



THE EMPEROR OF LIES

A Novel

Steve Sem-Sandberg

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Steve Sem-Sandberg

Translated from the Swedish by Sarah Death



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MAP OF THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO



Litzmannstadt Ghetto 1940–1944

Some streets in the ghetto,
with their Polish and German names

Bałucki Rynek – Baluter Ring (Bałuty Square)
Plac Kościelny – Kirchplatz (Church Square)
Radogoszcz – Radegast

Bazarna/Bazarowa Street – Basargasse
Bracka Street – Ewaldstrasse
Brzezińska Street – Sulzfelderstrasse
Ceglana Street – Steinmetzgasse
Ciesielska Street – Bleicherweg
Czarnieckiego Street – Schneidergasse
Drewnowska Street – Holzstrasse
Drukarska Street – Zimmerstrasse
Dworska Street – Matrosengasse
Franciszkańska Street – Franzstrasse
Gnieźnieńska Street – Gnesenerstrasse
Jagiellońska Street – Bertholdstrasse
Jakuba Street – Rembrandtstrasse
Karola Miarki Street – Arminstrasse
Łagiewnicka Street – Hanseatenstrasse
Limanowskiego Street – Alexanderhofstrasse
Lutomierska Street – Hamburgerstrasse
Marysińska Street – Siegfriedstrasse
Mickiewicza Street – Richterstrasse
Młynarska Street – Mühlgasse
Pieprzowa Street – Pfeffergasse
Podrzeczna – Am Bach
Próżna Street – Leeregasse
Rybna Street – Fischgasse
Szkłana Street – Trödlergasse
Urzędnicza Street – Reiterstrasse
Wesoła Street – Lustigergasse
Zagajnikowa Street – Bernhardstrasse
Zgierska Street – Hohensteinerstrasse

Memorandum

Łódź, 10 December 1939

Confidential

Classified

Establishment of a Ghetto in the City of Łódź

There are, at a reasonable estimate, some 320,000 Jews living in the city of Łódź today. This number cannot all be evacuated simultaneously. A thorough study undertaken by the relevant authorities has shown it would be impossible for them all to be concentrated in a single, closed ghetto. In due course the Jewish question will be solved as follows:

- 1) All Jews living north of the line marked by 11 Listopada Street, Plac Wolności and Pomorska Street must be placed in a sealed ghetto, ensuring firstly that a strong German centre around Independence Square (Plac Wolności) is free of Jews, and secondly that this ghetto can also be extended to the northern parts of the town already inhabited exclusively by Jews.
- 2) Able-bodied Jews who live in other parts of Łódź will be organised into special labour units and housed in barracks under close supervision.

Preparations for and implementation of this plan are to be the responsibility of a staff consisting of representatives of the following:

1. NSDAP (the German National Socialist Workers' Party)
2. The Łódź representative in the Government Presiding Committee in Kalisz
3. The Łódź City housing, employment and public health departments
4. The Schutzpolizei, responsible for local law and order
5. The security police
6. The Death's-Head Units (SS forces)
7. The Offices of Trade and Industry
8. The Offices of Finance

The authorities will also take the following preliminary measures:

- 1) Assess the action required to close off streets and barricade entrances and exits from buildings, cetera.
- 2) Assess the resources required to position guards around the perimeter of the ghetto.

- 3) Hold ready material from the Administrative Development Agency for the closure of the ghetto.
- 4) ~~Make preparations to ensure health-care provision in the ghetto – particularly the prevention of epidemics – by transfer of drugs and medical equipment.~~
- 5) Draw up regulations for future removal of refuse and waste from the ghetto and transportation of dead bodies to the Jewish cemetery, or for setting up a similar burial site within the ghetto.
- 6) Be equipped to supply the amount of fuel required by the ghetto.

As soon as these initial measures have been taken and a sufficiently large security force is available, we will fix a date for the implementation of the ghetto scheme, i.e. at a given point in time the boundaries, as specified in advance, will be manned by guards and the streets will be sealed with barbed wire and other obstructions. At the same time, house fronts will be walled up or otherwise blocked off by workers within the ghetto. Inside the ghetto, Jewish self-government will be established. This will consist of an Eldest of the Jews and an expanded community council (*kehila*).

The Department of Food Distribution in the City of Łódź will supply the ghetto with food and fuel, which will be transported to designated places within it where they will be given into the charge of the Jewish administration. The scheme will operate on the principle that the ghetto can only pay for its provisions and fuel with goods, fabrics, textiles and other such items. Thus we will extract from the Jews all the valuables they have misappropriated and amassed.

Other parts of the city will be searched so that all Jews unfit for work can be transferred to the ghetto immediately it is in operation, or very soon afterwards. Those Jews fit for work will be placed in special labour units in supervised barracks constructed by the City authorities and security police.

