

## SOUL'S FRIEND\*

by Aharon Appelfeld

It was at an abandoned railway depot, in whose ramshackle stationhouse one could hardly imagine that a conductor or snack-bar attendant was still to be found--it was in this forsaken outpost, which had once served as the local lumberyard, that the authorized representative of the renowned Sanger Company decided to make a stop. The agent happened upon the place on his way to Vienna. He had just carried off a whole series of important deals. Elated at all the orders he had in his briefcase, and out of some unaccountable curiosity, he turned off at the neglected stationhouse and there stopped to rest.

He had been promoted the year before. Benefits, commissions, and an expense account had been added on to his monthly salary. But above all, there was the fact that he now had tenure: the knowledge that he was no longer dependent on the whims of one supervisor or another, that he was on the firm's regular payroll, authorized to represent it in middle-level transactions and at expositions and fairs, gave him, overnight, a new sense of stature. The promotion also opened up, as they say, new possibilities, new vistas, new opportunities for wheeling and dealing. There was no telling how far he might go. He would now no longer be tied to the crowded home office and the draining, humiliating weekly reports. From now on, he would be working for himself. The promotion gave him high hopes. And one thing was clear beyond any shadow of a doubt: there would be fewer obligatory visits home, perhaps none at all.

He had in Vienna a wife and two daughters, who had learned over the years to live without him and his support. There had been a time when he would put in appearances. The girls doted on him; but he found their affection burdensome and learned to ignore them. His previous salary had been far from lavish. Losses and defaults appeared in his accounts. The rest he wasted. He drank and dallied with women. More than once did his wife

\*Hebrew yedid nefesh--the title and opening phrase of a Jewish mystical hymn, addressed to God, sung to usher in the Sabbath.--translator.

create a scandal at Sanger. But these scandals only hardened him. He yearned for wide-open spaces, and it was here that he had found them.

As the years rolled by, he grew more and more distant, and when he was in Vienna, he no longer went to his own house. His wife stopped sending warnings and threats. She got a job in a factory and supported the girls herself. He, meanwhile, did well in the outlying districts, where he established himself, learned the dialect, and got to be well liked. His successful dealings earned him a reputation back in the capital. And his reward was not long in coming. He was summoned to Vienna, and there, before the assembled department heads and agents, he was given his representative's certificate, his tenure, and the various other perquisites, public and private, that go with being an authorized agent.

He hadn't been home for years. He no longer thought of his wife and daughters as his own flesh and blood. When the thought of them did cross his mind, it was like thinking about strangers. He was up to his ears in business, and the promotion only confirmed him in the path he had chosen.

His whole situation bespoke success: two offices, a secretary, four assistants. Yet now, returning elated with his case chock full of new orders, a strange thing happened: he was approached by a man without title or uniform who asked him with a quiet certainty whether he was Siegfried Holtzmann, authorized Sanger representative, and whether he would be good enough to come along with him.

As it turned out, the hut was not as broken down as it had appeared from outside. It was, in fact, a well-ordered office. Telephone. Snack bar. Siegfried drew himself up to his full height and laid his smallish suitcase out on the chair, trying all the while to maintain some measure of composure.

He assumed it was a routine inspection, a mistake, or a misunderstanding, and his bearing--the annoyed surprise of a person of authority--reflected this. But the inspector turned out to know a great deal, too much. Following an examination of his documents, the questions immediately began to dig down into

the depths of the forgotten years when he had been a young, inexperienced agent, struggling with a well-known firm and with buyers, charting his course through heavy seas of foreignness, mistrust, and hostility.

Siegfried answered confidently, in detail. Moving from one matter to another, he permitted himself wit and irony. As if his personal case were not to be judged except insofar as it concerned the firm. Of course there was also the matter of the forgotten wife and children, which intruded itself as if out of spite; but here too he was able to formulate appropriate responses.

Now the investigation, which had at first seemed thorough but businesslike, reached out to more intimate realms. Like that woman who had helped Siegfried when he was first getting to know the territory. The woman had taken sick and died of typhoid fever, and Siegfried had been compelled to transfer to a less populous district so as not to arouse suspicion. The woman lived alone, but she had some cousins who might well have inflamed the affair. He concealed nothing. He talked about the difficulties and about the affection he had developed for this lonely woman. He even admitted that had it not been for her he would never have struck out into the wider world. Naturally they also spoke about percentages and benefits and certain evasions Siegfried had been suspected of during the first few years. Though these questions might well have surprised him, they were not unfamiliar. He had spent many long days and nights mulling them over in his mind, becoming in the process as intimate with them as with the scars left behind by a childhood disease.

