

Isaac Alttseit — Liberator of the Jews

There was no mistaking the fact: it *was* smoke that he saw rising high and coming from the direction of the Institute. He saw it, smelled it, tasted it and was suddenly quickened by panic, fruit of a vaulting fear that if the Institute were indeed on fire, his very life's work would go up in flames. With the railway station now well behind him, he hastened his step, almost ran. Before him, beside him, behind him, others too were hurrying. Their breaths evaporated in the morning crispness, their shoulders brushed against his, and their feet rang on the cold and steely asphalt. There were among them old men, executives, teachers, housewives, children, delivery boys, such who were eternally awed and animated by every merest hint of disaster. And so, in a mass, they were borne along. But for him, there was more at stake and the scene made his flesh crawl beneath sweat that cloyed and tingled and chilled. For there was a manuscript to be saved, his *opus magnum*, indeed his very *raison d'etre*, left there in his office for final typing. And it meant still more, incalculably more. A people's very salvation was vested in it, the redemption of a nation errant in its ways and the liberation of a stiff-necked, regressed and fossilised folk that had to be shaken out of its existing enervated torpor and shown again the path to light and to a God in the past rejected and despised.

He saw, however, to his relief, that the fire came not from the Institute, but from the Civic Square behind it. Still, he

didn't slacken his pace; he couldn't slacken his pace. The swelling human tide drew him with it, as it had done on the previous night, buffeting him on as if between high banks along a single inescapable onward-rushing course. He heard the talk of the people around him, caught their laughter and felt again the galvanising pulsation of their excitement.

"Looks like we're in for another dose of good clean fun. . ."

"Lordie, did ya' see all that glass las' night? . . ."

"An' th'way that church o'theirs she went up. . . whoosh. . . jus' like the fires o' hell with all them li'l Abrahams an' Moseses in it? . . . God! . . ."

It was the neighbourhood *Shomrei ha'Shamayim Synagogue*, the *Watchers of the Heavens Synagogue*, that had the night before gone up like the fires of hell. He had reached the scene too late to see the actual fire. He had been caught up in the midst of another crowd, locked into another crush of spirited pranksters running along Fisherman Street, more familiarly known as Jerusalem Alley, hurling bricks and firewood through the windows of Unglik's butchery, Rachamim's pharmacy and Sofer Schreiber's bookstore. Buoyed by the excitement, by the near-delirium of the streaming maelstrom, he too had thrown a stone, with sure aim shattering the six-pointed star on the *Children of Zion Opportunity Store*, thereby earning for himself a clap on the back and an accolade from "Killer" Bluey the leader who had said, "Good on yer', Sport, yer' really one of us, aren't ya?" By the time, flushed and out of breath, he had arrived at the synagogue, it was all rubble, cinders, char and smoke, from which some of the more daring and enterprising had salvaged silver candelabra and pointers, finials, breast-plates and wine-cups as souvenirs. The Scrolls of the Law, meanwhile, were just so many embers in the gnarled black skeleton of the Ark, the podium was a gutted fragile scaffold, while what had been stained-glass mosaics high up along the walls and verging on the dome were now congealed, agglutinated warps of lead-lighting and opaqueness humbled in ash.

"They brought it on themselves," he had said to a by-stander

at the time. "They bring all their misfortunes on themselves. . . They so hard-headedly insist on remaining unchanging, and yet always and everywhere hold themselves to be so different from everyone else. . ."

His words returned to him now. Once before, when he had expressed them to Gabriel Heiligman, his fellow tutor in Psychology at the Institute, Gaby had branded him a traitor and a renegade, doing so, however, with shoulder-shrugging, mocking, dismissive banter as though his opinion was of no account; and for a time he had considered that he might indeed be wrong. But "No!" — he steeled himself against both retraction and remorse — "They do insist on separateness," he said, "they really do cherish the role of suffering, and they do revel and wallow in the mantle of the eternal victim."

