The Ghetto of T-

At the tiny terminal of T-, I stepped down briskly from the airplane and, after paying my fare to a pleasant red-cheeked fellow in a peaked cap, I took my seat on the coach. There were perhaps twenty tourists on the bus and twelve locals. We passed fields, forests, farms. We crossed a viaduct built by ancient Romans. We saw a number of villas, a cemetery, churches. The driver maintained steady patter in an eloquent, if somewhat accented, English and reminded us of what the city, his city, had to offer – a lush profusion of art-treasures, exquisite glass – and leather-ware, superbly-ornamented Renaissance palaces and churches and, above all, the charming hospitality of his people. We would be delighted by T-, of that he was certain.

The driver took us through the modern sector, with its wide streets and imposing edifices of concrete and glass, of which he wasn't too proud, and swung into a narrow cobbled street along which we bounced towards the City Square. Here, we disembarked and separated. All was activity. The Spring weather, pleasantly mild, brought all manner of people out of doors. The Square and its branching lanes were filled with tourists, porters, postcard-vendors, photographers, working-folk and children. Pigeons flew over the rooftops; the hubbub of passers-by rose to meet them. And, looking about me in the fragile glow, I was in good humour.

I arrived on a Friday afternoon, an hour before sunset. Shadows were lengthening. The Sabbath was approaching.

And though not observant at home, a wave of sentiment towards things Jewish and historical drew me to visit the one-time ghetto of the city.

Following the signs nailed upon the grey stone walls at the northern end of the city, I passed under low-lying arches and between sun-starved lanes towards the ghetto. On both sides, stood drab stolid buildings of five or six flights, their entrances buttressed with heavy steel-enforced doors, their windows barred. The number of people with guide-books and cameras diminished. The sounds of living receded and, as if suddenly, I was in the heart of the ghetto. I found myself in a courtyard of cobblestone and shadow where there stood two wells and a bronze tap from which water dribbled upon the stone at its base. No-one was to be seen and there lingered the hollow silence of a temple. Only the dripping tap disturbed the calm, and a cat licking its paws in a doorway.

Here, Jews had once lived, I thought. I sought out the doorposts. No mezuzoth. Not even the signs – the paler slanting rectangular markings in the beams – of their one-time presence. Nor any name that was meaningful or that could evoke an echo of recognition in my mind. My good humour seeped away into the all-pervading darkness of the square. And the fragile glow that had earlier rested over T- had splintered completely before the leaden shadows, the gloom and the silent twilight. Here, Jews had once lived. I sought still other signs, but found none.

Yet I stayed, a needle to a magnet. Or rather, the ghetto held me. Its odours – of soup on the stove and fish on the grille – its occasional hollow sounds, its haunting austerity held me. I could get no further than the lanes immediately arising from the courtyard. Back and forth I paced before these stolid buildings, trying to extract the very essence from all that remained there. A few women in long black cotton dresses, carrying overladen baskets crossed the yard. They talked loudly and giggled. Their voices lingered after them in withering echoes and then these faded to leave behind once more a solemn silence.

The sombre greyness of the quarter yielded to darkness.

One by one, lights appeared at the windows. I wondered whether any of them might be Sabbath lights.

As I stood there, a man emerged from a house. He wore a hat and carried a book under his arm. He stooped as he walked. If this were a Jew, how self-conscious he appeared. I followed him. He walked briskly, clinging to the shadows as he moved along lanes, under arches and through gateways. I lost sight of him in the darkness but was guided by the sound of his steps. Then a door opened and closed on squealing hinges and even the footsteps were gone. I was standing in a small alcove. I explored my surroundings and found myself barely twenty metres from the original courtyard. The window shutters had been closed and the only lights which emerged where fugitive streaks escaping through narrow chinks around the shutters. I heard again the tap dripping in the square.

Above, a crescent moon encircled by a halo of stars idled between opposing rooftops. Lowering my gaze, I caught something familiar - an arc of Hebrew script engraved into stone over a double doorway. 'Blessed may you be in your coming,' it read, and my memory completed the verse, 'and blessed may you be in your going.'