With reference to the above, the following conclusion is to be drawn. All Jews placed in special labour units who prove unfit for work or fall ill must be transferred to the ghetto. Those Jews inside the ghetto who are still able-bodied must carry out whatever work is required within the ghetto itself. We shall reach a decision later about the extent to which able-bodied Jews are to be moved from the ghetto to the labour barracks.

Naturally, the establishment of the ghetto is only a temporary measure. I reserve the right to decide when and how the City of Łódź is to be purged of Jews. The ultimate aim must be to burn away this infectious abscess entirely, once and for all.

[signed]

Übelh

PROLOGUE

The Chairman Alone

(1-4 September 1942)

*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might;
for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom,
in the grave, whither thou goest.*

Ecclesiastes 9:10

That was the day, engraved for ever in the memory of the ghetto, when the Chairman announced in front of everyone that he had no choice but to let the children and old people of the ghetto go. Once he had made his proclamation that afternoon, he went to his office on Bałuty Square and sat waiting for higher powers to intervene to save him. He had already been forced to part with the sick people of the ghetto. That only left the old and the young. Mr Neftalin, who a few hours earlier had called the Commission together again, had impressed on him that all the lists must be completed and handed over to the Gestapo by midnight at the latest. How then could he make it clear to them what an appalling loss this represented for him? *For sixty-six years I have lived and not yet been granted the happiness of being called Father, and now the authorities demand of me that I sacrifice all my children.*

Had any one of them an inkling of how he felt at this moment?

(‘What shall I say to them?’ he had asked Dr Miller when the Commission met that afternoon, and Dr Miller had extended his ravaged face across the table, and on his other side Judge Jakobson, too, had looked him deep in the eyes, and they had both said:

Tell them the truth. If nothing else will do, you’ll have to tell them that.

But how can there be Truth if there is no Law, and how can there be any Law if there is no longer any World?)

With the voices of the dying children roaring in his head, the Chairman reached for the jacket Miss Fuchs had hung up for him on the hook on the wall of the barrack hut, fumbled with the key in the lock and had scarcely opened the door when the voices overpowered him again. But there was no Law standing outside his office door, and no World either, merely what remained of his personal staff in the form of half a dozen clerks exhausted by lack of sleep, with the tireless Miss Fuchs at their head, neatly dressed on this day as on all others in a freshly ironed, blue-and-white-striped blouse, with her hair in a chignon.

He said:

If the Lord had intended to let this, His last city, go under, He would have told me. At the very least He would have given me a sign.

But his staff just stared back uncomprehendingly:

Mr Chairman, they said, we are already an hour late.

*

The sun was as it usually is in the month of Elul, a sun like the approaching Judgement Day, a sun that was a thousand needles piercing your skin. The sky was as heavy as lead, without a breath of wind. A crowd of some fifteen hundred people had gathered in front of the fire station. The Chairman often made his speeches there. On other occasions it was curiosity that brought people to listen. They came to hear the Chairman speak of his plans for the future, of imminent deliveries of food, of the work awaiting them. The

present today had not gathered because they were curious. Curiosity would hardly have induced people to leave the queues for the potato depots and distribution points and walk all the way to the square in front of the fire station. Nobody had come to hear new people had come to listen to the sentence that was to be passed on them – a life sentence or, God forbid, a death sentence. Fathers and mothers came to hear the sentence that was to be handed down to their children. The elderly summoned the last of their strength to listen to what fate had in store for them. Most of those gathered there were old people – leaning on thin sticks or on their children’s arms. Or young people, holding their children tightly by the hand. Or children themselves.

With heads bowed, faces distorted with grief, with swollen eyes and throats constricted by tears, all these human beings – fifteen hundred assembled in the square – were like a town, a community in its final moment; waiting under the sun for the Chairman and his downfall.

Józef Zelkowicz: *In jejne koshmarne teg*
(*In These Nightmarish Days*, 1944)

*

The whole ghetto was out on the streets that afternoon.

Although the bodyguards succeeded in keeping the majority of the mob at a distance, a few grinning whipping boys found their way up into his carriage all the same. He leant back against the hood, too feeble to brandish his stick at them as he usually did. It was as malevolent tongues were always saying behind his back: he was done for, his time as *Praeses* of the ghetto was over. Afterwards they would say of him that he was a false *shoyfet* who had taken the wrong decision, an *eved hagermanim* who had acted not for the good of his people but just for the power and profit he could engineer for himself.

But he had never acted for anything but the good of the ghetto.

Lord God, how can You do this to me? he thought.

People were already filling the fire-station yard in the scalding sunlight. They must have been standing there for hours. As soon as they caught sight of the bodyguards, they hurled themselves towards him like a pack of ferocious animals. A line of policemen formed a human chain at the front and wielded their batons to drive back the crowd. But it was not enough. Sneering faces still hung over the policemen’s shoulders.