It was already evening, and Siegfried realized that an investigation this exhaustive and well documented was not likely to end quickly. So he turned to the investigator and asked for a few hours' respite to settle his account at the nearby general store and perhaps arrange for overnight lodging at the inn.

"Never mind those petty accounts. We'll get to them too, soon enough."

"But there's a new cashier at the store. She could mess up the figures so badly I'd never get out of it alive."

The investigator ignored the request.

Meanwhile, the snack-bar attendant served coffee in an old-fashioned railroad mug. Touching this old cup restored his confidence somewhat. The flow of words came back to him, and he spoke rapidly.

But where was the inquiry leading? Who was involved in it? Was it an internal investigation within the firm, or were outside elements involved? So far he did not feel directly implicated himself. The many personal questions that had been put to him were unpleasant, to be sure, but by reacting cleverly he had been able to diffuse the unpleasantness. As he saw it, he was being called upon to represent the firm and not himself. Yet despite his intentions the questions dug into his flesh. There was the matter of the women, of course, local women to whom Siegfried had been attracted since his younger days. The investigator knew the most intimate details.

Night fell, and Siegfried was put into a detention cell. It was an empty room illuminated by a single small bulb. "Evidently the company is in big trouble, with all the department heads and sales agents under arrest. The bosses are sure to be called on the carpet." Again he was trying to dissociate himself. But then he remembered the unsettled account at the general store, and this worrisome bit of unfinished business scared him out of his mental lair.

"Would you mind calling the investigator?" he said to the snack-bar attendant.

"There's no one in his office," she said. "I'm leaving right away myself. What was it you wanted?"

"Is there some way you can help me get in touch with the general store? I left my account unsettled there. The cashier is new, and she's likely to mess it up."

"Me?" said the attendant. "I've got no keys, and everything's locked up around here."

"What is one to make of such behavior?" he muttered indignantly, like a man accustomed to giving orders whose authority has suddenly been called into question.

The attendant turned out the light, and he was left alone in his cage. For a moment he tried to think clearly, but his

thoughts dissolved in the darkness.

The next day the investigator arrived late. He took up a position near the bars. The thought that his whole station in life--the commissions, the percentages, the tenure, the certificate of authorization to undertake medium-sized obligations in the name of the firm--the thought that this lovely edifice might be in danger made Siegfried's fingers tremble.

He knew the company managers well, especially those who had come up the ladder with him. Each had made his way up, step by step, in total disregard of colleagues in similar pursuit of advancement. Nor had he himself been altogether innocent in this struggle. But there was another factor he had not taken into account.

The investigation now turned in a different direction: the early years of his marriage. At first he tried to protest the procedure, to demand that a distinction be made between his private life and business affairs. The firm has always come first for me, he insisted.

He was enraged to think that his wife might be suing him yet again for nonsupport. It was insult added to injury. He spoke angrily about his wife and his mother-in-law, who had tried all those years to confine him in their insular little world and to squeeze out of him every penny they could. He attributed it to their bad upbringing, their narrowmindedness.

For a moment he had the feeling he was about to be released from this encirclement. Soon it would be plain to everyone that he was a solid citizen and had served the company faithfully. After all, if he hadn't been so loyal he would not have been promoted. He had already been with the firm for twenty years. And the angrier he got the more readily the words flowed: strong, harsh words, full of invective and indignation.

The investigation proceeded in slow motion, with a searching thoroughness that was bound to re-open old wounds, to reactivate old hostilities and quarrels. He for his part spoke informally, almost identifying, in an odd way, with the interrogator. The pus that had been collecting inside him could now be drained.

He had a strange sense of relief.