Thus galvanised, he moved on in haste, heading in the direction of the Institute, but bent upon seeing first what was burning just beyond it.

He was crossing the street in front of the Institute when a large ruddy-cheeked fellow, a man in overalls and corduroy cap, turned, peered at him curiously, and said, "Hey, I know you. . . You're Ian New, aren't you? . . . I recognised you from that photo there in the *Preacher's Weekly*. . . Printed a whole article about you, they did. . . The only Jew, they said, who saw an' knew an' spoke the holy gospel truth 'round 'ere. . ."

He winced and was about to say "I am no longer what I was born", but the man had himself already hurried on ahead and become submerged in the now-condensing scampering mass that made towards some seemingly pre-ordained destination.

He had said it often before, but wished he could have made himself heard again. He *was* no longer that which he had been born. Isaac Alttseit had become Ian New. The old had been shed. In changing name and allegiance, he had felt himself reborn. He had not left the race, for race, a quality predicated on genetic inheritance, could not be escaped; nor had he left the creed, for Judaism, Jewishness — Lord, how the words brought the spittle to his mouth — was not exclusively creed; nor was it a people he had left, for in their dispersion and Occidental-

Oriental diversity, the Jews — those out there — could not be a single, pure people.

But what he *had* escaped was the *tendency of mind*, that peculiar regressed psychological structure to which the name Judaism could be given — yes, *that* was now behind him. It was from that stifling strait-jacket that he had liberated himself, from that sclerotic superstitious legalism, as also from its darkness and righteous arrogance, from the femaleness that was its ineluctable nature. Weininger, genius misjudged, misunderstood and despised, had yet been so right. Maleness and femaleness were in everyone, though to degrees that were variable. What was wholly male was positive, productive, it was logic, creativity, brilliance, genius, Being; what was female, however, was in turn, negative, it was subservience, dependence, imitativeness and non-Being. And such was the Jew — all femaleness, all worthlessness, and all mediocrity, just as Weininger had said. But were the Jew only to enter into baptism, were he to accept the light of the Gospels as his own and merge himself with his neighbours, then lord and master would he be over those archaic tendencies of his accursed Jewish mind; embracing truth — Truth — he would overcome the cramped constraints of his mental make-up; and, daring towards grand divinity, he might yet triumph over every retarded, retarding strain of his Judaism. Then, and only then, would the Jew have a rightful place in the world.

All this was detailed, explained and elaborated upon in his manuscript, *The Liberation of the Jews: Towards Masculinity and Transcendence*. The Jews, to whom it was addressed, would yet come to see the truth. They would yet come to recognise their persisting error and clamour before the Lord's altar to be redeemed. And in furnishing them with the splendour of the Gospel light by means of that work soon to become circulating text, he, Ian New, he, Isaac Altseit of the past, would yet come to be the Jews' redeemer. What was now Judaism, Woman, business, matter and all things negative would be transformed into Gospel, veracity, Man, culture, spirit and divinity, to which he, Messiah-like, would be the one to lead them.

The thought exhilarated him; and, exhilarated, he reached the outer rim of the Civic Square behind the Institute where a dense teeming tittering crowd had gathered and to which masses of others coming from all directions now converged. Where the way from the station had been cool, mist-laden and distinctly keen, on this wing of the neighbourhood, there was warmth, the warmth of human confluence, of condensing breath, and of nearby fires yielding smoke in the morning frostedness to reveal, through the interstices of its curlicues and coils, enlarging lakes of limpid blueness promising the calm and pleasantness of a fine and temperate day. Whatever the festivity that drew the crowd, the organisers had certainly set out on an early start. And that it *was* organised, he had no doubt. Not for nothing the concentric rings of benches and platforms rising as in a circus, or the turnstiles steadily admitting the arrivals into the inner arena, or the crowded kiosk and souvenir stands with the flapping flags, the pamphlets and the lapel badges reading "*Celebrate Today the True Day of Jewish Atonement*", "*Redeem, Redeem the Lost with Mercy and Compassion*", and "*Liberate Earth's Tortured Souls from Grievous Sin.*"

Given the motifs on the badges, what was taking place in the Civic Square was clearly something he had to attend. That it might not be pleasant — well, stiff cheddar! as the expression went.

