lived with certainties of their own, and melodies, dances and dishes, and intimacies, fragrances, loving, industry and camaraderies, too.

From my seat, I look towards the orphanage.

On the pavement outside its door, a filled-out, dumpy, grey-haired woman in dull long-weathered wear stands surrounded by children. The children are dark, they are blond, dumpy and slight, ruddy and pale. I expect them to go inside; failing that, to turn down the street, to cross to the Square, in some other way to indicate pulse, breath, activity.

But they do not move. Perhaps - I muse - perhaps they are history's children that truly were, or a one-time's future's children - my children, Hana's, ours - that might have been.

I do not know.

Like so much else within this city, they are caught forever in the funereal dun-matt tones of fading sepia.