

## Scenes from the Past

### "The Penal Recruit"

by Osip Rabinovich

#### I

From the darkness/gloom of the past, shadows rise before me, but not those long-forgotten as is commonly said -- rather, those which have long slumbered deep within my memory. I had seldom called up these sad memories because they tortured my soul. Everyday worries, worldly concerns, but above all egoism which compels us to chase as far away as possible sad images and impressions in order to avoid poisoning our lives, disturbing our sleep -- these were the reasons why I buried deep in my heart those torture-filled memories and was afraid to awaken them too often. I don't know whether others in my place would have done otherwise. Being incapable of relieving/softening those conditions under the influence of which events occurred that appall the spirit and the heart -- events of which hardly anyone took notice except those for whom the words "man" and "brother" have real meaning -- I understood that my every impulse would be nothing but a large drop of poison for myself and would bring no good to others. Every new day gave birth to a fresh cheerless circumstance; new sorrows forced out the old and would in its turn be forgotten because others would appear in their place. Where could one turn? What would have been the point of torturing and ruining oneself fruitlessly?

But now when the present takes on such bright forms, when my heart (and perhaps the hearts of others) have rested a bit from this state of tension into which it was plunged by the uncertainty of each passing day, I begin to feel the pain of old wounds. Thus, an unaccustomed traveler who has ridden a great distance on a small post-chaise wagon begins to feel the soreness in his bones and joints only after he has slept well and rested upon reaching the destination of his journey.

One of such memories I want now to call up before the judgment of the reader; perhaps with time others will get their turn.

At that time I was engaged in business on behalf of my father in the provincial town of Z. I was very young then, life smiled before me and the energy and cheer of my personality drew everything in bright colors. But the nature of my upbringing and an insatiable passion for reading developed within me an ability to think and often I would reflect even more than was entirely healthy for me. More than anything else which compelled me to reflection was the fate of my people -- the Jews -- whose fate resounded urgently within my spirit. Familiar with the history of my people from the time of immemorial antiquity until modern times, I would often in mind run the journey they had long left behind; I was searching for an answer to the question: why is this people burdened with the unenviable blessing which consists of the fact, that for the fault of one, everyone must be held responsible, that for the sin of one everyone is branded with shame and contempt? I could not find the answer either in the history of the Jews, or in their mores, or in my own heart. But these were the outbursts of a hot-tempered nature, youth prevailed: I was happy, I was entering unto the wide road of life, sorrow and need were still unfamiliar to me and I drank the joys of a young and carefree life by the brimming cupful.

But daydreams and pleasures, serious empathy and windy-headed tendencies did not get in the way of my undertaking the commercial affairs of my father which demanded only a few hours each day. My pride was flattered that my father, a man strict and choosy in everything, would entrust me, a twenty-year-old youth, far away from his own watchful eye, the management of substantial affairs and, even more by the fact that he remained satisfied with my efficiency.

And so I lived in Z. which to this day remains undistinguished neither by the beauty of its architecture and its streets nor by the sociability of its residents. Nevertheless, the city was quite populous and enjoyed a brisk trade, and could boast of these qualities at a time, just a few years ago when many questions, that have since become the stuff of our life, remained in a slumber, rocked gently by the exclamations of general well-being and patted into complacency by loud self-

congratulations which drew their vitality from a well of dank silence, the impossibility of exchanging opinions, and the rarity and difficulty of communication, distinguishing our steppe cities.

Almost every morning I would walk out onto the shore of the fine navigable river in order to take in the sight of the approaching barges and rafts, to hear the ringing voices of the Belorussian laborers and to gaze upon the handy work of the Russian peasant lads, trimming timber and sawing fat logs into boards and *obapoly* to the sound of their beautiful doleful songs. Leaving my apartments each morning, I had to turn the corner of the street into an obscure narrow lane, and would continually encounter sitting by the window of the small corner house, a man sitting in thought and in sadness. Not a morning would go by that I did not see this man in the same place, leaning with one arm on the window sill and sunk in deep reflection. A strong curiosity urged me to become more attentive. Every morning, approaching the little corner house, I would pace my steps in order, if possible, to examine this thoughtful stranger and his sad dwelling more closely. He was over fifty, in the form of his face and by the little black velvet cap on his head I recognized one of my fellows despite the fact that the hair on his head was closely cropped and his beard shaven except for a large thick mustache with a white streak. In his look there was something gloomy, a deep sadness and the hardest suffering scarred his lean face. He was always dressed in an old robe and, as I have already said, would always sit with one arm leaning on the window ledge. Sometimes an open book would be laying before him onto which his glance would be directed. But by the spasms which would often cross his face and by the frequent rubbing of his forehead, it was possible to surmise that his thoughts wandered far from the open pages. His room, low and dark, was imprinted with the same sadness that marked its solitary resident; I saw no one besides him in there. It was clear that he was only a temporary tenant, that he was lonely and unhappy. He seldom looked up at me when I suddenly appeared from around the corner, walked up to his window and disturbed his gloomy thoughts with my footsteps. Even when he lifted his eyes, it was only for a moment and then he would once again sink them into his open book or stare blankly ahead into the empty cheerless lane. It seemed that he paid no attention to me; not intentionally, it seemed, but because he was preoccupied with something else, closer to his own tormented heart. At the time, shaven beards were more rarely encountered among the Jews than they are now and only among the rich and the educated but this one did not look rich, neither in his old robe nor in his sad apartment. Perhaps he was a scholar? A poet, a writer, a mathematician? But then where lay the source of his suffering demeanor, this deadly apathy under which is hidden some terrible story of suffering through trials? I was lost in speculation. I had completely forgotten that at that time among us, a shaven beard, aside from wealth and education, also represents a third condition, less happy perhaps but no less honorable. How could this have occurred to me, when I was so careless and full of the youthful thirst for life? But thoughts of the interesting stranger did not occupy me for long on my walks; new subjects diverted my attention and for the rest of the day and until the next morning I would forget about him.

But how great was my astonishment when soon after my arrival in Z. I, having some affairs in the local military office, saw my stranger in a soldier's greatcoat and service cap working in a crowd of other soldiers in the official canteen. I came closer and began to observe him and it seemed that I had been mistaken because in his soldier's clothes he appeared younger and more vigorous. Distracted by some other matter, I forgot about the shocking likeness; I became even more certain of its insignificance the next morning when the next morning I encountered my stranger as usual sitting in the same place, hunched over, powerless, unmoving. But that same day in the evening, strolling in the marketplace, I saw once again the soldier who had been working in the canteen and from the first moment his likeness to my stranger shocked me once more. I made a decision to follow him. He wandered aimlessly around the streets, with his head down and without looking back even once. From afar, I did not let him out of my sight and finally after frequent turns from one street to another, when it was already getting dark and lights began to appear in the windows, I saw him entering into the gate of the little corner house, so familiar to me from my morning strolls.

Thus, my stranger is a soldier, I thought.

I was aware of the frequent and increased levies that occurred among us which in every small town where Jews lived produced a mass of abuses that left a tragic imprint on many families. I knew that power, conspiracies, money triumphed over poverty which alone paid with its laboring hands, taken away when they were most needed. I knew that in many places, exhausted by previous levies and emptied by the flight of adults, children younger than ten were submitted as recruits. Everywhere rumors flew of about how these unhappy ones were dragged away from their mothers and piled on wagons, by the hundreds sent to far-away military colonies where they dropped like flies unable to stand the difficulties of the long journey or the change in climate or the inhuman treatment at the hands of the coarse colonists for whom the life of a little yid was no more important than that of a pup. All this I knew very well. But that old man was taken as recruits, weak and worn-out like my stranger, clearly belonging to an educated class among his people -- to which testified the open book before which he so thoughtfully sat through the mornings -- and that such soldiers were allowed to enjoy some measure of freedom -- this I could not grasp at all.

I must at all costs find out what sort of man this is, I thought.

With these reflections in my head, I slowly entered the door of the small house. The proprietress, a fat Jewess, was busy with the kettle on the front porch; I approached her.

-- Is this your house? I asked.

She tried to make me out in the evening dusk.

-- No, it isn't mine, she answered: -- what is it to you?

-- I wanted to know about the man who rents the room that looks out onto the lane, I said, pointing with my hand in the direction where, according to my calculations, was located the apartment of the stranger.

-- The house isn't mine, answered the proprietress: -- I rent it and keep boarders; and the person about whom you are asking, is a soldier.

-- Is he quartered here?

-- No, he rents for himself.

-- Has he lived long at your place?

-- From the time he arrived in the city, about two months. They say, they drove a whole party of them here.

-- So who is he, where is he from?

-- Don't have any idea . . . from very far, it seems like.

-- Does anyone visit him?

-- Didn't notice.

-- Would it be possible to see him?

-- As you wish.

I asked her to show me the entrance and walked right into the room. A candle already burned on the table; the shutters were closed from the inside. The tenant had already had a chance to shed his greatcoat and in his old robe was quickly pacing the room. Seeing me, he stopped bewildered, gave me a quick glance from head to foot and spoke in a shy tremulous voice in Russian:

-- Whom do you need?

I foresaw a cold reception but having decided to meet this soldier more closely I put my hat on the window sill and unceremoniously sat down. It seemed that the stranger was surprised at my familiarity; he stood in the middle of the room and did not take his eyes from me.

-- I am in need of you, I answered in our Judaeo-German dialect.