The feeling lasted only a few hours. That night someone else was brought into his cell, a man in a blue pinstripe suit, of average height and typically Jewish features. He was brought by an ordinary policeman, who unceremoniously shoved him inside. The arrested man did not utter a sound. The snackbar attendant stood to one side, near the counter, watching the comings and goings indifferently. Siegfried recoiled. The idea that they had thrown into his cell a man with such a Jewish face, a man who was undoubtedly mixed up in shady dealings of one sort or another, so aroused his indignation that he turned to the policeman and said, "This cell is not for swindlers!" He hated the little Jews who drifted about this district. More than anything else they reminded him of his own father and mother, his aunts and uncles, the great swarm that would descend on the house at holiday time. Their ludicrous, small-time way of eking out a living, their Yiddishized German, never failed to repel him. And if he had felt a wanderlust, it was mainly out of a desire to get away from them. But this impulse had been nipped in the bud. At an early age he had already begun to fill in for his ailing father, first as a traveling salesman and then in a small shop. Early marriage came as a matter of course. Quite a few Jews worked for the company too, but he avoided them. Now here was one of them, in the very display case of his humiliations, a Jewish businessman of the worst sort. He and his undistinguished satchel, a bag of the most mediocre sort. The Jew immediately understood that here too he was not wanted, and after surveying the cell he squatted and sat down in a corner. For some time he sat there without saying a word. Finally he whispered, "How long have you been holed up in here?" The whisper met no response.

"I asked you how long you'd been holed up in here," he whispered a bit more loudly.

"I don't owe anyone any explanations," was the annoyed reply.

The snackbar attendant turned off the lights, locked the doors, and left. The dim light in the cell was enough to reveal the

plates lying on the floor and the leftover scraps of bread. Evidently the Jew had finished everything.

Now Siegfried began to treat his investigation as a personal matter which was no one else's business except the investigator's. He would leave the cell and return with a curious self-importance about him, as if his affair were of a different nature than his cell-mate's. He preferred the interrogation table to the company of the latter. And at the first opportunity he even told the investigator of his consternation that such a low-class sort had been thrown in together with him in the same cell. The investigator did not react. Meanwhile, Siegfried carefully shunned all contact, even of the eyes, with his cell-mate.

The merchant was being interrogated by another official. Someone he knew outside had connections with the snackbar attendant, and, through her, with the interrogator. As a result, the merchant got two blankets, a tin cup, and, when the interrogators weren't around, a cupful of hot coffee. They certainly do make out wherever they are, Siegfried muttered, even when they're arrested for questioning. He would stretch out on the cold floor, mostly to demonstrate his own rectitude and self-respect in the face of investigation. Several times the merchant offered him bread and the blanket, but Siegfried ignored these offers as if there were something despicable about them. He no longer asked for release on bail but for separation. The thought of sharing quarters with a Jewish merchant was more painful to him than the indignity of the confinement itself. The inspector responded only indirectly to his request: to be sure, the two men's cases were completely separate, but as far as he was concerned there was no harm in their sharing a cell.

Meanwhile, autumn days arrived, and with them autumn winds. The chilly gusts buffeted the exposed cell and tore at the tin sheeting on its walls. Someone seemed to be taking care of the merchant: he received more blankets, and during the night two dishes were brought in to him.

Then, one night, Siegfried rose to his knees, clutched himself

about the waist, and, in a gesture of abject despair, beat his head against the floor. The thud was crisp, like that of a rounded object striking a dense surface. His right leg elevated itself blindly, groped about, and fell against the wall.

"What's the matter with you, Siegfried?" the merchant asked, getting up on his knees.

"Nothing."

"Let me help you stretch out." The merchant crawled over to him. He straightened his legs, and, lifting his head, asked, "Are you suffering from something?"

"My damned ulcer."

"It'll be all right soon. That's a curse I know all too well myself. Been avoiding fried foods for the last few years."

The merchant took his shoes off for him, loosened his tie, and wrapped him in his old raincoat. The first light of dawn sliced the cell into two narrow triangles. Siegfried did not open his eyes. The coat seemed to have warmed him up, and his breathing had resumed its normal rhythm as well. The merchant went back to his corner and watched him closely, studying his every move.

An hour or so later, he got up. There was an oddness to his movements. Rising on his knees, he stretched upward toward the window.

"Feel better?" the merchant asked.

Siegfried lowered his head with a jerk, fearing to meet the other's gaze.

"I should be able to handle the interrogation," he murmured.

"You can ask for a postponement. I'll try to get my investigator to put in a word with yours."

"That's an improper way of doing things, and I don't want anything to do with it."

"As you wish," the merchant said softly.

Siegfried continued to gaze in the direction of the barred window. His white, chastened features were devoid of expression, as if the skin had frozen.

