Daniel – A Fragment from a Letter

Perhaps you too, Ephraim, remember those days of our childhood when, like larks in spring, we played cheerfully and with our own brand of passion in the streets and courtyards of our homes, not for a moment believing that there could exist anything in the world that was not beautiful or fresh or radiant.

We grew up together, a dozen or so of us, in the same courtyard, tall toneless edifices looming all around us, while our fathers, dressed in their outmoded black caftans, leaned against the walls, argued and bargained, debated and gesticulated, and thought to solve, with words alone, the misfortunes that afflicted the world. In the mornings, we were hurried to the *cheder*; and in the afternoons we ourselves hurried home, back to our games and our laughter, to pulling Daniel's sister's neatly-twisted plaits, and to Moshe the Butcher's angry curses and his son David's blasphemies and vulgar jokes. And on the Sabbaths – do you remember? – the sun would creep into the courtyard like a reluctant guest, and while our parents pored over the Talmud or strolled leisurely through the gardens nearby, we occupied ourselves once more with those games of which we never tired and blew our whistles and rolled our hoops and tussled on the ground in childish battle.

Perhaps it is an illusion of the mind that is left of childhood, perhaps a shadow, a vision or a pleasant, peaceful dream. Yet it is no dream. I still see our courtyard as though I had walked through it just last week, with its heavy wooden cheese barrels rolled into the farthest corners and the linen

hung up to dry on twisted rusty wires stretched between opposing windows. And I can still smell the rancid odour of the fishmarket and the butchery; and if I hear voices every now and again, they are not the hallucinations of a deranged mind, but rather our own voices still ringing out and echoing in those streets, shrill and childlike, as if we had never grown up at all but had really stayed there, forever youthful, joyful and content, despite all that has passed since then.

Of course we did not stay there and time did not stand still – how often have you heard this expression? – and we had, of necessity, to grow up and mature and to see, through adolescent and, later, adult eyes, the black events that were drifting our way. So David, for instance, grew up and followed his father into the meat trade; and Simon – the one with the wild eyes and the sharp tongue who was a plague to the *rebbe* in *cheder* – set himself up as a seller of books; while Mordechai, the sexton's son, prepared himself for the life of a wastrel, existing from hand to mouth, and thriving on air. Yehezkiel escaped to study in the big cities and only the Almighty One knows whether he is alive today. And Dora, the rabbi's only daughter, as plain and homely as the weekday bread, slipped quietly into marriage, while Esther, Daniel's sister, whose plaits we had pulled as children, grew more and more beautiful by the day and became the common object of our affections and desires.

And there was Daniel himself, as reticent as a mouse and perpetually hiding behind a pair of thin-rimmed glasses and one learned book or another. Did you ever see him with empty hands? While we, the dozen or so, wreaked havoc in the courtyard and had the neighbours leaning out of their windows pleading from us a measure of silence, Daniel would sit through our play, perched on a cheese-barrel, a book in his lap, oblivious alike to our shrill cries and to our neighbours' pleas. Sitting alone, he read everything that came his way – the prayer-book, the Talmud, its commentaries, secular novels proscribed by the rabbi, travel books, all the newspapers, and an assortment of pamphlets, some of which called for our

destruction as a people and others which called upon our people to enlist in the army to defend the country which protected us. How he absorbed it all, I don't know. At twelve, he had read at least as much as his father, who far from being an illiterate man, was a cantor well-versed in rabbinical teachings and Jewish lore.

Just as we teased his sister, so did we taunt Daniel when, reading in a corner of the courtyard, he showed he had no patience for our games. His aloofness hurt us, for, secretly – we would never have dared to demonstrate it openly –, we admired and envied him, while our parents forever set him up as a model of an earnest, industrious, intelligent boy who would one day rise high among men. Nevertheless, children that we were, we mocked him, wore twisted spectacle-frames over our noses, in imitation hunched our backs as was his habit, and shuffled to and fro before him, our knees bent so that our trouser-cuffs scraped the bitumen, and our shoulders drooping until our arms disappeared into the sleeves of our jackets.

He was not one to be offended so easily. Every now and again, he raised his head, regarded us solemnly, flipped over a page and sank back into the special pleasures that his books seemed to give him.