A synagogue. I saw light within.

I knocked on the door and waited.

From a window overhead, a dry croaking voice responded.

'E aperto.'

I pushed against the heavy door and entered a narrow anteroom filled with mustiness, shadow and dust. I covered my head. A stooped man, wizened and sallow, his skin stretched taut over angular bone and his white hair in disarray, limped down the staircase.

'Vieni, vieni,' he beckoned. He was as old as Adam.

On the walls hung frayed and faded tapestries, sagging under the weight of age and dust. A chandelier of crystal and tarnished silver offered a dull light and ill-defined shadow rested upon all things. A soft murmur came from nearby. I followed my guide. Behind the stairs, he opened a door, stood to one side and, placing a bony finger to his dry lips, motioned

me to enter with a movement of the head.

Ten men stood within – the rabbi and nine others. They were facing the Ark, their backs turned to me. Tall flaking windowless walls and a high vaulted ceiling enclosed the room. In a humming undertone, the rabbi led the prayer. His adherents hummed with him, their lips barely moving.

As I entered, each man in turn turned his head towards me, subjected me to swift scrutiny, nodded and returned to his prayers. Perhaps I was interpreting too much, but I could not dispel the air of sadness and world-weariness that marked their faces and sat on their shoulders. Had the Temple been destroyed a third time, they could not have been more disconsolate.

A boy of Bar-Mitzvah years approached me, opened a prayer-book and pointed to the place. The congregation was reciting the Kabbalat Shabbat. The boy leaned towards me and said something which I did not understand.

'Perhaps Yiddish?', I asked, 'or Hebrew, or English?'

He shrugged his shoulders, then pointing to the rabbi, he said, 'Nonno mio, speak Inglese bene.'

The rabbi, too, like my guide, wore the years of Adam. He had obviously once been tall but was now slightly bowed. Deep furrows marked his cheeks and brows. His lips were thin, his chin worn almost to a point. He prayed with his eyes shut, rocking gently.

My companion stood constantly beside me, turning for me the pages of my prayer-book.

When the service finished, the worshippers gathered up their prayer-books, shook hands and wished one another a good Sabbath. But they did not leave. Instead, they lingered on in twos and threes, speaking quietly, almost self-consciously. For, between their words and remarks, they turned their heads in my direction and extracted from me with their gaze whatever they sought to find. Awkward among strangers, I prepared to leave. But as I reached the door, the rabbi, coming down from the platform, stopped me with a raised hand.

'My friend,' he said, in English. 'My friend, it is the Sabbath, the holy day of rest for God and man. If He can rest, what is your haste?'

His hands were bony, the sockets of his eyes were deep.

'Where is your home?'

'Melbourne,' I answered. 'Australia. Far away.'

'Far away. Far away. The words of dreamers who believe that the further they travel, the finer their discoveries, the more profound their experiences. True happiness is always at home – but it is healthy to be a dreamer.'

Then his tone changed as he drew closer. His coat smelled of mothballs.

'You have already travelled far and, with God's help, you will travel much further still. But tell me, are you visiting perhaps the Holy Land, Jerusalem?'

He wanted only one answer.

'Yes,' I said, 'God willing.'

'If you will it and it is good, then God wills it.'

The men remaining in the synagogue gathered about the rabbi and nodded at all that he said, though their inappropriate expressions betrayed their failure to understand our conversation.

A man, his hair closely cropped and his nose overlarge, leaned over to whisper into the rabbi's ear. The rabbi transmitted the message.

'Yakov begs you to send him a small parcel of holy soil to him. A year ago, he asked this favour of another traveller, but he has still received nothing.'

I promised to fulfil his request. The man's eyes and lips made a separate unuttered plea, but they seemed at the same time sceptical of my sincerity.

One by one, the congregation departed. It was well into the evening. I was hungry. My original guide thrust his head through the doorway, saw that the synagogue was not yet ready for closing and vanished again; while, by my side, the rabbi's grandson stood, listening. Only the three of us remained.

'Do you have time?', the rabbi asked.