He left for the interrogation stiffly erect. This time it was prolonged and did not end until nightfall. The merchant,

who was not taken for questioning that day, tried through the snackbar attendant to find out what fate had befallen his cell-mate. The interrogation was rough, she informed him.

It was late at night when he returned to the cell. Through the thick gloom their glances met for the first time. Siegfried looked around the cell, then bent over as if about to pull up a chair. His hand simply dangled in space.

"How did it go?" the merchant asked, in the way one questions someone who is ill.

"I confessed."

"To what?"

"Everything."

"How could you?" the merchant said reprovingly.

"I haven't served the firm faithfully."

"That's not up to you to determine," said the merchant as softly as he could.

After midnight, in the heavy darkness, the pains began to gnaw at him. Once more he got up on his knees and beat his head against the cement floor. The merchant went over to him and, without asking, stretched him out. Siegfried trembled.

By morning he felt better. He was oppressed by the thought that this merchant, toward whom he had felt undisguised hatred, bore him no ill will in return. He wanted to ask his forgiveness, but how do you ask forgiveness of a man who even now seems unworthy of gratitude?

And once again the merchant relieved him of his perplexity. He came over to him, covered his legs with a blanket, and propped his head up. It was as if his hands were accustomed to performing such service.

"I thank you." The words slipped from Siegfried's mouth, and quickly he added, "I don't understand. Why are you doing all this for me?"

"Have I wronged you in some way?"

"No," Siegfried said. "I'm only surprised at the way you treat me. What have I ever done to deserve it?"

It was Sunday, and the investigators did not come. The wind died down, and a drizzle sprinkled the fields. The countryside

could not be seen, but they could hear the slow penetration of the rain. Apparently they had the day to themselves.

It was as if Siegfried had forgotten his usual vocabulary. He stammered and apologized. At last he sat down cross-legged like a beggar. The merchant told him about himself, about his business. He had been trading in the area for years. Several times he had been arrested, sometimes with, sometimes without cause. He was, in fact, familiar with this very cell. Usually he would meet someone here. If it happened to be a fellow-Jew, all well and good. Neither his appearance nor his voice was at all comely. The morning light etched ugly lines in his face.

"I haven't served the firm faithfully," Siegfried repeated. "I can't wink at my own misdeeds any longer."

"A man shouldn't incriminate himself," the other said, turning to Siegfried and speaking with a reproving undertone in his voice. His life was blemished, Siegfried replied, and it must be that he had failed to serve the firm faithfully, that his dedication had not been complete. The merchant reacted skeptically to the stressed words: dedication, faithfully. His whole manner now bespoke the confidence of a trader hardened by misfortune. At last he burst out, "You'll always be guilty."

"I don't follow you."

"That's the way things are."

The merchant spoke more about himself, his childhood, this district that had never given him any satisfaction. He had tried several times to emigrate to America but was never able to get together the means. He spoke uncomplainingly, as though he did not expect things ever to change. For a moment, Siegfried was captivated by his voice. The word "Jew" grated on Siegfried's ears. Since his youth he had always thought it in bad taste to use it overmuch. Better, in fact, to use it as little as possible. The merchant spoke of himself with a kind of easy fluency, like a man discussing his own death without flinching.

"You speak so simply about these things," Siegfried said, amazed.

"How else should I speak?"

The merchant was now quite caught up in his own words and

gestures. As though he were not a prisoner with the threat of judgment hanging over his head but someone in the grip of a deep secret.

"Are you a religious man?" Siegfried asked.

"I'm a practical man, and I have to deal with practical matters all the time. But since there are so many practical decisions to make and they are so difficult, I do worry whether or not I'm doing the right thing.

"Always?"

"Not always."

Siegfried was stunned. He had thought it was only rural people who had faith. As for the Jews, since they were addicted to money, they believed in nothing but money and the things money could buy. Sometimes he would go to the villages to see the mass. He loved church music.

"I always thought," Siegfried said, "that the Jews--how shall I put it?--even though I myself am...."

"I don't look for other people's faults. I've got enough of my own."