It had been decided that Warszawski and Jakobson would speak first, while he waited in the shade on the platform, to temper as far as possible the pain in the hard words he would be forced to speak to them. The only trouble was that, by the time he came to climb up onto the speaker’s rostrum they had improvised for him, there was no longer any shade, and no platform either: just an ordinary chair on a rickety table. He would be forced to stand on this tottering pedestal while the loathsome black man jeered and gaped at him from down in the shade on the other side of the yard. Faced with this body of darkness, he felt a terror unlike any he had ever felt before. This, he now realised, must have been how the prophets felt the moment they stepped before their people; Ezekiel, who from besieged Jerusalem the *city of blood*, spoke of the need to cleanse the city of evil and all filth and set a mark on the forehead of all those who rallied behind the true faith.

Warszawski spoke, and he said:

Yesterday, the Chairman received an order to send away more than twenty thousand of us . . . among them our children and our very oldest people.

Do not the winds of fate shift strangely? We all know our Chairman!

We all know how many years of his life, how much of his strength, his work and his health he has devoted to the upbringing of the Jewish children.

And now they demand that he, HE, of all people . . .

*

He had often imagined it possible to converse with the dead. Only those who had already escaped the incarceration could have said whether he acted rightly or wrongly in letting people go who would not have had any other life anyway.

In the first, difficult period – when the authorities had just begun the deportations – he had ordered his carriage so he could visit the cemetery in Marysin.

Endless days at the start of January, or in February when the flat country round Łódź, the vast potato and beet fields, lay shrouded in a raw and pallid haze. At long last, the snow melted and spring came, and the sun was so low on the horizon that it seemed to cast the whole landscape in bronze. Every detail stood out against the light: the stark mesh of the trees against the ochre shade of the fields, and here and there a splash of bright violet from a pond or the line of a brook hidden in the undulations of the plain.

On days like these he sat huddled and unmoving in the rearmost seat of the carriage; behind Kupiec whose back assumed the same curve as the horsewhip balanced in his lap.

On the other side of the fence, one of the German guards would stand stiffly, or pace restlessly up and down around his sentry box. Some days a fierce wind would blow across the open fields and pasture land. The wind swept sand and loose soil along with it, and also blew a litter of paper over the fence and walls; and with the smoking soil came the cackle and mooing of poultry and cattle from the Polish farms just the other side of the fence. At times like these it was so evident how arbitrary the drawing of the boundary line had been. The guard stood impotent, head down into the persistent wind with his uniform coat flapping pointlessly around his arms and legs.

But the Chairman sat there as still as ever while the sand and soil whirled around him. If all that he saw and heard had any effect on him, he did not show it.

There was a man called Józef Feldman who dug graves as a member of Baruk Praszkie's gang of diggers. Seven days a week, even on the Sabbath since the authorities had ordered it, he was the one digging graves for the dead. The graves he dug were not large: seventy centimetres deep and half a metre wide. Just deep enough for a body. But considering there was a requirement for two, perhaps even three, thousand graves a year, it was obviously heavy work. Usually with the wind and loose soil whipping him in the face.

In winter, digging was out of the question. The graves for the winter had to be dug in the warm half of the year, which was therefore the time when Feldman and the other diggers had to work hardest. In the colder months, he retreated to his 'office' for a rest.

Before the war, Józef Feldman had been the owner of a small plant nursery in Marysin. In two greenhouses he had grown tomatoes, cucumbers and green vegetables, salad leaves and spinach; he had also sold bulbs and packets of seeds for spring planting. Now the greenhouses were empty and deserted, their glass broken. Józef Feldman himself slept in a simple wooden cabin off one of the greenhouses, which he had formerly used as an office. There was a low wooden bunk along its back

wall. He also had a wood-burning stove, with a flue sticking straight out through the window, and a little hotplate that ran on propane gas.

All the plots of land and former allotments in Marysin were formally owned by the Eldest of the Jews to be let out as he chose. The same applied to all land previously in collective ownership: the Zionist hachsharot, for example, twenty-one fenced-off allotments with long rows of meticulously pruned fruit trees where the ghetto's Pioneers had toiled day and night; Borachov's kibbutz, the Hashom collective's decaying farm on Próźna Street where they grew vegetables; and the youth cooperative Chazit Dor Bnej Midbar. Also the large, open areas behind the tumbledown old toolshed that went by the name of Prazkier's workshop, where the few dairy cows left in the ghetto grazed. All this belonged to the Chairman.

But for some reason, the Chairman had let Feldman keep his. The two of them were often to be seen in Feldman's office together. The big man and the little man. (Józef Feldman was diminutive. People used to say he scarcely reached to the top of the graves he dug.) The Chairman would be talking about his plans to transform the area round Feldman's nursery business into one huge beet field and plant fruit trees on the slope down to the road.