The sounds of his own language relaxed him somewhat. But he continued to stand before me in confusion.

-- I am in need of you, I repeated: -- and so I came to see you. I begin by introducing myself.

I told him my first and last name.

-- Haven't had the honor, he answered coldly.

-- It isn't necessary, I objected. -- Perhaps soon enough we will know each other better. Perhaps you better sit down. I shall not leave you for some time.

He sat down opposite me at a table on which were scattered a few books and brokenly, as if reluctantly, said:

-- So, what is it that you require of me?

-- Listen, I said: -- you are unhappy, you are lonely; I am drawn to you by empathy.

He let out a deep sigh and became lost in thought. I told him that for a while now he attracted my attention with his sad demeanor, revealing deep suffering; how surprised I was when I saw him in his soldier's greatcoat; how much I am interested in his present condition which, for many reasons, remains beyond my grasp; how a strange feeling, not of mere curiosity, but some kind of inexplicable attraction to him will not let me rest until I get closer to him, lonely and abandoned. I spoke at length and with all of the fire of my young heart, still uncooled by the deadly experience of a gloomy life.

-- Of course, I ended: -- it is not within my power to ease your fate of which I am still ignorant and which you will perhaps reveal to me; but if you are in need of a heart in which you can trust your sorrow, -- and this is necessary for you or your sorrow will kill you -- then I offer you mine; do not reject it but give me your hand as a sign of agreement.

He took my extended hand and shook it with feeling.

-- I am grateful to you, he said: -- sorrow is truly killing me. I am a stranger here and will probably always remain a stranger; who has any need of a man in a gray overcoat? Your sympathy touches me; but spare your youth. An acquaintance with me will not give it any joy and it is such an evanescent heavenly gift that it would be a sin to attire it in mourning clothes needlessly.

I saw that I was not mistaken in my former conclusions and that I really was dealing with an educated person.

-- Don't worry about that, I answered: -- sooner or later a person must become acquainted with the dark side of life; I think, sooner rather than later because even if youth loses a little by this, certainly adulthood should gain a great deal.

For a short time, we continued to talk in this vein. The proprietress, entering with the kettle interrupted our conversation.

-- You will not refuse to drink tea with a simple soldier? said the old man, getting up from his chair.

Instead of answering, I shook his hand.

While he busied himself with rinsing dishes and other preparations for tea, I crossed the room a few times, becoming thoroughly familiar with it. There was no extraneous furniture; against one wall stood a bed with a mattress and a leather pillow; against the headboard was a small round table on which its owner was setting out the tea. Against the other wall stood an oval table with books, that I mentioned above. Two plain chairs stood on either side of the table and another three or four against the wall. Leaning against one wall was a tall wooden trunk under lock on which was lying now the greatcoat and his service-cap and on the opposite wall hung his full-dress uniform, his belt and his cutlass. I approached the books and began to look through them; they consisted of a few historical publications in Polish as well as a few German and Jewish volumes of a philosophical content. Sitting at the table, I picked up one German book and began to leaf through it. It was Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.

-- You are my first guest here, said the soldier, handing me a glass of tea and smiling sadly: -- Blessed be the hour of your arrival.

I muttered some trite phrase of thanks.

-- You were leafing through my Mendelssohn, he continued, sitting down opposite me with his glass. -- Oh! This small number of books is my only source of consolation. I would lose my sanity, if I didn't have them.

-- Yes, in one's loneliness books replace people, I noted, reddening slightly realizing that once again I was uttering a banality.

The old man hadn't noticed.

-- They wanted to take even this consolation away from me, he continued, sadly shaking his head: -- I have lost a great deal . . . everything . . . family, property, my name . . .

He began to wring his hands; his face expressed terror and despair.

-- Who was it that wanted to deprive you of your books? I said, intentionally trying to interrupt his memories of awful hardships.

He collected himself.

-- There was one who wanted to do just that, he answered. -- At one of our rest stops -- and our party walked at length, a great length -- we camped at some insignificant provincial town. The head of the invalid command, in major's epaulettes, came to stare at us. He saw my sack of books, began to shout, threatened to hit me. "Just look at this cursed yid, carrying books around, and in German and in Polish too . . . Probably a rebel as well, certainly a rebel." He threw my books around, stomped them with his feet and yelled at the convoy officer, that he should take them away, accusing him of harboring rebels and allowing official convoys to transport subversive literature.

-- How did it turn out? I asked.

-- Thanks to the convoy officer, he defended me, answered the soldier: -- didn't listen to the major; actually that one really did not have the right to interfere in this matter. God granted him a good heart, he was a kind man, our convoy officer! The entire way he treated me humbly and humanely.

-- Thank God! Then there are kind people in this world.

-- Yes, there are. Actually, he was paid well for treating me kindly when I was inducted. So what? I am grateful to him. Another would have taken the money, forgotten, and remained the wolf that he was . . . I owe it to him that I got to keep these books . . . Sometimes, when I remember the past, sorrow begins to rip at my heart. . . I pick up a book and I seem to relax a bit . . . although truth to tell I don't always understand what I am reading: my thoughts are far, far away from here.

He lowered his head in sadness.

-- Yes, Mendelssohn was a great man, he continued as if in thought: -- his *Jerusalem* -- is the healing balm for my cruel wounds. Oh, Yerushalaim, Yerushalaim, how your mighty have fallen! Is there any sorrow that is equal to theirs?

He stood up and began to pace the room. I let out a deep sigh.

-- Didn't I tell you that you would be unhappy here? he said, approaching me. -- Leave an old man victim to his unhappiness; go on your way. There is no place for you in this boring little room.

-- I did not come here to be amused, I answered: -- in seeking out your acquaintance, I knew that we would not be feasting together.

-- But there was a time when there was feasting in my house . . . there was a time when I was happy, surrounded by contentment, family . . . This time will be no more.

-- Why despair? God has much goodness.

He raised his eyes to the heavens.

-- May it be His will! he said solemnly.

For a few moments we were both silent. He walked slowly across the room and I drummed mechanically on the tabletop. The kettle hissed pitifully, and then quieted and then would hiss again, quieter and quieter like a dying man who in his final moans wastes his last bits of strength.

-- But you still don't know what I have lived through, said the old man, sitting down opposite me.

-- How should I know? I responded. -- Unburden your sorrow before me, tell me what you have lived through . . . who are you?

-- Who am I? You see, I am a soldier.

-- Yes, I see . . . Have you been serving long?

-- It has not been a year.

-- How did you manage to get drafted? Can it be that people your age are still on the recruitment lists?

-- I was not conscripted by turn.

-- Not by turn? How did it happen?

-- I was conscripted as a penalty. Many of us are penalty . . . I am a *penal recruit* .

-- What does that mean "penal recruit"?

-- It means . . . No, discharge me for today; today I am very upset. They wanted to make me run the gauntlet today because I could not carry a sack of flour to its place . . . I fell with the sack, the "official" flour spilled . . . Would you come tomorrow? You will find out my whole story then, but today I cannot assure you.

Promising to return the next evening, I said good-bye to my new acquaintance and returned to my lodgings.

## II

The entire next day, the penal recruit would not leave my head. With difficulty, I waited until evening and then went directly to him. This time, he greeted me more affectionately; it even seemed that my arrival pleased him.

-- You know, I awaited your arrival with anticipation, he said to me. -- From the moment when misfortune fell upon me, I haven't encountered a single friendly face, a person who showed any interest in me, before whom I could spill forth my bitterness. Only my wife and daughter that I saw once . . . for a short time and in such a state? God Almighty! I don't wish upon anyone to see his family in that condition!

-- When was it that you saw them? I asked.

-- At the moment when they were putting the soldier's overcoat on me, he answered: -- an hour before they sent me on my long journey. But this is the end of the story and you don't yet know the beginning. Listen.

We sat across from each other; he leaned with both hands on the table and with a drawn-out quiet voice began his story.

"The city in which I lived, in which I grew up and grew old was populated almost entirely by Jews and is located not far from the border. Our community is considered large. Although I was not among the richest, I had a comfortable living. Occupying myself with trade, like most of our brothers, I managed with effort and thrift to secure my situation. I lived happily with my family, which consisted of a wife and two daughters. God did not favor me with a son; I was upset about this for a long time but now I see that it was for the best. During my free hours -- of which I had many because my trade did not require my constant attention, I traded in wool with visiting foreign merchants: in my free time, I liked to read and to study those subjects to which I was inclined, thanks to the natural talents which were developed in me by my departed father. You know that most of us receive a poor boy's schooling because we are destined for trade; unless perhaps there is someone who wants to dedicate himself exclusively to learning and studies systematically and seriously. The trading class, on the other hand, relegates learning to a secondary place. At least, this is our custom in the Western provinces. Thus, one ought not to seek among us scholars or well-educated people, for this is a luxury and we are fated to labor in order to live and life is not easy for us because we are knocked together into big communities and limited in our activities, as you know. And so among us, as I have said, one will find few well-educated people but, likewise, a total ignorance, a complete absence of education is a rarity. More or less, many among us are studying something; one would not be ashamed to meet them, as Jews say, in other words, they may be rather decent people, limited to the Jewish sense of course because truly European enlightenment is still far from them, and actually not only from them but from many who are in a higher position than they are and enjoy a considerably better situation. I am speaking of officials and property-owners, although, obviously, there are exceptions.