Siegfried's interrogation came to an end. He admitted everything. The merchant's interrogation, too, was completed, or rather he was rescued from it. His brethren on the outside paid off whoever had to be paid off. Conditions in the cell did not improve: the same darkness that was neither day nor night. But now the hostility was gone. Siegfried no longer avoided his neighbor, and the merchant talked. His monotonous voice filled the vacuum with words. He had cookies and jam, and they ate together on the floor. Do the Jews not have a kind of herding instinct? They are always together, in swarms, Siegfried thought, his old fixations coming to life. Or take the loudness: it drives me out of my mind. The merchant, for his part, spoke about bitter fate, misunderstanding, the obstacles placed in the way of petty merchants, and, hardest of all, the enmity. You save, you build, you develop a bit of trust, and suddenly the malevolent hand comes down upon you.

"And what do you think you'll do now?"

"I don't know," Siegfried confessed.

"If you like you can work with me."

"And what about my past?"

"I would gladly take you on as a partner."

The ulcer attacks had subsided but were not completely gone. Siegfried felt like dying. "Hush," the merchant would chide him, "A person shouldn't think so much about himself."

Winter. The cell was filled with a damp cold. The merchant's brethren paid many bribes for each blanket. They sat now facing one another, wrapped up in blankets. Why? How long? These and similar questions melted into the thin darkness. Suddenly, Siegfried felt a strange closeness, like none he had ever felt before, toward the man sitting opposite him all bundled up in a blanket. He wanted to ask forgiveness, but immediately understood that it would be out of place here. The cold got progressively worse, and the merchant began to worry that Siegfried would fall victim to hallucinations from its severity. He would rouse him from time to time, as one rouses someone from a faint.

It was the winter of 1939. Even in his delirium, Siegfried could scarcely imagine how many trials still awaited him. "You've got to be strong, you've got to be tough," the merchant told him, as though addressing a foreigner in some dark office, undistinguished except for its frightening severity.

But the truth was bitterer still. The next day they tied the two together, and a paddy wagon took them to another station. They stood squeezed against the bars. All along the way the merchant joked about Austrian thickheadedness. Even Siegfried was provoked to laughter.

Once in the cell they were not interrogated any further. Twice a day, early in the morning and in the evening, Siegfried was required to stand up and announce, "My name is Siegfried, but I am a Jew." As for Max, they found another way of humiliating him. The hours between humiliations stretched out interminably.

Siegfried now began to ask a lot of questions, out of curiosity, like a blind man. And Max talked. He was forty-three years old and had a wife and four children. Two brothers and a sister in Poland. He spoke of his wife affectionately, but not overly

so. He felt a stronger tie with the children. And when asked about religious matters, he would lower his voice as though embarrassed. He had not been lucky in his business; his brothers had been more successful. His voice was quite monotonous. But Siegfried now seemed to have been utterly transported, carried away to a kind of wonderland. Every detail excited him. For whatever he told him was told without self-interest, even when he spoke of business. And since they passed from place to place and met many arrested merchants along the way, Siegfried imagined each of them to be a kind of wonder, for they were all like Max.

During his fits of delirium he would see himself returning home along the route he had always taken. And as always, there was the dim light in the window, his wife and two children on the floor. They appeared to be, not a family at all, but three abandoned girls. The delirium held him captive like heavy chains. He would describe his dreams to Max. Max neither comforted him nor tried to sweeten his sorrow. "As I've told you, Siegfried, it's not easy, not easy." It was as if they were foraging together into a region which held danger but also some kind of hidden hope in store for them.

And in between his seizures he would marvel at the fate that had brought Max his way. A merchant in every respect. A nondescript face, much like that of his cousin Pinye. Like Pinye, the man had not pursued his studies but had instead undertaken the heavy burden of supporting a family at an early age. He understood nothing about music, never went to museums, and, except for a few sayings learned in a Jewish school, he had never gotten an education. Nonetheless, he had his feet firmly planted on the ground, and from this he derived a simple manner. It was as if he had come to the conclusion that life on this earth was not so grand as to be worth making a commotion about.

He would have liked to learn more from him, but the fits of delirium gave him no rest. The two of them were dragged about from place to place like sacks of potatoes, from one frozen region to another. They got to know many floors, many tin plates. The merchant lost touch with his brethren. The scenery kept

changing: mountains, valleys, deserted wintry plains. Siegfried no longer tried to keep track. He knew that the way led back to some unknown beginning, perhaps to his former life, which lay far beyond this winter haze. All through the years he had been alone, in flight or on the climb, and now here he was with Max, a man whom adversity never got the better of, who could always pick himself up, wipe his face, and say, "It's not the worst thing that can happen to a person."

translated from the  
Hebrew by  
Michael Swirsky