It was something often said of the Chairman. He basically preferred the company of ordinary, simple people to that of rabbis and Council members in the ghetto. He felt more at home among the Hasidic Jews in their school in Lutomiarska Street or among the uneducated but deeply devout Orthodox Jews who continued making their way out to the big cemetery on Bracka Street for as long as they were allowed to. They would sit there for hours then, crouching between the graves with their prayer shawls over their heads and their well-thumbed prayer books held to their faces. Like him, they had all lost something – a wife, a child, a rich and prosperous relation who could have been providing food and lodging now they were old. It was the same eternal shoklen, the same lament down the years:

*Why is the gift of life given to one tormented so bitterly;
to one who waits for death but waits in vain;
to one who would delight if he could find his grave;
to one whose path is wreathed in darkness:
pervaded, immured by God?*

From the younger visitors, less lofty sentiments were heard:

– If Moshe had left us in Mitsraim we could all have been sitting in a café in Cairo instead of being trapped here.

– Moshe knew what he was doing. If we hadn't left Mitsraim we would never have been blessed with the Torah.

– And what has our Torah given us?

– Im eyn Torah, eyn kemakh, it is written; without the Torah, no bread.

– I'm quite sure that even if we'd had the Torah, we still wouldn't have had any bread.

The Chairman paid Feldman for the winter upkeep of his summer residence in Karola Miarka Street. Virtually all the members of the Council of Elders had 'summer residences' in Marysin at their disposal.

in addition to their town apartments in the ghetto, and some were rumoured never to leave the area like the Chairman's sister-in-law, Princess Helena, who was said only to leave her summer residence there was a concert at the House of Culture or some rich business owner was giving a dinner for the *shpitsn* of the ghetto; then she would always put in an appearance, wearing one of her many elegant flat, wide-brimmed hats, with some of her favourite finches in a hemp-rope basket. Princess Helena collected birds. In the garden round the house in Marysin she had her personal secretary, the versatile Mr Tausendgeld, construct a large aviary to accommodate no fewer than five hundred different species, many so rare that they were never sighted at these latitudes and certainly not in the ghetto where the only birds generally to be seen were crows.

As for the Chairman, he shunned all excess. Even his enemies could testify to his modest lifestyle. Cigarettes, however, he consumed in great quantities, and when he was sitting up late, working in his office in a barrack hut at Bałuty Square, he not infrequently fortified himself with a glass or two of vodka.

And sometimes, even in midwinter, Miss Dora Fuchs would ring from the Secretariat to say the Chairman was on his way, so Feldman had to take his coal scuttles and march all the way up to Marysin Street to light the stove, and when the Chairman got there he would be unsteady on his feet and cursing because it was still cold and damp in the house, and it would fall to Feldman's lot to get the old man to bed. Feldman was more intimate than most with all the swings of the Chairman's mood, and well aware of the oceans of hatred and envy that lay behind that silent gaze and sarcastic, tobacco-stained smile.

Feldman was also responsible for maintenance of the Green House, on the corner of Zagajnikowa and Okopowa Street. The Green House was the smallest and most outlying of the six orphanages that the Chairman had set up in Marysin, and here it was that Feldman would often find him, sitting hunched in Kuper's carriage opposite the fenced-off children's playground in the garden.

The old man clearly found it soothing to watch the children at play.

The children and the dead. Their horizons were limited. They took sides only on the basis of what was right before their eyes. They did not let themselves be duped by the machinations of the living.

They talked of the war, he and Feldman. Of that immense German army which seemed to continue expanding on all fronts, and of Europe's persecuted Jews who had to submit to life at the feet of the mighty Amalek. And the Chairman confessed that he had a dream. Or rather, he had two. He spoke of one of them to many people; that was the dream of the Protectorate. He spoke of the other to only a few.

He dreamt, he said, that he would demonstrate to the authorities what capable workers the Jews are, so they would let themselves be persuaded once and for all to extend the ghetto. Then even other parts of Łódź would be incorporated into the ghetto, and when the war was over, the authorities would finally be forced to admit that the ghetto was a *special* place. Here the lamp of industry was kept burning, here there was production such as had never been seen before. And everyone had something to gain by letting the incarcerated population of Litzmannstadt work. Once the Germans had realised this, they would declare the ghetto a Protectorate within the borders of those parts of Poland that had been incorporated into the German Reich: a Jewish free state under German supremacy, where freedom had been honestly won at the price of hard work.

That was the dream of the Protectorate.