Moving towards a turnstile, he was about to say to the attendant, "Certainly been efficiently arranged, all this", when he felt a touch upon his elbow, and, turning, saw "Killer" Bluey smiling at him, clearly unslept but electrically eager.

"Wondered whether ya' might come," he said, "whether we might be blessed with the pleasure of yer' company."

"Had you told me yesterday. . ."

"Yeh? Then? . . ."

"Then I should most certainly have made a point of coming, and of coming sooner. You know of my interest in these things. . ."

He caught Bluey's swift scrutiny.

“Yeah. . .,” Bluey said. “Reckon I could’a told ya’.
But. . .”

“But? . . .”

“Well, you know, Sport. . . In operations like these, the less that some folks they knows about it, the better. We ’ad t’make sure o’ no hitches gettin’ in the way. . . Or all the work’d be wasted. . .”

“Mercy, yes, I understand,” Ian New said, and nodded, though he wasn’t fully sure that he did.

He let it pass.

“Right,” said Bluey, “shall we go in? You c’n be my guest.”

What he saw as he entered reminded him of historical narratives he had read, and of prints and woodcuts he had seen, and of Hollywood extravaganzas issued by the score when the movie moguls passed through their lush, spectacular and sumptuously epic phase. In the centre was the arena, a throwback to the Roman Colosseum; around it were the rising tiers where the audience milled and swayed and pointed and applauded, all clearly entertained and galvanised by what was taking place below. Now and again, a full-throated clamour rose from their midst and whoops of delight counterpointing a cacophonous roar accompanied by victorious brandishings of fists aloft.

And what was taking place?

From where he stood, on a level with the arena itself, he saw forty, fifty, sixty mounds of kindling and firewood at the base of solid timber uprights. The backmost rows of them, those nearest the rear facade of the Institute, were aflame, the smoke swirling and thick before it thinned and vaporised into the sky, but what was burning he could not wholly determine.

From the smell, there was a suggestion that it might be flesh — it reminded him of a barbecue with a lamb on the spit — but he dismissed the notion as fanciful, the stuff of an over-ripe imagination nurtured on tales of Roman blood-sports, saintly martyrs, mediaeval *auto-da-fes* and the excesses of the wars in Armenia, Rusia and the Latin countries, and, reducing all of

these to mere skirmishes, the most recent apocalyptic ravages and wholesale despoliation of Europe.

"Ya' know, Sport?" said Bluey, leading the way to a more favourable observation point. "I don' unnerstan' a great deal of it, but I do admire yer writin's. One o' me buddies that helped organise this — we calls 'im 'Briansie' Blacklaw — 'e's got everythin' ya' ever wrote on th' Jews 'ose souls we're savin' today. 'E ain't one 'imself but 'e too 'as always 'ad a special interest in 'em. 'E says. . . 'e says. . . well, 'e says jus' what you're always sayin' an' 'e says that even if y'are one of 'em, ya' does make a lot o' sense, yeah, a lot o' sense, 'cause you're speakin' from the inside an' *really* knows. . ."

Ian New was about to say, "I don't consider myself one of them anymore", when, on the wing of the arena, beside a makeshift race flanked by a formation of uniformed youngsters who reminded him of schoolboy Cadets, Bluey laid a hand upon his forearm.

"Let's stop 'ere, eh?" Bluey said. "The nex' lot's comin' up. . ."

And indeed, a straggly file emerged from the race — three men, two women, two adolescents and a child, accompanied by attendants who, soldier-like and expertly drilled, bore rifles against their shoulders.