I had my own small circle which consisted of *autodidacts*, or the so-called self-taught. We would at times get together and chat about Jewish literature which enjoyed particular success abroad or about new Polish or German works. There were few Russian-speakers among us; for the most part, the only people among us who knew Russian were those who had direct contact with the authorities, such as for instance, those who dealt with tax-farming, army-supply or fulfilled official duties. I was happy in my small circle of family and friends. Our time was spent between one's own business undertakings and peaceful gatherings at the home of one among us

where visiting shady Jewish manufacturers would sometimes chat about interesting questions in the areas of scholarship and literature, developing in the farthest reaches of Europe. Our city and the nearby town under its jurisdiction enjoyed the patronage, at least as it's allowed, of the periodic descent of the police and the local officials for whom a place populated by Jews always represents a profitable "estate". I don't have to tell you about it; I think it's the same where you live?"

-- Unfortunately, yes, I answered.

-- What can I say? continued the old man with animation. -- Whether it was a fair, a dead body, a deserter, some new order regarding the synagogues or the private schools, -- all of this turns into a new cause for bribery, all of this serves as a sure source of income for certain people. The end is always the same: a common appeal is announced, people are elected to submit the offer and the little ominous bell stops ringing until next time. But we are used to all that. You know that a Jew reconciles himself easily to his fate. A warm haven, an onion, a slice of bread and a piece of fish or meat for Shabbat and he is happy. Aware from his crib that oppression is his fate, that it has been decreed from above he sings his *zemirot* (table songs) and wipes an accidental tear from his cheek, in expectation of a better day.

He paused and for a few moments we sat in a deep silence.

"But our community suffered from another misfortune from which we could never extricate ourselves, once again there was a call-up for soldiers. And not just from a single community but everywhere as far as we knew. This was because of the shortages in the recruit quotas. We spent great sums of communal money, sent representatives to the provincial authorities, hired people from other cities, did our utmost but remained in arrears. Enjoying a certain respect in the city and the reputation of an unselfish person, I, among others, was elected to serve on the *kahal* board, a duty I fulfilled for more than ten years. Do you have any idea what a *kahal* member is? He is either a robber or a martyr -- there is no middle ground here. He must suffer the cries of a poor man, whose last blanket was taken away for tax obligations, a blanket which protected his naked family against the cold; he must bear the scream of the widow whose last son has been taken away as a recruit; he must stand the persecution of all the rich if somehow some member of their extended family was affected in the collection of tax money or the fulfillment of some other obligation but the rich will always find their defenders; he becomes the victim of the authorities if, out of pity for his poorer brothers, he decides to put a stop to the outright robbery of the collector of the *korobka* tax who sells bones that he calls meat and that for double its worth. If a *kahal* official has a heart, it is racked by daily tortures; if in his chest is a stone instead of a heart than he becomes one of the oppressors and fills his pocket. I tell you, he is either a robber or a martyr! Fortunately or unfortunately, I belonged to the latter category. What I have lived through, what I have suffered only God knows!

The expulsion of Jews from villages, occupational limitations, in residential rights and others like these, when coupled with a multiplying population, have produced among them a terrible poverty. You could hardly find in our city one well-off person to every two hundred poor ones! Poverty and homelessness increased year to year. This was exacerbated also by our custom of early marriage, an irrational custom which brings about so much harm! If for a propertied person, a large family is a blessing because it adds extra workers, to a homeless man with an uncertain source of income a large family is nothing but a curse. If early marriages nip in the bud the spread of depravity among the young, they likewise lead to premature aging, sometimes even to despair because at thirty something, one might already have two generations to support. This custom developed among the Jews because of their isolation from society during the Middle Ages, from the desire to remain close within the family and to find comfort in it since the outside world offered them none at that time. But when new times impose different conditions upon us, this custom no longer has any sense especially in our cities when the everyday life of Jews is limited and restricted in so many ways. However, it is difficult to distance oneself from deep-rooted nonsense. Even if someone who is a little smarter dares sometimes to raise his voice against decayed customs which at the present time bring about certain harm, the ignorant crowd is ready to drive him into the grave. A crowd is always a crowd, during the old days and now, it hurled and continues to hurl stones at a person who desires its good.

Every year our community amassed more and more shortages in taxes and in recruits. In the past the levies had significantly thinned out our population. Many families fled and disappeared without a trace. Many, capable of service, went abroad. There was not a single city family which was not missing a brother, son, grandson or husband. Some were hiding and some were already conscripted. Other families even served up recruits two or three times; for lack of others, their turn would continue to recur. Levies occurred often. If there was a levy from the Western provinces -- we gave recruits; from the Eastern provinces -- we again gave recruits and every time, ten to a thousand, -- no laughing matter! And how many among that thousand are under-age, dead, old people, the sick, and the incapable, runaways and finally those who had already left to serve but haven't yet been crossed off the census lists!

We suffered, we the elected people, God is a witness to our suffering, trying to fulfill the demands of the authorities; but what was the use? It was completely beyond our power. Wherever there was an orphan, a bachelor, a playboy, all of these we gave up as recruits. Families struggled against us, and rightly so: they had long ago served out their turn once and twice. We collected money, sent it out to hire recruits but this was always connected with incredible difficulties and expenditures and was rarely crowned with success. The authorities warned and threatened; it was necessary to go to the provincial offices, to scrape and beg, shower with gifts, spend terrible sums, papers and reports flew in all directions: "Such-and-such community is unable . . . because of cholera" or ". . . in consequence of a fire" or something else, time would pass, the storm would abate for a few months but at what cost to us! Thus was our strength idly sapped and our money needlessly wasted -- for the arrears were not covered but only grew and grew still more.

And what about the district-police chief and the constable, Heaven forfend? Does *he* have a paper from the provincial administration saying whether we owe recruits or not -- what does he care? At times, he'd saunter into the town -- the whole place trembles feverishly. "Lock the stores . . . stick this one in a cell . . . chase everyone into the synagogue . . . light the black candles . . . swear in old and young!" How? Why? God knows! Of course, the conclusion is always the same: the usual delegation, the usual bowing and scraping accompanied by the usual "extras".

I must admit I was disgusted with this life of constant fear and trembling. I begged the community to release me from my responsibility and to elect someone else in my place. I planned to leave my city, even that area, to move as far away as I could in order not to see the heart-rending scenes which, due to our continued arrears, recurred more and more often.

I have already told you that I had two daughters. One was seventeen, a bride already. Her intended was an orphan, without any kind of property but with wonderful talents. With my support, he was studying medicine in a far-away university. He had three years left until the completion of the course of study; as soon as he got his diploma, we meant to have the wedding. My other daughter was still a child, going on twelve. My daughters were good-looking . . . or perhaps it only seemed so to a parent's eye. What is the difference? They were my children, my flesh and blood, my joy and comfort on this earth, they were a part of my being. It seemed that they could not be torn from me without tearing my heart from chest . . . Oh, God! My God! But they were torn from me and still I live!"

He jumped up from his place and with an inexpressible despair began to wring his hands, to beat his breast, letting out quiet sobs.

I let him cry himself out; perhaps I too was crying, I don't remember. But after a few minutes he calmed down a bit and once again sat down.

-- Forgive the tears of an unhappy father, he began again, taking my hand: -- I cannot remember my children without tears. Here, here I feel a cruel ache!

He pointed to his chest.

-- I understand your grief, I answered, -- but . . .

He didn't let me finish.

-- But tears do not relieve the sorrow, he interrupted quickly: -- you can't turn back the clock . . . You are right . . . I will continue my story:

"My daughters received some education, commensurate with my means. I was asking the community for rest in order to devote the rest of my days to the happiness of my children.



Influential people in the community were ready to accede to my request in light of my age and the tenure of my service which, whether I served well or badly, brought me nothing but worries and disappointments. But then new circumstances arose -- and my resignation became entirely out of the question.

There was a new order which said that in order to prevent arrears in the future, for every missing recruit we would owe another two as a penalty and for every thousand rubles in back taxes, another recruit. In case of non-fulfillment of these conditions, the elected officials of the *kahal* itself would be taken and counted as penalty. We owed about forty recruits and now we -- just think! -- had to come up with 120, add the 120 and some of the most recent levy not to speak of the tens of thousands of rubles in back taxes which now had to be replaced with people -- then you will imagine the situation! Terror gripped us especially when we realized that in the case of arrears in supplying the penal recruits, new penalties would accumulate, two for every one and so on in a horrible progression until our whole people was transformed into a single giant party of recruits. We did not doubt the inevitability of this outcome because to fulfill these new demands there was no hope.

What was happening in our city at that time, I am powerless to describe. Messengers raced to the provincial administration, money fell like useless trash, we begged for mercy, for a postponement. Once again, offers were made through all the proper channels. But in the meantime, we did not idle: we began to grab up anyone we could. Anyone who had no defenders, was our recruit; eight-year-old children were taken, chained together in pairs and sent away. We were deaf to screams and cries. Oh, it was a terrible time! May God have mercy on those who cursed us with it!"

-- But all the same I don't understand this despair, I noted: -- the fatherland needs soldiers, it is a sin to refuse service when the tsar demands it.