In the other, the secret dream, he was standing on the prow of a big passenger ship on the way to Palestine. The ship had left the port of Hamburg after he had personally led the exodus from the ghetto. Exactly who, apart from himself, had been allowed to emigrate was never clarified in the dream. But Feldman understood that most of them were children. Children from the vocational schools and from the ghetto orphanages, children whose lives the *Praeses* had personally saved. In the background, on the far horizon, was a coast: faint in the strong sun, with a strip of white buildings along the shoreline, and above them rolling hills that merged imperceptibly with the white sky. He knew it was Eretz Israel he could see, Haifa to be more precise, but he could not make anything out very clearly because it all melted into one: the white deck of the ship, the white sky, the refracting white sea.

Feldman admitted he found it hard to see how the two dreams could be compatible. The dream of the ghetto as an extended Protectorate, or the dream of the exodus to Palestine? The Chairman answered as he always did, that the ends depended on the means, that you had to be a realist, and see what opportunities presented themselves. After all these years, he was familiar with the Germans' way of thinking and behaving. And even he had acquired many confidants among their number. But one thing he knew for sure. Every time he woke up and realised he had dreamt the dream again, his breast filled with pride. Whatever happened, to him and to the ghetto: he would never abandon his people.

Yet later, that was precisely what he would do.

The Chairman rarely spoke of himself or where he came from. That's all over and done with, he would say when certain events from his past were brought up. But still sometimes, when he gathered all the children around him, he found himself coming back to certain events that had presumably taken place when he was a child himself, and that he had obviously never got out of his mind. One of these stories was about one-eyed Stromka, who had been a teacher of Talmud classes back home in Ilyno. Just like blind Dr Miller, Stromka had a stick, and that stick had been long enough for him to reach any pupil in the cramped schoolroom at any moment. The Chairman showed the children how Stromka used to deploy his stick, and then rocked his own heavy body just the way Stromka would rock up and down between the desks where the pupils sat hunched over their books, and every so often the stick would shoot out furiously and rap some inattentive child on the hand or the back of the neck. *Like that!* said the Chairman. The children had nicknamed the stick the extending eye. It was as if Stromka could see with the end of his stick. With his actual, blind eye he could see into another world, a world beyond his own where everything was perfect and without distortion or imperfection, a world where the pupils formed the Hebrew characters with complete accuracy and rattled off their Talmud verses without stumbling or hesitating in the slightest. Stromka appeared thoroughly to enjoy looking into this perfected world, but he hated what he could see on the outside.

There was another story, too – but the Chairman was not as fond of telling it:

The little town of Ilyno where he had grown up was situated on the River Lovat' near the town of Velikiye Luki, for which many fierce battles were to be fought during the war. The town consisted at that time almost exclusively of narrow, rickety wooden houses, built close together. On the slopes between the buildings, which swelled into shapeless areas of mud when the rains came in spring and the river burst its banks, there was room for little garden plots. The mainly Jewish families who lived there traded in cloth and imported comestibles and other goods from the colonies, conveyed the way from Vilna and Vitebsk. The district was poor, but the synagogue looked like an oriental palace with two substantial pillars in front; all made of wood.

The bathhouse stood on the riverbank. On the far side of the bathhouse was a stony beach, to which the children often went after Talmud classes. The river was shallow just there. In the summertime it looked like the stagnant water from the well that his mother used when she was washing clothes on the front porch; he loved dipping his hand into the water, warm as his own urine.

At low tide, a little island would appear, a flat streak of land in midstream, on which birds would stand spying for fish. But the bank's shallow appearance was deceptive. On the other side of the 'island', the muddy riverbed fell away sharply again and the water grew suddenly deep. A child had drowned there. It had happened long before he came into the world, but they still spoke of it in the village. Perhaps that was why his schoolmates were drawn to the place. Every afternoon, crowds of children competed in daring to go out to the island lying bare and exposed in the middle of the fast-flowing river. He remembers one of the boys waded in almost to the waist and stood with elbows raised

far out in the choppy, glittering water, shouting to the others to hurry up and join him.

As he remembers it, he was not among the boys who then, laughing, ploughed their way through the water.

Perhaps he had volunteered to join the game but been rejected. Perhaps they had said (as they often did) that he was too fat; too clumsy, too ugly.

That was when he had a sudden inspiration.

He decided to go to Stromka and tell him what the others were up to. Afterwards he could only dimly recollect the effect he had hoped to achieve. By turning informer, he would somehow win Stromka's respect, and if he only had respect, the other children would not dare to exclude him from their game any more.

A brief moment of triumph followed, as blind Stromka came stalking down to the river, his long stick swinging in front of him. But the moment of triumph was short-lived. He did not find himself in favor with Stromka after all. On the contrary, the evil eye stared at him from then on with even greater contempt and ill will, if that was possible. The other children avoided him. They would stand aside and whisper each day when he came to school. Then one afternoon, when he was on his way home, they came too, crowding round him. He was surrounded by a whole crowd of shouting, laughing children. That was what he remembered afterwards. The sudden surge of happiness that ran through him when he thought himself accepted and included in their circle. Though he realised at once that there was something forced and unnatural about those smiles and comradely thumps on the back. They joke and play around, they tell him to wade out into the water, they say they bet he doesn't dare.