Among the emergent group, Ian New recognised Rabbi Geist who had publicly proclaimed him a turncoat and a calamity upon everything decent in the local *Weekly Jewish Tribune*; he recognised Gaby Heiligman, his mocking, bantering colleague from the Institute; he recognised Mrs Goodwach, his one-time neighbour who, whenever she saw him, turned away; then Raphaela Meyerowich, the sweet-heart of his adolescent years who had thwarted him with a stinging "You have warped ideas, you have. There's a devil in you trying to get out"; and young Sammy Landsleit who had let his dog snap and leap at him and tear his coat. Something of the earlier anger against each was now rekindled and he set his jaws to marbled firmness and tasted venom on his tongue when Bluey beside him said, "Say, Sport, do ya' wanna do somethin' for us?"

Without being told, he knew what was being asked of him. There was no mistaking it. He could tell as soon as he saw each in that ragged procession led to a separate mound, there, all protest, resistance and writhing futile, to be bound with cords to the upright stakes. The enormity of the request, its very brazenness, as also its extraordinarily underplayed delivery, made his pulse leap to throbbing and the blood rush to his temples and brow, causing there a gathered perspiration to sting and chill and prickle as before.

“You know what you are asking of me?”

Bluey flicked a wrist with a nonchalant devil-may-care dismissive gesture.

“Yeah,” he said languidly. “Shouldn’ be too hard, Sport. It’s all a logical progression, as Brainsie’ll tell ya’. Lordie, if ya’ c’n write such mighty stuff about them Jews o’ yours, an’ then if ya’ c’n throw stones through their winda’s like ya’ done yesserdy, then what’s so hard ’bout takin’ the nex’ step an’ lightin’ a match? . . .”

“But it’s their *lives* you’re asking me to take. . .”

Bluey shook his head.

“What’s their lives when it’s their souls that we’re redeem-in’, like you yourself’re always writin’ an’ talkin’ ’bout? I heard ya’ meself, with m’own ears b’fore the *Society for the Propagation o’ Spiritual Truth*, an’ I read ya’, with m’own eyes, in y’letters to th’papers, in *The Preacher’s* an’ them other pieces o’ yours, *Race an’ the mould of th’Jewish mind* an’ *The fallacies o’ peoplehood*, an’ . . . an’ . . . oh, yeah, th’best o’ them. . . *Archaisms r’visited: th’Jews in our time*. Didn’ unnerstan’ it all, like I tol’ ya’, but Lordie, I recognise th’truth when I sees or ’ears it. . . An’ believe me, none of us, not even Brainsie, could put what you’ve been sayin’ any better. . . B’sides. . .” — Bluey turned to him square-on — “b’sides. . . are ya’ t’go back to bein’ Altseit again or to remainin’ New like we ’as come t’know ya’?”

The logic, harsh to be sure, was not without validity. Unless one were to draw lines. But then where would one halt, where say “Thus far will I go, but beyond — even at the price of my life, no”? What were the limits of acceptability before acts

became obscenity, or of responsibility before being transmuted to culpability? — But were one to change the perspective and look at the matter in another way, even if only for a blinking. In the world, in the *real* world, that is, where obscenity exceeded decency, where terror, mass graves and nuclear blackmail had become the norm, and where casualties in wars and revolutions ran daily into thousands, and over a year into millions, how vile in fact was the lighting of a single pyre, or two, or, for that matter, eight or ten or twenty? And if such an act would rid society of a problem that through history had become cankerous and more devastatingly murderous, then if such act were indeed evil, might there not be times when evil itself could be deemed a virtue? Besides, evil was never absolute; it was always relative to greater or lesser improprieties along an expansive spectrum. And as a last point: if he were being asked to act against his own folk — truth was that they were not any longer, except in name perhaps, they were not any longer his own; the disowning had been mutual and Rabbi Geist had more than once proposed formal excommunication which in a former age would certainly have been a viable demand, but one that, in establishing experiential kinship between himself and Spinoza and Acosta, would have made him wholly proud.