"Without a doubt, a sin, answered the old man: the will of the tsar is the will of God. We must sacrifice our life to the fatherland, if it demands it. Who can argue with that? But our people are still not entirely used to military service. Besides, there is service and there is service. When there is some hope for promotion, it is another matter but a Jew cannot hope to be promoted to anything. In addition, take the rude treatment of fellow soldiers: who else to serve better as an outlet for rage and disappointment if not the *accursed yid*, who better to kick without any rhyme or reason than a yid, in whose face to shove a piece of bacon? To say nothing of the authorities which looks at Jews through different eyes, knowing that no distinction will move a Jew forward in the ranks. Certainly there may be exceptions to this, but I am speaking generally. Don't forget this happens to adults who at times can stand up for themselves or to complain to someone in charge but what about children? How must it be for a child, barely out of diapers in a foreign place, among coarse and cruel people who hate his faith and his tribe, among people who don't treat their own any better and whose language he doesn't understand at all? And what kind of service can be expected from such a child? Just to tend the hogs of a military colonist and to suffer the beating and the shoving, that is if in the meantime he does not manage to land in the grave. . . No! Service is one thing: one must serve if it is required, although it's a pity that the treatment is not everywhere tolerable especially at the hands of the lower command. The higher-ups, though, are always humane and honor God's creation in every person but they are far away and the lower officers are always at hand . . . Well, anyway we weren't speaking of that . . . the main subject is my story.

We struggled desperately. They began to take from us even the crooked and the toothless and those who already passed the age but what did every submission cost us! What were the costs in paying off medics, induction officials, scribes -- horrible to say! But in the end all of this was of little use: there was still more than half missing to reach the right figure. Recruitment arrears continued to grow and reached somewhere in the hundreds, too fearsome to count even. We stopped answering the letters from the provincial "office" after a while: we could not fulfill the demands and to explain that there was nothing to give was completely useless -- somehow the letters appeared to stop. It was calm for a time but clouds continued to gather above our heads. This illusory respite which we were given frightened us more than all of the harsh warnings: we

felt a terrible and unstoppable storm coming and we were not mistaken. It soon broke out in the most frightful way.

One morning -- it was the fourth day of Hanukkah ( holiday of the Maccabees) when we were preparing to celebrate the victory of our glorious ancestors over Antiochus when we heard a multitude of little bells all around the city. Our hearts stopped. The authorities had arrived from the district office: a regiment of soldiers entered the city. A few carriages stopped right in front of the synagogue. Like sheep, people were herded into the synagogue, young and old, women and children, everyone was herded with rifle-butts, the entire city was commanded to gather together. We -- the *kahal* officers, tax-gatherers, all communal officials -- were chained up into leg irons and likewise driven into the synagogue with the rest of the people. An enormous crowd had gathered: not just in both sections of the synagogue, the men's and the women's, which were packed with people but also the courtyard and the entire street in front of the synagogue was filled. An official rose to the platform and began to read out from a paper. He read for a long time, continually accusing us of not heeding orders, of obstinacy. When he finished, he began to pour out all sorts of insults upon our heads, he slung mud at everyone, without distinctions. Everyone listened to him without uttering a word, with fear and trembling but when in conclusion, he yelled: "Have you any idea with whom you are fooling? Don't you know you, you pitiful, contemptible people, that you can be erased from the earth in a single moment, to be stomped out like a disgusting worm!" when he pronounced these words, loud weeping escaped from the breasts of the listeners and those who were outside in the courtyard and in the street, hearing the cries of their brothers, likewise began to weep in expectation of something awful. Wails filled the air. It was frightful to see an entire population sobbing. It seemed at that moment that the dumb walls of the houses would shortly break out in tears.

But this was just the beginning. It was ordered to grab up anyone who looked like a fit recruit. People ran in all directions like a frightened flock, soldiers chasing them; terror was in every face. Everyone hid where they could, in cellars and attics, all stores were locked up and all activity stopped. There was an unbelievable commotion. But the number of recruits grabbed on the streets still did not reach the desired number. Orders were given to let up in the evening, to allow the confusion to die down but at night they invaded the houses and dragged people from their homes, from their beds. Scream all you want: I am too old, an only son, it's not my turn, my brother and my son are already serving, or I am entering the merchant estate and just waiting for certification or something else -- no one paid any attention to this, only shackles! and forehead! forehead! in the blink of an eye.

For a long time, the city could not recover from shock, no one dared to show his face in the street and someone who had a dire need would creep along like a thief through the narrow alleys and under fences. For two months the stores were closed, the markets were empty, there was no life, no movement of any kind. Only moans and sighs, sighs and moans were heard. Everyone mourned someone; here a father was missing, here a brother, there a husband, a son and in some places the first, the second and the third altogether.

Thus ended this raid, incurred by our unintentional and unavoidable "carelessness" -- a raid which struck our city as if we were paralyzed, it rendered us powerless, almost everyone despaired of their energy. This unprecedented event and fear for the future lay like a piece of lead on one's chest.

Us, the officials, of whom there were about fifteen, they counted among the penal recruits and chained together brought to the provincial "offices" where we were placed under arrest. Some could not stand it and died soon after right in prison.

You can imagine the lamentable fate of my family. My old woman, who felt an incredible attachment to me and respect, considering me an inviolable individual according to her own understanding, my daughter, the bride at whom a future with a beloved friend was so pleasantly smiling, the other daughter, a child, a favorite of her parents who assumed that it would be difficult to find someone higher and more important than her father because it was the father who endowed the family with all sorts of amusements and quiet joys -- all of this remained as if upon a wave and in one moment the family lost its head and its leader. The past disappeared like a fog, shattered into a thousand pieces. Of me, I cannot tell you a thing. It seemed that all of it was a lie, a terrible

dream: but unfortunately, the shackles and the prison reminded me that this was no dream but a merciless reality.

My wife, together with my elder daughter soon followed me to the provincial "offices". She gathered as much money as she could in the hopes of freeing me. She and my daughter went everywhere, begged and pleaded and did not stint any expense. There were some kind people who empathized with them, took the money and promised to help but as it turned out they could not help at all. Sometimes I was allowed to see my wife and daughter in my cell. They encouraged me to have hope, mixing their own tears with mine. Worry and sleepless nights exhausted them but they did not lose heart and continued to exert all possible efforts to ease my plight. Nothing helped. One morning, they shaved my beard and my forehead and lead me out into the courtyard where there were a few carts, people crowding around, recruits, policemen. I could not see anything, it was as if my reason became clouded. They took the upper garments off me and began to pull on the soldier's greatcoat. Suddenly a horrible scream was heard . . . it was my wife and daughter, who threw themselves upon my neck . . . I stood like a stone: on the faces of everyone around, regret was expressed. Even a few soldiers and policemen uttered "Poor women!" My wife hung on my chest like a 100-pound weight . . . another scream and she fell like a sheaf at my feet; she was struck by a heart attack.

I asked for a delay in order to sit at my wife's deathbed and was permitted. In an hour my wife was dead and a few minutes after her death, my eldest daughter went mad."

The old man was silent. Tears, like two rivulets, coursed down his cheeks. It seemed as if the hair on my head were pricking me. I wondered inside how such a weak old man, worn out by a prison term, tortured by the fate of two people dear to him which befell them before his eyes, could survive all this.

-- But you see, here I am, I have not lost my mind and I live, he continued after a brief silence as if responding to my secret thought. -- I am a useless vessel, a broken shard, I have to stand all of the suffering of a sound mind and she, so beautiful and innocent, just beginning to bloom, was forced to abandon her hopes and dreams . . . What is to be done? God is just. He gives and He takes away, may His Name be blessed!

-- So then what happened after? I asked, seeing that he was somewhat calmer.

-- What could have happened after? he retorted with bitterness. -- Was this insufficient? I was sent far away to the north, I spent a few months there. But thanks to the efforts of kind people, I was transferred into the local garrison and supplied with good connections. With the efforts of the same people, my business affairs were tied up as I had been caught unawares and had left everything in disarray. Everything that could be collected after the substantial final expenditures of my departed wife and the plunder of the officials, was turned into cash money and given to dependable people. An old woman, distantly related, was appointed guardian to my younger daughter and she is supported from the percentages accumulating on the left-over money. As I am informed, my elder daughter is lying in a hospital in a provincial town, near death. I beg that the heavens take her as quickly as possible . . . They even send me money here sometimes but I don't have any need for it, and I don't really need much here. The authorities treat me well; they allowed me to rent lodgings of my own and do not burden me too much with service duties. May they be rewarded by God, protector of all the miserable! They are lenient with me, the higher-ups that is. From the lower command, I sometimes get it even though I know my business and what to offer to whom; but there is nothing to be done, I take it. I sometimes even grow cheerful and begin to reconcile myself with my condition but not for long. Thoughts of my poor child, the only being alive who is still left to me, gnaws at me constantly. The young woman is growing up, developing . . . what will become of her, a motherless orphan, 1200 versts from me!

He lowered his head and sank into deep sorrow. I paced the room for a long time, stealing glances at the "penal recruit"; he continued to sit in one position and it seemed had entirely forgotten about my presence. I went to the window and opened it. The summer evening stood in all of its enchanting beauty. On a dark-blue sky, sown with a million stars, some blindingly bright and others hardly glittering at all, as if trembling in an unimaginable distance. The moon swam, unnoticed, emitting a pale calming light. The city was long asleep. Everything in nature was quiet and triumphant.

I went over to the old man and placed my hand on his shoulder. He stood up. Taking him by the hand, I walked with him to the window.