Then it all happens very quickly. He's standing up to his waist in water, and behind him the children closest to him are bending down to pick up stones from the beach. And before he realises what is happening, the first stone strikes his shoulder. He feels dizzy, tastes blood in his mouth. He does not even have time to turn round ready to run out of the water before the next stone comes flying. He flails his arms, tries to get to his feet, but falls again; and the stones are landing in the water all around him. He sees they are aimed in such a way as to drive him out towards the deeper channel. The moment dawns on him – that they want him dead – the wave of panic breaks over him. To this day, he has little idea how he did it, but by frantically pushing aside the water with one arm and holding the other over his head for protection, he somehow manages to get back onto the beach, find his feet and shuffle and limp away, as the stones rain down on him.

Afterwards he was made to stand with his back to the class while Stromka beat him with his stick. Fifteen brisk strokes on his bottom and thighs, already swollen and blue where the stones had hit him. It was not for missing lessons but for telling tales on his classmates.

Yet what he would remember later were not the informing and the punishment but the instant when the smiling children's faces down by the river were suddenly transformed into a vengeful wrath and he realised he was, in effect, in a cage. Yes, over and over again (even in front of 'his own' children) he would come back to that barred cage with spaces through which stones and sticks were perpetually thrown or poked at him and he was a prisoner with nowhere to retreat to and no means of protecting himself.

When does a lie begin?

A lie, Rabbi Fajner would say, has no beginning. A lie runs downwards like a rootlet, branching an infinite number of times. But if you trace the rootlets down, you never find a moment of inspiration and vision, only overwhelming desperation and despair.

A lie always begins with denial.

Something has happened – yet you do not want to admit that it has.

That is how a lie begins.

*

The evening the authorities decided without his knowledge to deport all the old and sick people from the ghetto, he had been attending the House of Culture with his brother Józef and his sister-in-law Helena, for a celebration of the foundation of the ghetto fire brigade, precisely one year before. The following day it was exactly three years since Germany invaded Poland and the war and the occupation began. But naturally they did not celebrate that.

The soirée opened with some musical impromptus; these were followed by some turns from Moshe Puławer's 'Ghetto Review', which had on that same day received its hundredth performance.

The Chairman generally found musical performances extremely trying. The deathly pale Miss Bronisława Rotsztat wound herself around her violin as if an electric shock were passing through her over and over again. Miss Rotsztat's musical expression was, however, much appreciated by the women. Then it was time for the Schum sisters, who were twins. Their act was always the same. First they rolled their eyes and curtsied. Then they rushed out into the wings and came back as each other. Since they were exactly alike, this naturally presented no problem. They simply swapped clothes. Then one of them vanished – and the other sister began to look for her. She looked in bags, she looked in boxes. Then the missing sister popped up and started looking for the one who had been looking before (and who had now vanished), or maybe it was actually the same sister looking all the time.

It was all extremely disconcerting.

Then Mr Puławer himself came on stage and told *plotki*.

One of his stories was about two Jews meeting each other. One of them was from Insterberg. The second man asked: What's new in Insterberg? The first one replied: Nothing. The second: Nothing? The first: *A hintel hot gebilt*. A dog barked.

The audience laughed.

Second Man: A dog barked in Insterberg? Is that all that's happened?

First Man: Don't ask me. A big crowd of people seems to have assembled.

Second Man: A big crowd of people assembled? A dog barked? Is that all that's happened in Insterberg?

First Man: They've arrested your brother.

Second Man: They've arrested my brother. What for?

First Man: They've arrested your brother for forging bills of exchange.

Second Man: My brother's been forging bills of exchange? That's not news, is it?

First Man: Like I said, nothing new in Insterberg.

Everyone in the hall convulsed with laughter, except Józef Rumkowski. The Chairman's brother was the only person in the hall who failed to realise the joke was about him.

There were also stories about Rumkowski's young wife Regina and her incorrigible brother Ben-Zion, whom the Chairman was said to have locked up in the mental hospital in Wesola Street for 'causing too much trouble'; that is, for saying things to the Chairman's face that the Chairman did not want to hear.

The most popular stories of all, however, were about the Chairman's sister-in-law, Helena. Moshé Puławer told those himself, coming forward to the edge of the stage with his hands stuck impishly in his trouser pockets. For example, the fact that he referred to her as the Princess of Kent, making play on the Yiddish verb for knowing a person: *Ver hot zi gekent un ver vil zi kenen?* He asked, and suddenly the stage was full of actors shading their eyes and spying out for the missing princess: *Princess of Kent? Princess of Kent?* The audience went wild, pointing to the front row where Princess Helena sat blushing bright red beneath the curved brim of her hat.