Clearly, Rabbi Geist maintained his enmity towards him to the very end. Looking down from the stake as he, Ian New, set match to the kindling, and draped in his prayer-shawl, phylacteries and skull-cap, his face long and severe and deeply etched, the rabbi said, “I shall die with honour, but you, if you live, will smoulder with shame; I will die with the *Sh'ma* on my lips, but you will rot together with Satan’s slime.” Gaby Heiligman at the next post jeered, “It’s neither more nor less than I should have expected of you and your kind”; Raphaela huffed, “So the devil in you has finally shown himself, I only wonder that he took so long”; Mrs Goodwach simply spat in his face; Sammy Landsleit stared at him with wild and hateful eyes; while the other three, strangers to him all, only urged him to move quickly to do his meanest, that their end may be more swift.

Having set all the pyres blazing, he turned away; he had to

turn away, for a lifting swirl of wind blew the smoke into his face. His eyes smarted, his breath constricted, and the rancid, fulsome smell and taste of singed and scorching flesh brought his stomach to his throat. He thought he might vomit there and then in the very middle of the Square before the whole assemblage, but the offensive wave of nausea passed, the sweat on his brow subsided, and all that swam and shimmered and swirled before him regained firm anchorage and fixity. His feet restored to *terra firma*, he walked back towards "Killer" Bluey. Behind him, he thought he heard Mrs Goodwach shriek out her last; a brief truncated wail followed from the Landsleit child; a last *Sh'ma* from the burning rabbi; a contemptuous snarl from Gaby Heiligman; and a final curse, more of a jeer, from his one-time unrequiting sweetheart Raphaëla. But the thrust and penetration of these became quickly submerged, absorbed into the louder, rowdier clamour of the spectators, and overshadowed by their laughter, their cheering and their exultatory cries.

"There he goes, their holy rabbi, whoof, see that puff of smoke," called out one of their number; "They sure make good tinder fer' burnin'," added another; while a third said, "Reckon I might get meself a Jew or two o' me own for me incinerator."

Rabbi Geist's curse hung over Ian New, as did the taunts of Gaby and Raphaëla, but on reaching Bluey who made everything seem so right, he shrugged them off. Perhaps there *was* shame in what he had done, perhaps he *would* rot, but done was done and the world would still go on. If by his action, he had added any evil to that world, then against the far greater realities to which it was daily witness, such evil was of the minutest proportions. Eight souls out of millions — indeed out of thousands of millions — these were a mere pittance. The most modest landslide or earth tremor would in one hit claim a hundredfold more. And besides, he had only done that which would, by default, have been given to another to perform. If there was any blood on his hands, it was no less than on the hands of those who had bidden him light the match. They were

the true instigators; in the end, theirs was the crime. Seen in this way, he was clean, he was absolved, he was immune from guilt; there was none who could point an accusing finger at him, or hold him to account, or demand from him penitence of any sort.

Drawing abreast of Bluey, he said, however, "I never thought I'd become a public executioner."

He saw Bluey eye him with more studied scrutiny.

"Ya' knows somethin', Sport," he said. "You became executioner o' them folk o' yours long ago, long b'efore *we* ever done. . ."

"Oh?"

"Like Brainsie 'e says, 'Logic. . .it's the logic o' the situation. When ya' wrote that firs' letter o' yours in the paper agains' them, 'gains' yer' people, y'became their executioner. . ."

"But they're not mine anymore, Bluey. You know that. You yourself said last night, 'You're really one of us, aren't you?'"