-- Look how beautiful it all is, I said to him. -- Does it really lack the power to console you?

-- You speak of the beauty of nature, he answered: -- and ask if it consoles me? No . . . You are young yet, you have not known unhappiness . . . your eyes see differently and convey different impressions to your imagination. I was young once too and saw the world and nature in another way . . . but it is no longer the same. I remember, he added, pointing with his hand to the horizon: -- I remember that there ought to be happiness and light but I do not see it with my eyes and do not feel it with my heart. For me, the sky is dressed in the black of mourning, the moon is a funeral candle, the stars look like open, gaping wounds on a mutilated body from which blood is about to stream forth, the trees seem to whisper of horrors committed in silence. . . No, everything which is visible and everything beyond that, that which is far off, what is beyond the power of my bodily eyes, what is covered in mystery for all of us -- that is what consoles me. There, beyond your bright images and my dark ghosts, there where thoughts dare not reach, -- there it is, my consolation.

### III

My friendship with the "penal recruit" got stronger every day. Not a day would pass when we would not see each other; I spent whole evenings at his place and sometimes he at mine. We found pleasure in conversation with each other. I loved to hear his stories about our communities in the Western provinces, about the fights between factions in these tiny anthills, about the Hasidic sect and their enthusiastic ways, ignorant tzaddikim or leaders, about their constant quarrels and wars with the party of the educated which placed obstacles in their path at every step. According to his stories, the social life of the Jews in those places still stood on a very low level and no wonder: during the most recent times, in the matter of enlightenment Jews move behind the ruling nation but the petty nobility, bureaucracy and peasant estate in this regard do not represent anything which is worthy of imitation. Crowded together in a narrow space, they are incapable of untangling themselves from the thick web of prejudices, woven during the Middle Ages; rather, they become even more entangled because the growing ignorance of past foolishness serves to add new absurdities. This unenviable state of things was significantly abetted by the system of burdensome responsibility which gradually descended upon them. In such a situation, quite unconsciously everyone blends together, each one holds fast to one another and acquires from his fellow that which should not be acquired at all. Behind lock and key people blather about nothing or talk nonsense whereas when they are freed, they learn proper treatment of the light/ proper relations with society, get down to work and bring benefit not only to themselves but to others.

Despite all this, enlightenment made headway, by storm -- as the "penal recruit" put it -- breaking through all kinds of obstacles put in its path by obscurantism and unfavorable circumstances. There was no city or town which did not have a substantial number of sensible people inclined toward European ways. At first it was difficult for them to fight Hasidism because very often wealth and power were for the most part with the latter, and therefore local authorities. Coarse self-love continually strove to rule the day. At the head of the Hasidim often stood rich people who paid out enormous sums to their tzaddikim and because of this had influence over the national masses and held them in sway. All trade was in the hands of these first-rank criminals and the entire fraternity of second-rankers was in debt to them and was forced to dance to their tune. One hand washed the other. The local authorities were always behind these petty and ignorant despots and therefore things were awful for people with independent opinions, with a sensible and modern outlook. However in truth enlightenment began little by little to triumph. Enlightenment found its adepts even in the homes of rich Hasidim and thus Hasidism was stopped in its rapid, all-consuming track. Hebrew compositions which found their true mark appeared here and there in Lithuania and struck at Hasidism with their biting jests and satires, displaying the charlatanism of the sanctimonious tzaddikim and the absurdity of Hasidic customs; in a certain sense, public

opinion was shaken. The ultimate result of this was that Hasidism was paralyzed; it did not even dare to move forward but dragged along and rarely found new adherents. But even that which remained was sufficient. This sect put forth deep roots and produced many seedlings and had already in the past conquered a great space; years were needed until the consequences of this could be effaced. After the fundamental blow sustained by Hasidism, came the period for enlightenment to do its work; only for it alone and its faithful disciples was reserved the task which could not be accomplished by any measures of force.

Unfortunately, according to the words of the "penal recruit" even the authorities in those places looked askance at people who tried to raise up their brothers sunk deep in their ignorance and unaware of their humiliating position, by means of the slow but sure way of education. Whether this was due to the machinations of rich egoists who were loath to lose their influence or to the tendencies of the bureaucrats themselves, seeing a dangerous person in anyone who had his own opinion, who failed to remove his hat at fifty paces, who demanded respect toward his own person and actively opposed all kinds of arbitrariness; or maybe it was the consequence of both of these together? . . . Perhaps. But the main misfortune consisted of the fact that circumstances made no exception for anyone. Limitations lay equally upon all, the educated and the hardened fool. For the time being, no material advantages presented themselves to the former. They toiled, while being counted among the majority, similarly despised and oppressed; they toiled for the future.

The "penal recruit" sometimes related to me the dirty tricks of the provincial authorities and especially of the assessors and the police prefects. Their sway in the yid townlets had no limits, their greed knew no boundaries. It goes without saying that a city where there are a few thousand people cannot be without crime, without vagrants and the like. So what follows? Vagrants ought to be collected, crimes uncovered, the guilty given over into the hands of justice and the whole matter dispensed with. Of what concern can all of this be to the townlet? But with Jews, the matter stands otherwise. Especially for them is invented the notion of collective responsibility, obviously by the police and the assessors themselves since the law knows no such thing. Take anyone you can, tie him up, put him in irons, drag in the innocent with the guilty. The leaders run around the city, collect money and the stern administrator of his own private justice relents. One thread from every person -- and the poor man gets a shirt; one ruble from each -- and the police chief gets a thousand, and more. Obviously, the latter goes on to pay out whoever is required. The way these gentlemen look out for new means of procuring money is really worthy of utter amazement. The old man acquainted me with a few such occurrences.

One time a dead body was found; the policeman came, placed two guards at the location and informed the district town. While the appointed officials prepared to conduct the investigation, the policeman arrived at a wonderful idea. He collected the body, placed it on his cart, together with his scribe and a witness from among the peasants and rode to the nearest Jewish-owned tavern. This was Friday night; the Jew was just getting ready to celebrate his Sabbath. His wife had dressed up in a festive way; on the table covered with a white tablecloth, in a seven-branched copper candelabrum candles burned brightly, two loaves covered with a napkin; a carafe of vodka sparkled in the middle; the kids jumped around the table; from the oven the tempting smell of stuffed pike waiting to be brought to the table wafted around the room; the owner in his Sabbath coat proudly walked about the room and rubbed his hands with pleasure and respect toward his own person. Suddenly -- a bell. The policeman runs in, they bring in the corpse and lay it right on the table. The scribe is ready to do his job, everything is ready for the process of autopsy. The Jew becomes as pale as death, the wife wailing runs into the cellar and locks herself in with the two-three of the littlest kids while the rest of the children hide under the bed. "Your honor, have mercy! What did we do to deserve such a curse?" -- Go to hell, fool, yid . . . you dare resist . . . I'll drag you to the police district and you'll rot in jail . . . An emergency: an "official" corpse . . . A couple of half-crowns send the policeman packing, together with his "official" corpse. The policeman races to another tavern five versts away where dinner has already begun. Again the same story and the same half-crowns. In this manner he drove the corpse around the entire neighborhood that whole night and the next day and everywhere took money from Jews in order to

safeguard the honor of the Sabbath day. On Sunday, he returned to the place where the body was found and coolly, without skipping a beat, began to await the arrival of the appointed commission.

Another knight of the same colors half-shaved the head of an unlucky teacher and sent him in chains to the district court, which placed him under arrest from where the poor fellow barely extricated himself after a year and that, thanks only to the intercession of kind people. The affair was of this nature: This teacher was a man of some education and taught his students the Bible with German translation, arithmetic, history, and geography; in the town, such a teacher was a great rarity. All of the well-off people of the new style entrusted their children to him. It should not be forgotten that this was a private teacher; "official" schools were at that time did not yet operate among the Jews. At that time, every town was inundated with a mass of ignorant *melamdim* who are these days, thank God, little by little forced out. These were either frightful fanatics, who stuffed the heads of their charges with metaphysical fantasies or simply ignoramuses who hardly understood Scripture and with great difficulty one or two tractates of the Talmud. The children were stuffed in so-called *hadarim* or schools and in piercing shrieks and wild body movements repeated their lessons before the stern *melamed* who, alien to any rules of rational morality and the laws of social intercourse filled their young heads with his own parochial ascetic outlook on life. Because it was necessary for every Jew to know the law and the religious writings, it was necessary to make do with the meager means provided by these half-barbarous *hadarim*. But the teacher in question introduced order and reform into education. He presented useful areas of knowledge with all of the talents of a capable pedagogue. The party of the enlightened in town, obviously the most insignificant both in terms of numbers and in terms of influence, was delighted with him, while the party of the Hasidim hated him and tried to get rid of him with every possible means. People were found to denounce him to the authorities for teaching from books forbidden by the censor. The police prefect, as usual, well-plied by the obscurantists, appeared on the scene to investigate. Taking all of the books away from the teacher, he took him in for questioning. "How dare you teach from forbidden books?" he began yelling. -- These -- forbidden books? objected the teacher. -- Here, see for yourself: this is a general history, this is arithmetic and so forth. "And what is this?" continued the prefect, pointing to the Bible with German translation. -- This is a Bible with Mendelssohn's translation, replied the teacher. -- "Who is this Mendelssohn? What sort of person is he? shouted the provincial official: probably he is the same kind of thief and crook as you are! Where is he? Give him here!" -- How can I do that? He died long ago, answered the accused. -- "You lie! He is hiding, bellowed the policeman: give him here: we ought to have the two of you confront one another . . . You are all a bunch of brigands and plotters! Here is a fine thing, this one is in cahoots with some Mendelssohn and won't admit a thing. Just wait, I'll send you up the river, then you'll be singing a different tune." And so he dispatched a half-shaven and chained teacher to court, with a report in which it was stated that so-and-so continues to resist questioning and to conceal his partner, one Mendelssohn, with whom it is necessary to arrange a face-to-face confrontation in order to uncover the whole truth of the matter. Fixing the teacher in this manner, the prefect started up with the parents who dared to entrust the education of their children to a person who clearly posed such a danger to the state, in the process skinning them for a nice amount. Ignorance triumphed and good intentions either sat in prison or paid money.