The other actors went on scanning the audience:

Where is she? Where is she?

Another actor came on stage, shamelessly imitating Princess Helena's duck-like gait. Addressing the audience, he reported that there had been a distress call from the district fire station in Marysin. An unusual case: a woman had locked herself into her home and refused to go out. She had her husband bring food home for her. She ate and ate, and when it was finally time for her to go to the privy, she had ballooned up so much that she couldn't get out of the door. The fire brigade would have to come and lift her through the window.

SO THAT WAS THE UNKNOWN PRINCESS OF KENT!

Upon which the whole ensemble dashed on stage, linked hands and burst into song:

S'iz keyn danken keytn

S'iz gite tsaytn

Kayner tit zikh haynt nisht shemen

Yeder vil du haynt nor nemen;

Abi tsi zayn tsu zat¹

It was the most malicious and shameless song-and-dance act Mr Puławer had ever put words to. With a hair's breadth of lese-majesty, and typical of the mood of despondency and chaos that had prevailed in the ghetto over the last months. Though the Chairman tried to put a brave face on it and clap in the right places, even he felt a distinct sense of relief when the acting was over and the musicians returned to the stage.

Miss Bronisława Rotsztat concluded with a turgid Liszt scherzo and drew a line under the who

deplorable business with her well-rosined bow.

*

The following morning, Tuesday 1 September 1942, Kuper was waiting with the carriage as usual outside the summer residence on Miarki Street and the Chairman got in as usual, a scarcely audible grunt his only greeting. WAGEN DES ÄLTESTEN DER JUDEN, says a silvery-white plaque on each side of the carriage. Not that anyone could be in doubt. There is only one carriage of its kind in the ghetto.

The Chairman often toured the ghetto in his carriage. Since everything in the ghetto belonged to him, he was naturally obliged to look in from time to time, to assure himself that it was all in good order. That *his* workers were queuing properly at the foot of one of the ghetto's wooden bridges waiting to cross; that *his* factories stood ready with their vehicle access doors open to admit the vast flood of workers; that *his* police officers were on hand to prevent unnecessary altercations; that *his* workers went straight in and stood at their tools and machines waiting for *his* factory whistles to sound, ideally all together, at the same moment.

And so the factory whistles did, that morning. It was a perfectly ordinary dawn in the ghetto, clear but a little chilly. Soon, the heat of the day would burn away the last remaining moisture from the air and it would be hot again, as it had been all that summer and as it would remain for the rest of the dreadful September.

He did not notice anything amiss until Kuper turned off Dworska Street and into Łagiewnicka. The road in front of the barrier guarded by the *Schupo*, the German police, at the entrance to Bałuty Square was thronged with people, and none of them were on their way to work. He saw heads turn in his direction and hands reach out for the hood of the carriage. One or two people shouted at him, their faces strangely projected forward from their bodies. Then Rozenblat's Jewish constables came running and the forces of law and order surrounded the carriage, and once the *Schupo* lifted the barrier, they could calmly continue into the square.

Mr Abramowicz had an arm out ready to support him as he stepped out of the carriage. Miss Fuchler came rushing out of the barrack hut, and after her came all the clerks, telephonists and secretaries. He looked from one frightened face to another and asked: *What are you staring at?* Young Mr Abramowicz was the first to pluck up courage, stepping forward from the knot of people and clearing his throat:

Haven't you heard, Sir? The order came last night.

They're emptying the hospitals of all the sick and the old!

There are several eyewitness accounts of the Chairman's reaction on first receiving this news. Some said he did not hesitate for a moment. They had seen him head instantly, like 'a whirlwind', down Wesola Street, rushing to try to save his nearest and dearest. Others thought he had received the news with a look that could best be described as derisive. He was said to have denied to the very end that any deportations had occurred. How could anything have happened in the ghetto without his knowledge?

But there were also those who thought they could see the uncertainty and fear suddenly breaking through the Chairman's authoritarian mask. After all, was it not he who had said in a speech: *My mot*

is always to be at least ten minutes ahead of every German command. An order had been issued sometime during the night; Commandant Rozenblat must have been informed, since the ghetto police force had been called out to the last man. All of those most closely concerned had been informed, except for the Chairman, who had been at the cabaret!