In this way, we all grew older and, yielding up the pleasures of our childhood, we turned our minds to more serious matters. Of David and Simon and Mordechai and Yehezkiel I have already told you. Jacob, the widow Rivka's only son, took up work in a saw-mill and lost an arm there – perhaps a fortunate event, for that exempted him from the first call-up in 'thirty-nine. He later fled eastward, always a step ahead of the invading armies and, if he survived, he probably settled at last in Samarkand or in Tashkent. Leah followed Dora's example and married, but then her husband fell victim to some mental illness and she left him for a Polish student with whom she lived until the war separated them and make them bitter enemies. Benjamin, the baker's boy, who had a special talent for the violin, went the other way and moved in with a

fiery Polish actress for whom he composed maudlin love poems which he then set to music. Elijah volunteered for the army, but deserted when the war finally broke out to join the partisans instead. And Esther, Daniel's sister, the same whom we had teased and taunted for our amusement, the same who had grown more beautiful by the day and became the object of our affections and desires . . . Esther and I became aware of one another as individuals with common interests and similar enthusiasms, and, in the last spring before the war, when the sparrows reappeared and the blossoms opened, we were married. By that time you had already left the country.

Meanwhile, Daniel, too, had grown up, although apart from his outward appearance he had changed little. He had become tall and lean. His chin was pointed and above his prominent forceful nose sat those inevitable thin-rimmed glasses. He had graduated from high school – with high honours, as everyone had expected – but, owing to lack of money and the *numerus clausus* besides, he gave up all ambitions for the university and found work as a proof-reader with a publisher, while in the evenings, he edited a newspaper for a young group that had been formed in the wake of the threats which filtered in from Germany. Even while entrusted with this responsibility, he maintained his reticence. He shrank from his comrades and moved about awkwardly, a fish out of water. His arms seemed too long for him, his back arched forward, his shoulders drooped. He hid within himself. Yet from behind those spectacles, he saw everything; and his mind worked hard, exploring all manner of things in order to sift from them as much as a thread of reason or of justification for the terrible things – the slanders, the beatings and the deportations – that were reported from Germany.

He spoke little of these matters, even when Esther and I happened to interrupt him in the course of drafting an editorial or consulting a reference work. He let his writings be his mouthpiece. – Did you ever read anything he wrote, Ephraim? Fire, I tell you, fire. Every word seethed with emotion, every phrase raged with some innate passion. He sensed

that a war was coming and he appealed, with all the vehemence that a soul can contain, to the leaders to seek peace before the wrathful conflagration engulfed Europe entirely – these were his own words – and to cease indulging in self-interest, and to think of the people whose lives and welfare were entrusted to them. He quoted from Jeremiah and Job, invoked the writings of our rabbis, selected passages even from Christian writers whom he had read while still at school – Shakespeare, Mickiewicz, Tolstoy. He wrote of the destiny of mankind which could be a glorious one. And he wrote of every man's responsibility not to be moved by empty slogans promising victory and prosperity or, as he put it, promising the sun when the sun itself had been banished by the storms and clouds of our own making.

The news that came grew daily more terrible and more fantastic and we were seized by genuine fear and anxiety lest the threats that spoke of our annihilation would prove indeed to be true and not merely the vacuous words of a demented man. And the more fantastic the news items were, the more feverish became Daniel's activity and the more passionate his editorials and articles. Abroad, he noted, the leaders of governments were talking of peace and appeasement, yet on every side, nations were preparing for war. And he cited figures, quoted ministerial speeches and exposed what he saw as hypocritical or brazenly false.

Those of us who knew him and a few members of the young group for whom he wrote held Daniel up as our authority whenever we sought to make or drive home a point in discussion. But beyond this narrow circle, his newspaper enjoyed only a minute circulation and even that among people with no authority, no influence, no voice of their own. So in the end, Daniel spent his passion in a vacuum, and his anger and frustration passed unrewarded and unremarked and were merely fanned by the endless current of news that came into his keeping.

The war broke out in early autumn and we went into hiding, in a room on the outskirts of the city. There were six of us

- Esther and myself, Daniel, Simon, who, at the time, was already selling books, and two others, a Moshe Weisengrad and a Bruno Musikant, who earned their place by virtue of the fact that they worked with Daniel in the production of his newspaper. A seventh visited us frequently and stayed the night when he came. His name was Bransky. He was an assimilated type whom conscience as much as external events made him remember that he was a Jew, but who nonetheless managed to keep the company of gentiles, particularly of academics and of government officials. It was he who furnished much of the information which Daniel used in his newspaper.

Perhaps if Bransky had not come so frequently, Daniel would not have lost his self-control quite so readily. Perhaps it would have happened anyhow. But as the weeks passed by, a visible change was coming over Daniel. He was no more than twenty-one at the time, a weakling physically and always bowed as though by a heavy conscience. His brow perpetually knitted, his expression betrayed to us that our situation was far more threatening and perilous than we had even imagined. Gradually, he began to lose control over his thoughts and let slip isolated words and ideas that left us uncomfortable and anxious.