In those days I heard my fill of scandalous injustice.

But the greater part of my conversations with the "penal recruit" leaned toward his own misfortune and his little daughter, leading her orphan's life somewhere far away. It seemed that the whole life of the old man, all his thoughts focused on this little child who so early discovered the tragic unpredictability of fate.

-- Oh! he said to me on one occasion: -- if only I could see my child once more and hold her close to my heart. I can feel that here I will lay my bones to rest; there is nothing left to mourn, it's time for me to rest. But if I could see my child just one more time, if I knew that her future is secure, I could go quietly to my grave.

-- Why not send for her then? I asked. -- If she were here with you, you could occupy yourself with arrangements for her future.

-- I thought about this myself, he answered: -- but it is impossible for many reasons. Just think: it's so far! To drag her here, where I don't have, and will probably never have, any kind of acquaintances. What can I give her here? Who will want to enter into a relation with me, a soldier, when it comes time for her to marry? After all no one here knows what I once had been . . . Some might even think that I am a contemptible person, paying for some crime, while at home everyone at least knows me for a long time and also knows the story of my misfortune. It is more likely that a suitable match will be found for her there than here. And finally, what will happen to her if I should die before she reaches maturity? This is more than a possibility: my body is worn out with age and suffering. What would she do, so young in a strange place? . . . No, it is impossible: she must remain there . . .

I agreed that the old man was absolutely right.

My acquaintances were surprised at my spending so many hours with an old soldier. They could not understand my strange behavior, when I declined invitations to their merry parties to go visit the "penal recruit" about whom they made quiet inquiries in order to find out whom I was favoring over them. I paid no attention to their jokes and witticisms and left them in ignorance, unwilling to sully sublime suffering by recounting it to an absent-minded and careless audience, occupied with its empty amusements.

The affairs which kept me in Z. came to an end. I was supposed to leave, and began making arrangements for my departure. I was very sorry to part with the "penal recruit" to whom I formed a sincere attachment; he also expressed regret at our parting because he had paid me in kind, obvious to me despite the fact that he expressed it wordlessly with his own quiet sorrow.

The last evening of my stay in Z. I wished to spend in his company. We chatted for a long time about all sorts of things. I had to leave early in the morning and soon it came time to say good-bye.

-- Thank you, my young friend, the old man said with feeling, holding my hand in his: -- thank you for your empathy, for your unselfish friendship . . .

-- For God's sake, leave off such thanks! I exclaimed. -- I am the one who has to thank you: I learned a great deal from you, found out a great deal . . .

-- No, I cannot forget your friendship, he interrupted: -- you made a gift of your own free time to a lonely old man, you spent time with him which you could have spent in the company of happy comrades and friends . . . For youth, this is a great sacrifice. You brought me comfort and would compel me to forget even for a moment my unhappy fate. Accept my last embrace . . . Probably we shall never see each other again.

-- How do you know? I said: -- even though I don't foresee any future business in this part of the country, still . . . commerce is a capricious goddess, without warning, she tosses her devotees all around the world. I hope some day to see you happy and at peace enfolded in the embraces of your daughter . . .

Sadly he shook his head.

#### IV

Nine years passed.

The capricious goddess did in fact toss me to Z. for a second time. After a short rest from the road -- I had traveled more than a thousand versts on post-horses -- my first impulse was to visit the "penal recruit."

He still lived in the same small house, the only window of which faced the narrow, empty lane. The day was turning to dusk. My chest trembled. What was my old friend up to? Had time brought him comfort, or at least forgetfulness of past wounds? Did he have the chance to see his daughter, for whom had so yearned his suffering heart? These questions crowded upon one another in my head when burning from impatience I ran into the tiny courtyard and rushed to the long-familiar door.



In the small hall-way, I encountered a young soldier, holding some piece of paper in his hand; by his face, I instantly recognized him as a Jew. He blocked the door, respectfully removed his service-cap and asked me who I was looking for.

I told him that I wished to see the old man.

-- Impossible, he answered: -- he is very weak and cannot see anybody . . . Here, have a look, I am going to the drugstore with this prescription.

-- It's no matter, let me in, I said: -- he will be glad to see me: he and I are old friends.

-- The reason doesn't matter, it is not allowed, objected the soldier -- He spent a terrible night and was delirious throughout the day . . . Now he seems to have dozed off a bit, perhaps he will sleep . . . It isn't allowed.

-- Is he seriously ill? I asked, worried.

-- Seriously, answered the soldier: -- very seriously . . . God only knows whether he will recover from this illness . . .

-- All the more, I want to see him, I said very disturbed by the words of the young soldier.

-- Perhaps when he sees me, he will feel better . . . Perhaps . . .

The soldier made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

-- People don't recover from such things, he interrupted: -- his time has come. If you are really his friend, then leave now and let him rest . . . Come another time.

I was ready to heed the advice of the soldier; I was even glad that he was so concerned about the old man and shielded him from untimely visits. But suddenly the door to the room quietly opened and a young man appeared in the hall-way, a young man of about thirty, tall and stately, wide-shouldered and with an intelligent, noble face. He was dressed in a black coat which was buttoned all the way up and fitted nicely around his well-formed figure. His head was not covered and his black curly hair, carelessly combed, endowed his attractive face with a particular thoughtfulness.

-- See here, decide, Doctor, said the soldier, addressing the young man -- He wants especially to see *father*. . .

Upon hearing this word, I quickly sized up the doctor and the soldier.

-- What *father*? Whose father? I asked in bewilderment.

-- I am sorry, said the doctor, not answering my question: -- the patient is in a condition which in no way allows . . . Wait, just a minute! he added, looking me carefully up and down. -- Allow me to inquire, whom I have the pleasure of seeing?

I gave him my last name.

-- My God! Just as I thought, said the doctor, taking both of my hands in his -- It is you, the young friend of whom the old man constantly spoke before he had become so weak! Even now he often recalls your name . . . So it's you! Oh father, father! If only the arrival of an old friend who at some time had reduced your bitter loneliness, could now sweeten your last moments! We all call him father, me, and that soldier and the one sitting at his bedside in the room and the other two whom you will probably see . . .

-- And who are you, may I ask? I said.

-- I am a medic, as you have already heard, answered the young man. -- I am the person who owes his present title to him, to our mutual friend . . . that medic, he added with an inexpressible anguish in his eyes and voice, -- who was supposed to marry his older daughter . . .

We shook hands with each other.

-- Let's go into the room, continued the doctor: your presence will not disturb the patient, he seems to be sleeping. Indeed, perhaps it may help him, if there is still any human possibility that something could help him . . .

Saddened by the doctor's last words from which I could easily surmise that there were few hopes for the life of the patient, I entered the room that I had not seen in nine years but one that I had often recalled.

The same table with books, to which some new ones had been added, the same tall chest in the corner, holding the folded soldier's overcoat, the same dress uniform and cutlass on the wall -- everything appeared to me in its long-familiar form: but on the bed lay the sick tormented old man, whose mustache and hair had grown completely gray and around whose emaciated face already



hovered the air of death. At the foot of the bed motionlessly sat a young soldier looking very much like the one who had left with the prescription.

We sat ourselves down quietly, at a distance from the sick man.

-- Finally, he will be rid of all his sufferings, whispered the doctor to me: -- I doubt that he will live another twenty-four hours.

-- So there is no hope? I asked.

-- None. How could one at his age survive such a case of pneumonia!

-- Has he been sick long?

-- Almost a month. Did he need much to get sick, after all? His sorrow gradually ate away at his life but this last finally did him in.

-- Which last? I asked.

-- Oh, of course, you don't know, answered the doctor: -- he lost his second daughter as well . . .

I could not control myself and jumped up from the chair. A loud outcry nearly escaped from my chest.

-- Calm yourself . . . quiet, you will disturb him, said the doctor, taking me by the shoulder and sitting me down in my place. -- I know how this news must shock you . . . In speaking to me of you, he did not omit a single detail and conveyed all of his conversations with you, all of the comfort which you offered to him . . . He told me how often you consoled him with the thought that he might some day see his only remaining child and for how long he yearned for this untold happiness, how he thirsted for it . . . Poor, poor man! He was forced to drain the cup of bitterness to its last dregs . . . The only hope which remained to him and which connected him with life, did not come to pass; he lost his remaining daughter . . .

-- When did she die? How did it happen? I asked.

-- She is alive, answered the doctor, shaking his head in sadness: -- but to him, she is dead.

-- I don't understand, I said: -- explain . . .