When the Chairman got to the hospital, just before eight on Tuesday morning, the whole area round Wesoła Street was closed off. At the hospital entrance, Jewish policemen were forming a human chain impossible to breach. On the other side of this wall of Jewish *politsayen*, the Gestapo had brought up big open-topped lorries, with two or three large trailers attached behind each vehicle. Under the supervision of the German police, Rozenblat's men were in the process of dragging the old and the sick out of the hospital building. Some of the sick were still in their hospital clothes; others were dressed only in their underpants, or nothing at all, with their emaciated arms crossed over their chests and ribs. A few individuals managed to break through the police cordon. One white-clad figure with a shaven head rushed towards the barrier, its blue-and-white-striped prayer shawl flowing out behind like a banner. The German soldiers immediately raised their weapons. The man's incomprehensible cry of triumph was cut off abruptly and he fell headlong in a shower of fabric shreds and blood. Another fleeing patient tried to take cover in the back seat of one of the two black limousines that had pulled up alongside the lorries and trailers, beside which a handful of German officers had been standing for some time, impassively observing the tumultuous scene. The escapee was just attempting to crawl through the back door of the car when its chauffeur alerted SS-Hauptscharführer Günther Fuchs to the presence of the intruder. With a gloved hand, Fuchs dragged the wildly resisting man out of the car and then shot him, first through the chest and then again – when the man was already prone – through the head and neck. Two uniformed guards immediately rushed over, grabbed the man's arms and threw the body, still bleeding from the head, up onto the trailer, where a hundred or so patients already stood crushed together.

While all this was happening, the Chairman, calm and composed, had gone up to the officer in charge of the operation, a certain SS-Hauptscharführer Konrad Mühlhaus, and asked to be given access to the hospital building. Mühlhaus had refused, saying this was a *Sonderaktion* led by the Gestapo, and no Jews were allowed to cross the police line. The Chairman had then asked for access to the office to make an urgent telephone call. When this request, too, was turned down, the Chairman supposed to have said:

You can shoot or deport me. But as Eldest of the Jews, I still have some influence over the Jews in the ghetto. If you want this operation to run in a smooth and dignified way, you would be wise to grant my request.

The Chairman was gone for scarcely thirty minutes. In that space of time, the Gestapo brought up more tractors and trailers, and an extra handful of Rozenblat's men were ordered to the hospital gardens, to find any patients who had tried to escape out of the back entrance. Those patients who had been hiding in the hospital grounds all this time were felled with blows from batons or rifle butts; those who had strayed out into the road were cold-bloodedly shot by the German guards. At regular intervals, screams and stifled cries could be heard from the cluster of relatives outside the hospital.

grounds, who were powerless to help the infirm as they were led one by one from the hospital building. Meanwhile, more and more eyes turned to the upstairs windows of the hospital, where people expected to see the Chairman's white-haired head appear, to announce that the operation had been suspended, that it had all been the result of some misunderstanding, that he had spoken to the authorities and all the sick and the old were now free to return home.

But when the Chairman reappeared at the main entrance after those thirty minutes, he did not even glance at the column of loaded trailers. He just walked briskly back to his horse and carriage and got in and they set off back towards Bałuty Square.

That day – the first of the September operation – a total of 674 in-patients from the ghetto's six hospitals were taken to assembly points around the ghetto, and then onward out of the ghetto by train. Among those expelled were Regina Rumkowska's two aunts, Lovisa and Bettina, and possibly also Regina's beloved brother, Mr Benjamin Wajnberger.

There were many who wondered afterwards why the Chairman had done nothing to help his own relations, in spite of the fact that everyone had seen him standing outside the hospital talking first to SS-Hauptscharführer Mühlhaus, then to SS-Hauptsturmführer Fuchs.

Some thought they knew the reason for his compliance. In the course of the brief telephonic conversation Rumkowski later had from inside the hospital with ghetto administrator Hans Biebow, he was allegedly given a promise. In exchange for agreeing to let all the old and sick people of the ghetto go, the Chairman would be allowed to compile a personal list from among those on the expulsion list, a list of *two hundred fit and able-bodied men*, men indispensable to the future operation and administration of the ghetto, who would be allowed to stay in the ghetto despite being formally above the age limit. The Chairman was said to have agreed to this pact with the Devil because he believed it was the only way to secure the continued existence of the ghetto in the longer term.

Others said Rumkowski realised that the time of promises was over, as far as he was concerned, the minute the deportations began without his knowledge. That everything the authorities had promised until then had turned out to be lies and hollow words. So what did the lives of a few family members signify, when all that was left for him was to look on, bewildered and powerless, as the whole mighty empire he had built slowly crumbled?

I

Within the Walls

(April 1940–September 1942)

*Geto, getunya, getokhna, kokhana,
Tish taka malutka e taka shubrana*

Der vos hot a hant a shtarke

Der vos hot oyf zikh a marke

Krigt fin shenstn in fin bestn

Afile a ostn oykh dem grestn

[Ghetto, beloved little ghetto

You are so tiny, and so corrupt!

Whoever has a hand so strong

Whoever bears a certain mark

will choose from the loveliest and the best

and at least the greatest, too]

Jankiel Herszkowicz: 'Geto, getunya'
(composed and performed in the ghetto, around 1940)



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