'There is much goodness in the world,' he said on one occasion, 'yet people insist on clouding its luminous face with evil. One man alone is needed to sweep the cloud away from the world.' And another time, when Bransky brought us the news that a massive plan was being devised to gather all the Jews of the city into a central ghetto, he burst forth with a fire quite out of keeping with his usual composed demeanour. 'We must prevent this. We must speak to those who will bring an end to this scheme.'

At first, he spoke in general terms, saying that someone must intercede in order to bring sanity to the world. And when he spoke in this way, we were on his side, though confined in hiding in a single room, we knew of no-one heroic or foolhardy enough to intercede in events which were out-

striding the comprehension and influence of the average man. But later, as it became more obvious that he himself was assuming the role of spokesman and saviour, every word struck like a stone and filled us with a fear both for him and for ourselves. For no man anywhere had the strength to alter the course of events. And further, if there were such a man, it seemed impossible that he would come from our midst.

Finally, when things kept moving relentlessly from bad to worse, he could take no more of the news in silence. His reticence collapsed and, in one long impassioned speech he declared that – let the winds howl and the sun scorch his back! – *he* was setting out for the front. There he would try to talk sense into those engaged in the fighting. The heads of government were beyond his range of influence. The common man might understand, might listen where others were deaf.

During the night, flaunting the curfew which had been imposed in that period, he crept out of hiding and sought out the house where he had earlier lived. He returned with two suitcases into which he had thrown together some clothing, a loaf of bread, a prayer-shawl, phylacteries and a prayer-book.

Daniel closed his mind to all reason. There was one thing only he now wished for. That was to leave. And none of us, neither I nor his sister, nor Simon, nor the two men Weisengrad and Musikant, could dissuade him.

'Is it martyrdom you are wanting?' we asked him.

'We have martyrs enough,' he replied, speaking in such a way that we saw before us the trainloads of victims being shuttled across the countryside to labour camps and crematoria.

'For whom are you doing this? Whom do you hope to save?'

'For myself alone. I can save no one else. To know that I have done my part is all I want. The peace I want is my own peace.'

'You are throwing away your life, deliberately, without reason!

'So be it then.' The light played around the rims of his spectacles and cast wide shadows around his eyes. He did not smile. He bore only an expression of resignation which, like a shrug of the shoulders, dispelled all self-doubts and hesitations and denied all attachments and debts. He locked his suitcases and tied a leather belt around each. Esther flung herself about his neck, and his body, already bowed, seemed to yield still further under her weight.

'Daniel! My brother! Think at least of us whom you're deserting for some personal madness.'

He did not answer, for such pleas were of no consequence and, besides, could not be answered.

So he went away before dawn, a solitary silhouette against the early light, and we never saw him again. Only his baggage returned several months later – two small suitcases containing a muddied prayer-shawl and phylacteries which had been neglected at some byway station where – so Weisengrad, who had met him again, informed us – he had set himself up on a straw-wagon and, waving a prayer-book and a Bible above his head, had called upon the people to abandon their fighting and to resist those in high places who sought to make of them their tools, their servants, their slaves. He followed the war-front wherever it moved, addressed the troops at every stopping-station, threw himself in the line of fire in every town. A few there were who listened to him, but, according to Weisengrad, he was met more often with mockery, derision and anger. They called him traitor, anarchist, renegade, Judas. They spat at him, beat him, rubbed his face in the mud. Finally, the authorities came and took him away.

What ultimately happened to him one can't even guess. One acquaintance wrote, stating that he had been exiled deep into Russian territory. Another, a Polish refugee, swore that Daniel had been executed by a firing-squad alongside a trench with fifty others, while another still is just as certain that he was delivered into enemy hands and ended his life in a labour camp.

A generation has passed since then, even more. I can only

surmise that Daniel has perished and his bones have decayed in some nameless grave covered over in spring with foliage and pasture and in winter with snow. And with him lie his desires, his ambitions, his frustrations. While for us, for Esther and myself, all that remains of him are grey and tattered photographs of a boy and, later, of a young man, standing awkward and withdrawn, a bent water-reed with arms too long for him and an expression impassive, almost remote. And there remain, too, flitting glimpses, memories, echoes which, in turn, focus clearly and recede, bringing with them painful wisps of nostalgia, of sadness, bitterness and regret.

Ephraim, do you remember too? . . .

cheder – literally, a room; a school for Jewish studies
rebbe – rabbi, teacher