"Yeah, I did say that. . . But we been talkin' some more, Brainsie an' me an' th'others. An' we comes t'hold that how ya' sees yer' Jews an' how ya' sees yerself, that's yer' own affair. To you, I knows it from yer' writin's, bein' a Jew is bein' a structure or a mould or a make-up o' mind that like a skin y'has seen fit t'shed. That's all right, Sport, but to us, you is anythin' we choose ya' t'be. . . that is, race *an'* creed *an'* nation *an'*, the thanks to you, structure or mould o' mind. . . So, man, whatever y're t'yerself, t'us ya' always remains th'same. . . What y're born, ya' stays an' yer' destiny remains that that ya' been born inta'. . . Believe me, Sport, we thought 'bout th'matter long an' hard an' that's th'verdic' we come ta' we that organised this gran' public showin' o' salvation. . . An' I knows what y're thinkin' — an' I'm truly sorry t'say it — but the gates's closed now an' y'ain't leavin', I'm sorry, Sport, but y'ain't leavin', save as a soul goin' t'wherever yer' Maker he be waitin' t'receive ya', as with yer' rabbi an' yer' sweetie an' all o' them others that're today goin' the way o' the saved. . . An', yeah, b'lieve me, I am

sorry, I did like ya', but y'know 'ow it is, if we let one o' yer's go, then. . ."

There was no escape. The gates, though still admitting spectators, were indeed closed against egress. Armed uniformed attendants stood before them, as did other guards at intervals around the perimeter of the arena. Ian New was caught; he was trapped; he was snared; he was also caught, trapped and snared, as Bluey had said, by a logic taken to its full conclusion.

Above him and all around, the crowd in its movement seemed congealed to a dense gelatinous and faceless polychromatic mass; in the arena stood the humped and malignant wood-piled mounds, the rearmost ones still smouldering with Lord alone knew whose ashes, those he had himself ignited still blazing in the centre, while, nearer still, another formation of shuffling, sullen mortality, a mother with her baby and a club-footed Institute student among them, was being hustled forward towards the next grim tier of waiting stakes.

With the heat of it all touching his face, Ian New looked at Bluey, and at the guards, the stands, and, beyond them, at the sky now more shimmeringly, more gloriously blue, save where the smoke, as if in quest of Jerusalem, was being driven eastward by an impetuous wind. Not he, he saw now, not he, Ian New, with his urgings, importunings and tirades directed at the Jews, was to be deliverer. Death, rather, had stronger claim to the messianic mantle. Nor — this, too, he saw now — had he, for all his labours, been in possession of that hallowed light and gospel truth. The reality was all too clear, and he would have had to be wilful, blind or obtuse to deny it. What he had perceived as brilliance when pitted against the worn sclerosis of Judaism was, at base, nothing other than murky primevalism; what had seemed maleness and creativity proved, at root, nothing less than dour destructiveness; and what had seemed genius and positiveness crumbled into a ravenous penchant and proclivity for diabolical evil.

It seemed to him so right then, so natural, so reasonable to be led by Bluey and Brainsie to a waiting stake plumb in the heart of the arena.

Meanwhile, at the Institute, on his desk, lay his manuscript, his life's work, his *opus magnum*. It only awaited his secretary to type it. And type it she would. Whether or not he was there, she would do it. For there were numbers in plenty — “Killer” Bluey and “Brainsie” Blacklaw not the least among them — who would wish to see it done and brought into the light and disseminated among the nations to give sanction and spur to more rampages, devastation and Jew-burnings everywhere. And though that work was scarcely a score of breaths away, it was yet eons, light-years beyond his reach. It simply lay there waiting to be typed, waiting for those who had till then been his companions to bring it into the open, the consummation of which nothing could be more certain — nothing except the inescapable truth that, in a denouement hateful, despised and in his wildest dreams unforeseen, he too would soon, too soon, join his kin and perish, crumble to ashes and rise up in smoke, no longer the Ian New he had sought forever to be, but the Isaac Altseit which, through a logic inexorable, violent and perverse, and which he himself had set in train, he was yet again, as upon his birth, to become.