I nodded.

'Of course,' he said, smiling so that the point of his nose and his chin came close. 'For matters concerning God and His people, one must have time. Come! We have a little museum here. You have seen many things already, I know. But come, let me show you more.'

From the prayer-room, we walked up the stairs and along a corridor, the rabbi ahead, the boy close behind. From darkness into deeper darkness we passed, through mustiness and shadow and more dust, until at the end of the corridor, he opened a door and all was light again, for a lamp was burning in the room. I wondered then whether this lamp burned every Sabbath, awaiting the stray tourist who passed this way. How many visitors did indeed come here?

There were three glass showcases in the room, two against the walls and one in the centre. In the corners stood ornate Torah cases on mahogany pedestals.

'Do you see this?', the rabbi asked. 'A Sefer Torah case from the fifteenth century. Look, look upon the immaculate woodwork, the firmness of touch which executed it, the rhythm of the lines and reliefs. A work truly wrought by love and dedication. Its creator, may his memory be blessed, worked upon it for seven years, then died within a month of its completion. The Malach Hamavet permits each man but one perfect deed or work in his life.'

'And this Torah crown,' he said, moving to another case, 'pure, precious silver. For three centuries, it sat upon the Sefer Torahs in the Ark until a heretic, may his name be expunged, flung it to the ground. Since then, it has not been in the Ark nor sat upon any scroll in T-.'

He was reciting legends of long ago.

I asked him, 'What has happened to the people of this ghetto?'

The walls and showcases may have heard, but not the rabbi.

'My friend, examine this tapestry. It will warm your heart. What do you see?'

The tapestry was largely faded. Lacklustre patches covered one-time rents.

I sought out those things he wanted me to see.

'I see mountains', I said. 'I see mountains, valleys, terraces, forests, and in the valleys and along the slopes, there are people, pilgrims I suppose, all facing the peak where there is a walled city. That can only be Jerusalem.'

'Jerusalem,' the rabbi repeated. 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.' He placed an arm on my shoulder. It was surprisingly strong. 'You do not know how blessed you are to be on the threshold of breathing that city's air. I too travelled in my younger days – indeed, I was forced to travel to survive – and passed through many countries. When the War ended, I returned to T- and Jerusalem I did not see. Perhaps he, my grandson, is destined to reach it. But come further, my friend, over here.'

He showed me other things – shofars, silver breadplates, pointers, illuminated Tenachs - and told me other anecdotes.

But he was showing me the yesterdays, the remains of centuries long gone.

I asked him again, 'What happened to the people of this ghetto?'

We were leaving the museum, this graveyard of legends. The smell of the corridor, in all its mustiness and mildew, returned. The old sexton, my guide, must have left. Only our steps on the hollow floor disturbed the stillness around us.

Downstairs, again, at the entrance to the prayer-hall, the rabbi paused.

'Twice you have asked me the same question. Before you think to ask it a third time, I will answer you. But a man of seventy and more must rest when he talks of weighty matters. Come, let us return here.'

The synagogue, in its emptiness, seemed surprisingly less haunted than it had been during prayer. As the rabbi sat down, the lines on his face smoothened. The boy and I sat on either side of him.

'We were a fine people once,' he began.

He paused. His gaze rested upon the Eternal Light before the Ark.

'Once. Artists, financiers, actors, printers, poets. Their names I need not tell you. A traveller sees and hears many things and forgets much of what he has learned. Remember only that those years, five, six, seven generations ago were the best we have known, the most perfect. But perfection – this you have already learnt tonight – is a one-time achievement only; for men and nation alike.'

He spoke on as if delivering an elegy to times past.

'The later years are merely a chronicle of decline. Wars, military adventurism, defeat, economic ruin, a loss of confidence and balance for both nation and Jew. We found ourselves portrayed as usurers, Christ-killers, kidnappers of infants. You know the tale, I am sure. Then the ghetto, the high walls, the barred windows, the reinforced doors behind which our grandfathers often trembled between zemiroth and prayers for the Messiah to lead us home.'