-- Afterward . . . not here . . . not now . . . afterward . . . answered the doctor: -- we will go to my lodgings and you will find out everything . . .

I was silent. My body shook with fever, then with chills. The fate of this unhappy old man disclosed itself to me in all of its merciless cruelty.

-- Yes, continued the doctor, sighing and dropping his head as if talking to himself: -- destiny accomplished her task, pitilessly destroyed a whole family . . .

-- Who are you whispering with there, doctor? came a weak, barely comprehensible voice of the patient, laying with his eyes closed.

The doctor stood up and made a sign for me to follow him. We went near the bed.

-- Look, father, said the doctor: -- here is someone you will be pleased to see.

The old man opened his eyes and his gaze was fixed upon me. His face came alive for a moment. He immediately recognized me and stretched forth a hot withered hand; I grabbed it feverishly.

-- It is you, my old friend! he said weakly. -- Oh, how you have changed! It seems, time did not spare you . . . every one has the same portion . . . time takes care of everyone in its own way.

I was silent. Involuntary tears streamed down my cheeks.

-- Here, it is settling final accounts with me . . . continued the old man. -- This is it . . . I have paid out my debts, now we add up the columns and sign: cleared with payment . . .

-- My friend, we don't despair: you will live with us, I interrupted, myself unconvinced by my words . . .

He smiled sadly.

-- No, don't deceive yourself, he said: -- anyway, for what? . . . Why should I continue living? This would be only a fresh cruelty and I believe in the endless mercy of the heavens . . . The heavens ought to be satisfied with what I have suffered . . . My last hope, or better to say the ghost of a hope, has collapsed . . . you probably know already . . . What do I have left in this desolate world? It is time for the grave! Old bones are demanding their rest.

I spent the remainder of that sad evening in the room of the patient. He spoke with difficulty but firmly and calmly of the life to come, eternal and free from temporal losses and vain desires. He was dying like a righteous soul, like a man of true wisdom, with deep faith in God's goodness not of a trembling slave but of a faithful son.

With the soldier who came back from the drugstore came two more young soldiers so that there were now four in the room. From the newly arrived, two attracted my attention -- one by his Herculean height and lively movements, while the other, clearly his opposite, was short and obviously weak. The other two, whom I had seen before, were similar enough to each other in height and outlook to be twins which I discovered later, they were. From the newly arrived, the shorter one replaced the one who had been sitting at the foot of the sick-bed and the one with the prescription who had greeted me at the door made ready for himself a simple bed on the floor near the patient. The other two did the same in the hallway. It was clear that they were making preparations to take turns watching through the night. They would often go in and out; one would give medicine to the patient, another fixed his bedclothes, another gave him water or did something else. Sometimes, faint whispers of one to the other would reach me: "What about father? How is father doing today? What did the doctor have to say? Will father live?" All of them were concerned; all of them with sincere empathy would often direct their eyes at the sick man; it was clear that they felt a sincere attachment for him.

The doctor and I sat at his bedside and occasionally exchanged brief phrases. The patient was calm; he would often take my hand and express with his look that my presence pleased him.

-- You are probably surprised at these soldiers taking charge here? he said, noticing that I would often not take my eyes from this or that soldier, walking on tiptoe into the room from the hallway or out of the room.

-- Yes, I don't see why you need so many to serve you, I said: -- they only disturb you no matter how hard they try to do the opposite. Even two would be sufficient, it seems.

-- They refuse to leave him, remarked the doctor. -- They beg and plead with me not to send them away.

-- Please, I ask you, do not send them away, said the patient: -- They call me "father" . . . I enjoy hearing this word: it reminds me of so much.

-- Who are they, these soldiers? I asked. -- How did they end up with you?

-- They are "the catch", answered the old man.

I made a questioning gesture with my head because this word "the catch" was entirely new to me.

-- Don't concern yourself, father, said the doctor perceiving that the old man was about to answer me. -- To speak at length is both difficult and unhealthy for you. Allow me to explain what this strange word means and how these soldiers ended up here: I am as well informed about this as you are.

The soldier sitting by the sickbed turned around to face the doctor; another, whose watch was meant to begin at midnight was already lying on the floor, raised himself up quietly and sat up on his makeshift bed; the other two, still busy about the room, squatted by the threshold. All of them prepared to hear what was long familiar to them as though it was the freshest bit of news. But after all, this subject was too close to their hearts.

-- "The catch" at first referred to those, began the doctor, -- who were "caught" by the authorities because they did not have proper documentation of residence and were conscripted as a result. Recently, permission was granted to Jewish communities to catch all of those who lacked passports and belonged to other communities, even in another province, and to hand them over as conscripts to be counted against their own conscription obligation. Heads of families themselves, no matter who, could catch anyone without a passport and hand him over instead on oneself or anyone in one's own family. This was supposed to remedy the serious recruit arrears that had accumulated among the Jews everywhere. The hunt was on. They would grab anyone they could, whether or not he had a passport; the passport itself posed no obstacle because it could be destroyed and the hapless "catch" could scream with all his might that he has written documents -- no one would believe him. One's own misfortune deafened all pity and money smoothed all further consequences. This was a clear case of trade in people who were being sold by anyone

who had the desire and bought by anyone who had the need. It was dangerous to leave even for half a verst without a passport because anyone could be hunted down to become "the catch" handed over for recruitment in any place where there was need of one. It is difficult to imagine how much evil was brought about by this measure which supposedly aimed at the good. The passport-less were hunted down like wild animals because this brought profit; they were hunted down not with the purpose of rooting out vagrancy but for personal gain. But this was not enough. Children were ripped out of the arms of their parents with force and with guile, taken away and sold as passport-less.

-- But this is awful! I uttered.

-- Yes, awful, unheard-of, but this is precisely how it was, continued the doctor. -- Every city, every town -- everywhere a market for "the catch". These four soldiers that you see here they are among the "catch". Two of them that are so like one another, they are twin brothers. They lived in a village with their mother and supported her with their labor; their father died a sailor in the fleet. One fine evening, the police prefect arrives, grabs them, ties them up and drives them away to the nearest town where the communal heads pay him what he has been promised ahead of time. The mother's wailing and crying do no good. That thinner, shorter one that you see at the sick bed, he was taken because he really didn't have residence documents; actually he had them, but they had expired. He worked in some city for a tailor, became ill, was left without any money and could not send away for a new passport. On the first day after feeling better, he left his house to find work and was grabbed up on the street by the "hunters" who dragged him to the collection house and chained him up with other recruits. And that tall man-child was lured into a tavern where they got him drunk and stole his passport right out of his pocket. Be so kind as to tell us what happened to you, concluded the doctor addressing the stately service-man who was carelessly twirling his mustache as if to show that he didn't give a damn about anything in the world.

-- What is there to tell, sir, answered the soldier phlegmatically: -- it's always the same old story. Drink was my downfall. It's a pity though; that passport was brand new, good for a year, could have served me another ten months.

-- How did they manage to steal it from you? I asked: -- You appear to be such a fine strong fellow.

-- What of it? answered the soldier: -- What "fine strong fellow" can resist a drink? Well, neither could I. I used to work in a port city, you know, in the grain trade. The money was good, at that time lots of grain used to be shipped abroad: either the French or the English were starving . . . in need of our Russian bread. Well, please yourself! Just give us your thalers over here. What a time that was! In my trade, one earns about four rubles a day so how can one not party? And the taverns there, curse them, are one better than another. So one hangs about in one or another until midnight at tea and "floor polish". One time we were all sitting around, some fellows joined us and we started putting it away . . . Well, those demons got me good and drunk, lead me out and lay me to sleep somewhere. The next day, I rub my eyes, where the hell am I? What do you think? I am lying in the collection house and next to there are another two fellows. I get up to dress. "Where, they say, are you going? We won't let you." -- Why not? -- "We are handing you over to be a soldier, that's what." -- For what, a soldier? -- "Because you're a vagrant, that's why and our 'catch'." -- Lying bastards! You are the vagrants, not me. I put my hand on my wallet, where I keep my money and my passport . . . the money is there, all of it but the passport disappeared, fell through the earth, go figure it. They stole it, those scoundrels. I start to make some noise . . . the collectors and the scribes and the whole low-down bunch come running. . . I am screaming give me back my papers and they make like they don't understand a word . . .

-- Why did you not complain? I asked.

-- Complain to whom? objected the soldier: -- What next? Who would've heard me out? They've got the whole system well fixed . . . I got so mad, I didn't think twice, gave this one in the teeth, and that one, and the third . . . rang all their bells. . . Well, I tell them, now take me, chain me up and the devil take the whole lot of you!

-- And when you were being inducted you didn't say a word to the officials? I asked once again.

-- Yeah, I did but they scared the pants off me, answered the soldier. -- One gentleman with the gold epaulettes even laughed . . . remarked about me "You can tell this one is a bum and a great trickster . . ." So I stopped fussing. I have no family and no kin so there is no one to bewail me or to beat a head against the wall on my account. They took me and in one second, my forehead was shaved. Then one of those comes up to me, tries to kiss up, says: don't be angry brother, it's probably meant to be. Maybe, I say, but still you are all some kind of scoundrels: they give you a break and take your money into the bargain. . . Go to hell, all of you and God grant me to forget the likes of you altogether! As for me, I'm gonna serve God and the tsar faithfully and truthfully not like those bribers who a hundred times a day betray their oath . . . Well, with this ended the whole tale.

-- Go to sleep fellows, said the doctor. -- and we too will leave shortly . . . So, here are the "catch" for your consideration, he continued, addressing me.

-- But how did they end up with our old man?

-- Very simply, said the doctor. -- They were serving here; the old man saw them often, heard their stories and out of compassion helped them out as much as he could. The authorities were well-disposed toward him so he could talk them into letting one of these fellows, or two or even all of them to come to him for the holiday. Sometimes he would give them money, you know he was never in need, as far as money was concerned. They came to love him, grew attached to him and began to call him father. Really in more than one sense, he was their father. And when he became ill they began to care for him and to watch over him like his own children. He asked not to be taken to the military hospital . . . His commander respected his wishes, even brought the regimental doctor here and himself visited a couple of times. He praised the youngsters that they didn't abandon their old friend and after that, their zeal doubled. This is how it was until I arrived and goes on like that every since I've replaced the regimental doctor.

During our conversation, the old man had turned to face the wall.

-- We can leave, said the doctor after leaning over the patient for a few minutes and listening to his breathing. -- He is asleep. Let us to go to my place, I don't live far from here. It is too early for us to go to sleep.

We went out.

## V

I awaited with impatience to discover what had happened to the daughter of the "penal recruit" but did not dare to disturb the doctor with my queries, seeing that he was engaged in his own gloomy thoughts. But when we entered his lodgings and sat down on the couch, he himself began to tell me what I could not resolve to ask him.

-- I promised you not long ago to tell you the story of father's last misfortune, said the doctor. -- I will tell you now: you must know the sad tale of the old man to the end . . . You are aware of how the wife and the older daughter attempted to rescue him, how the former died seeing her husband with the shaved forehead and the gray overcoat of a recruit and how the latter . . . my intended . . . lost her mind.

-- Yes, this is known to me, I answered.

-- Is it known to you also that this daughter after a few months of quiet and peaceful madness, which we in the medical profession call *tacuitas* (being touched), let out her last breath in the hands of strangers in the hospital of that same provincial town?

-- Yes: the old man told me then that he had received word of her illness. He even wished for her speedy end, the poor father!

With his handkerchief, my interlocutor wiped the tears that appeared in his eyes and shook his black curls.

-- Did he tell you the condition in which his younger daughter remained? he asked.

-- He told me that an old relative was appointed as her guardian and that she replaced her parents, I answered.

-- She was some replacement, let me tell you, said the doctor, smiling sadly. -- The young woman grew, became more lovely each day: people say that she was an astonishing beauty at the time but of course the last time I had seen her, she was still almost a child. I was finishing my studies then and planned to marry her, if I would not disgust her. But, unfortunately, I was forestalled.

-- What happened?

-- Some petty official, who possessed about fifteen peasant souls near the town, began to court her. The old woman was blind and stupid and the young girl, inexperienced and flighty. The cad dishonored her and continued his visits for about a month or so. But it was difficult to hide her condition. So the seducer talked her into gathering all of the household silver and some money, to fly with him and to leave her faith. He promised to marry her. She did everything he asked but he did not keep his promise. Picking her clean, he mercilessly threw her out just when the time of birth for the fruit of their criminal liaison was getting near. With all of her might she tried to hide her pregnancy and then from shame resolved on a crime . . . She was caught and thrown into jail where she spent two years and where all sense of modesty and shame completely died within her. Some old lecher, smitten with her beauty, got her out of jail and took her into his house. But after his sudden death, she experienced at the hands of his relatives the same fate that she experienced in the hands of her first seducer. What was a poor woman who had barely reached the age of eighteen to do? She could not return home, and anyway it would have been fruitless: she freely rejected everyone she knew and could expect nothing but contempt from them. Without thinking, she plunged headlong into the pit of corruption and was swallowed in it entirely.

-- Horrible! I cried out, clasping my hands.

-- A few years after returning from the university, continued the doctor, -- I had a practice in the same provincial city where her sister had died and where she herself was living at the time. I would sometimes chance to see this miserable creature carousing among her contemptible friends, whom she surpassed not only in her blinding beauty but in her wild debauchery. She had not even a trace of modesty. Her raging personality would often lead her to the prison court-yard. Giving no quarter to anyone, she acquired a kind of pathetic local reputation: the entire city knew her as "the lady". She continues to lead this life to this day at the very same time when her poor father was dying from grief and loneliness. I would sometimes correspond with him. He would not let either me or his old friends rest with constant questions about the fate of his daughter and why he had not, for so many years, had word of her. It goes without saying that the truth was hidden from him. Sometimes, they would write that she is not well, or that she had gone to a wedding in another town and remained there for a visit, or some other such lie. Sometimes, his letters would remain unanswered for half a year. Finally, they stopped writing altogether, running out of appropriate excuses and stories. But when recently he had written to an old friend of his, in which he said that he would request leave and if he was refused, even threatened to flee and risk the gauntlet, just to embrace his child one final time, his friend decided it was best to disclose the whole truth to him. The old man could not take this latest blow and took to his bed. His illness grew more and more serious and became dangerous. At the time the "catch" were already his roommates. They knew my address, having heard from me the story of our previous relationship, and one of them informed me of his serious condition. I left my practice behind and came here to offer help to my old-time benefactor or at least to close his eyes. Unfortunately, the first is no longer within human power and I am left only with the latter.

That evening, our conversation made no further headway. I went back to my lodgings and tossed and turned all night; sleep evaded me. The misfortunes of the "penal recruit" upon whom fate seemed to be determined to pour out all of her wrath, passed before me, one after another and in every single episode I found enough bitterness to poison an entire human life. But imagine someone who had suffered them all!

The next day, as soon as the sun rose, I was already in the room of the "penal recruit." The doctor had anticipated me by a few minutes. From among the "catch" only one remained; the other three had gone back to the barracks to show their faces briefly and then to return to the bedside of their dying "father".

-- You seem to be better, I remarked, sitting down next to the patient.

-- Incomparably better, he answered. -- These are the last quiet moments which precede death.

I glanced at the doctor, he was gloomily silent.

-- Better, better . . . continued the patient. -- The coughing has stopped; I have already coughed up all of the blood left in my chest . . . All of the preparations are ended, it is time for death to arrive, everything is ready . . .

-- What are you saying, God forgive you! I objected.

-- He forgives everyone . . . He is in all of His creatures, continued the patient somberly. -- Blessed be he, who does not forget Him throughout his life; only this keeps away the fear of even a thousand deaths . . . The weak-spirited are afraid to die but dying is not hard at all . . . living is incomparably harder. . .

He let out a deep sigh.

-- I lived for vanity, he continued: -- I placed my joy in decay . . . and the Lord opened my eyes and showed me how feeble and transitory it was . . . When I lived in the midst of my family, in comfort and happiness, I often complained of the worries, of the burdensome communal affairs . . . Fate threw me into prison. This seemed like the peak of misfortunes . . . They shaved my forehead. Once again, I complained, raged, thinking that there would be no sharper sting than this . . . my wife died before my eyes and my daughter went mad. I fell into despair: it seemed to me that a whole mountain of evil crashed upon my head, enough for a few generations. But the crown was still being prepared for me and indeed it crowned everything in the past. What the earth covers up is forgotten but dishonor . . . this is horrible! My own flesh and blood brought disgrace upon my head . . . Oh, these were great lessons! I have no time left to use them, so let others profit from them . . .

At this time the entering "catch" surrounded the bed of the old man. His face was flushed, his eyes burned with prophetic fire, on his forehead appeared droplets of sweat.

-- My children! he continued. -- The pride of man is ridiculous and worthless: a worm feeling pride before his Creator! But grumbling at fate is the greatest of sins . . . This is rebellion against the Creator and a sign of disbelief in His justice. . . Do not complain so that you do not destroy your own soul . . . Everything has its purpose and you cannot change it. Fulfill honestly the laws of man. Accept everything with love and love will be returned unto you. Do not cry . . . tears are the precursor of grumbling and lead directly to it. Pray, pray . . . Prayer, not tears, are given to strengthen us.

Tears streamed down the cheeks of the "catch."

-- Give me your hands, he continued: -- all of you . . . just so . . . Don't be afraid of death: this is the beginning of a better life . . . May God bless you . . . I repent of all my worldly and sinful acts. . . May I merit the forgiveness of all to whom I caused harm! . . . The ones who have done me harm, I have forgiven. . . *Shema yisrael!* Our God is One . . .

He closed his eyes and was silent. For some time, we waited expecting him to speak once more. The doctor leaned over him and placed his hand on his heart -- it was no longer beating.

All of us looked at each other as if wishing to say: the great deed is completed.

The next day, before the setting of the sun, the funeral of the "penal recruit" took place. The "catch" sewed a shroud, hammered together a coffin and washed the body which they covered with the soldier's overcoat that had belonged to the dead man. Completing the preparations, they took up the body and carried it to the cemetery. The doctor and I followed the casket. The entire funeral procession for the one who had for so long carried upon his shoulders the sufferings of thousands others like himself, consisted of two people.

The funeral ceremony was brief. Every Jew has the right to read the last prayer for the dead. We lowered the casket into the ground; the doctor read out from a prayer book a last farewell for our brother; we covered the grave, placed four stones upon it. Then, every one of us scattered a handful of earth and -- it was all over.