He passed the back of his bony hand across his brow, heaved deeply and said, 'We were a fine people once. Now we are dust. Who knows the will of the Almighty?'

'Why does this community live so much in the past?', I ventured at this stage. 'Your synagogue, your museum, all those artefacts, your anecdotes – they are the stuff of the past. Of your present and your future not a word. Everything is woven of bleakness, gloom, even . . . even despair.'

The rabbi turned hard eyes upon me.

'Despair? Bite your tongue, my friend. Despair disowns God. We dare not despair.'

'Then?'

'Had we despaired, everything here would have been woven not of bleakness and gloom, but of apostasy, decay and death. There would have been no Jews left here. But we returned and waited and prayed. And now that our people have a home again, in Jerusalem, our hope has been strengthened – not weakened – but strengthened beyond measure.'

'If you have such love for Jerusalem, why don't you leave T-?'

'Always the same question. Why do we not leave?'

Pangs of hunger were gnawing at me. 'What is it,' I said, 'that stops you from leaving tomorrow or the day after?'

'And to leave is such a simple thing? A mere matter of packing bags? To leave the homes of our fathers, to dishonour them . . . '

'Dishonour them?'

The rabbi was looking straight at me. I wavered under his intense scrutiny.

'Tell me, my young friend. Is a Jew permitted to take a vow?'

'To my knowledge, vows are permissible, excepting those involving sacrifice and death.'

'Our fathers, two or three generations ago, made such a vow. They took upon themselves the burden of the Diaspora. So long as any Jew remains outside the Holy Land, so long shall we remain here. We shall be the last to return. This was their vow which is ours to honour. And it is this vow which sustains us.'

'But why you?'

'The reason we no longer know. Nor does it matter. So long as we look to the future, to the day when all Jews will be in the Holy Land . . . '

'The day will never come,' I said with a vehemence bolstered by hunger.

'The day *will* come,' he answered, his chin trembling in defiance, an old man defending his faith. 'The day will come and when we make the pilgrimage to the Land of the Covenant, then we shall know that the Messiah has arrived.'

Had he held his eyes closed and swayed like a man possessed, I would have accepted that he was in a trance or in the hold of some fantastic dream. But he was awake, alert, his eyes alight.

'These are delusions,' I wanted to say. I saw machines reducing the ghetto to rubble, then clearing away the debris as there rose over it edifices of concrete and glass which paid no heed to aging men and eccentric vows. 'Delusions,' I wanted

to say. 'You live for a day that will never come, that can never come. A generation will pass, two, and this community will fade away, without obituary, without tears, without notice. And not even the signs on the walls will remain. And there will come a time when your vow will be broken. Not because the Messiah has arrived, but simply because this community will vanish into oblivion and no children will remain here to study the Law or to guide a stranger in prayer.'

But I preferred not to hurt. I said instead, 'If you will it, God wills it.'

'Yes, God wills it.'

It was late. The rabbi's grandson was asleep, curled like a cat upon the bench. The rabbi lapsed into silence. I had no more questions to ask. I wanted to be outside, in the certainty of wind and stars and nocturnal darkness, in the nest of palpable reality. I stood up to leave. The rabbi accompanied me out of the prayer-room. He was grimacing with some private physical pain. Once again I passed beneath the chandelier of crystal and silver, walked along the corridor and looked for a last time over the frayed and faded tapestries sagging from age and dust along the walls. Decay covered all things like a cruel shroud.

'Also from the fifteenth century?' I asked, not knowing what else to say.

The rabbi opened the door for me. The night was unexpectedly alight. The crescent moon, caught between the rooftops and surrounded by a cluster of stars, glowed like Sabbath candles. A breeze, bearing with it the smell of the sea, blew through the lanes. No lights shone in the windows. The ghetto slept. From the courtyard came the sound of water dripping upon stone.

As I was about to turn away, the rabbi grasped my hand and clenched it between his own dry and quivering palms. His face was mournful. They may have been tears that glittered in his eyes.

'Please, my friend. Tell the world about us. Tell them that we are waiting, waiting for them to absolve us from our vow. Tell them.'