

XVI

PEOPLE WHO WANT TO LIVE

I.

RETURNING TO POLAND AFTER AN ABSENCE OF nine years, I was confronted with a most dismal spectacle. Villages and towns that were once prosperous were now lifeless, sunk in poverty and misery. People once well-to-do were now aimlessly walking the dilapidated sidewalks of the wide ghetto streets . . . Shadows of misfortune . . . Living corpses . . .

The country was groaning under a load of taxation, for it is through unbearable taxation of the city population (and about 90% of the Polish Jews live in cities or towns), particularly in those of the *Kresy Wschodnie*, that Poland is able to maintain her large army and bureaucracy.

I have seen Jewish poverty in the ghettos of Galicia and Poland proper—Lwov, Lublin, Warsaw, Lodz, etc.,—but the misery of the Jews in the *Kresy Wschodnie* is almost indescribable. For these are “colonies,” conquered colonies.

It is, however, the deeply rooted Polish anti-Semitism, the moral torture, that makes the life of the more cultured Polish Jew sad and hopeless. Of course, if you ask any “enlightened” Pole, he will

tell you in a flow of flowery Polish verbiage that there is no official anti-Semitism in Poland. Only recently the Polish Minister of the Interior, Bronislaw Pieracki, declared from the Sejm Tribune that "acts of terrorism and violence by individuals and collectives . . . no matter against whom they are directed, will not be tolerated, and the perpetrators will not escape severe punishment . . ."

"In order to prevent all misunderstanding," the serene minister said, "allow me to state that we will not tolerate race and national conflicts because they are alien to the historical spirit of the Polish people . . ."

Alien to the historical spirit of the Polish people! What mockery! Only a few days after this remarkable speech, I read in the newspapers about the house of a Jewish grain dealer which was burned to the ground during the course of an anti-Semitic night attack upon the village of Krulewski.

"A number of other anti-Jewish outbreaks in the villages of the Czestochowa region," the papers stated, "were also reported from the city of Czestochowa. Windows of Jewish houses in Remblietz were broken, and other vandalism perpetrated . . ."

Alien to the historical spirit of the Polish people! The truth is that although fifteen years have passed since Poland was made an independent state, the conditions of her national minorities, far from improving, have become even more acute. Indeed, at no time since the World War was the position of the Jew in Poland as serious as today. Because of the world economic crisis which played havoc with many

European countries, unemployment and a standstill in business in Poland—which is primarily an agricultural country—have assumed larger proportions than ever before. It has resulted in the total ruination of the Jewish workers and middle class. The economic boycott of Jewish merchants, Government monopoly, and the wave of pogroms that seizes the country periodically, have added the finishing touches to this picture of Jewish misery.

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There has always been in Poland a type of Jew popularly known as the *Mayofes Yid*. He has been in existence for many centuries.

In the old days the *Mayofes Yid* was generally an old Jew, often a chassid, dressed in a long cassock and velvet skull-cap from which extended two side-curls. He was the favorite clown, banker, and go-between of the Polish landowners and the *muzhiks*. He also used to entertain the Pan. While the latter would play with his mistress or debauch with his fellow *shliacta*, the *Mayofes Yid* would sing Jewish religious songs to him or dance his holy-roller chasidic dances.

The old *Mayofes Yid* is still alive and functioning. His place, however, is being gradually usurped by a modern Yid, dressed in a modern garb. The modern Yid is first of all a rabid Polish patriot. He plays up to the Polish politician. He usually belongs to the Government Party—only the Government Party—(in this case Pilsudski's famous "B.B." Party)—

and looks at the poverty and misery of the Jews through official Polish-colored glasses.

Such *Yidden* exist in Germany too. I shall describe them in subsequent chapters. Here I would merely like to point out that even this *Mayofes Yid*, even this Jewish member of the Government Party can no longer close his eyes to the fact that the Jewish masses of Poland are being gradually driven to extinction. No matter how much he would like to do it, he can no longer keep silent.

"I declare here that the Jewish population is, in addition to the general crisis, suffering from a specific crisis, for the ways of Polish Jewry make our distress more acute." Thus the Jewish member of the Government Party and Sejm Deputy, Minzberg, addressed the Sejm. "Trading and artisanship," he continued, "the principal source of Jewish economic life, are crushed ten times more than any other branch of activity in the midst of this general catastrophe. Over 100,000 Jewish trading enterprises have been shut down. Hundreds and thousands of artisan workshops owned by Jews have had to close. If you add to this the several hundred thousands of Jewish unemployed workers, you will find that there are a quarter of a million Jews in Poland who are earning nothing at all. The Government policy of etatism and monopolization of production and trading is strangling the whole merchant class and most of all the Jewish merchant class. Impoverished Polish Jewry cannot hold out any longer . . ."

Yes, the Polish Jews cannot hold out any longer. I wonder that they have held out so long. However,

in this case, too, the people are far ahead of their "spokesman." The Russian Revolution, the solution of the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union, has taught them to search for a way out. The most significant thing that I have discovered during my recent sojourn in Poland is the fact that even the ghetto Jew is acquiring new spirit and new blood. (I am speaking, of course, of the young Jew, for the old Jew is old.) The Jew has suffered for many centuries. His only relief was the great Jewish lament. But now he has discovered that it is just the same whether you die fighting or lamenting. As a result many Jews have turned fascists. The Zionist Revisionists—the Jewish fascists—are quite strong and numerous in Poland. The majority of the Jewish workers and middle class, however, much to the chagrin of the *Mayofes Yidden*, have turned towards a revolutionary way out. This, incidentally, happened in Germany too.

I can almost visualize the violent protest with which this statement will be greeted by the *Mayofes Yidden* of all countries. I heard recently many arguments on the part of well-known American Jewish leaders denying the charge that the Jewish youth in Poland and Germany is turning revolutionary. But these, of course, are ostrich-like arguments of men who hide their heads in the sand so as to escape the enemy. They are arguments of men who are afraid to face the truth squarely. After all, the fact is not important that the Jewish youth is turning Communist but that the social and economic conditions

are rapidly driving them into the ranks of the revolutionists. For, as I have already pointed out in a similar connection, it is a historical axiom that wherever there is oppression of one group of people by another, there inevitably arises a revolutionary sentiment among the oppressed group. This happened in Tsarist Russia. And in Poland we witness merely a repetition of Tsarist history.

To a foreigner casually passing through the Polish Ukraine, it would never occur that those dirty, unkempt Ukrainian *muzhiks*, or the emaciated, ragged Jews have any life left in them or even a desire to live.

John Reed, in his day one of the most brilliant American journalists, visited my home town, Rovno, during the World War. His description of it is accurate in all its grimness.

"I can never forget Rovno, the Jewish Town of the Pale of Settlement," he wrote in his report on *The War In Eastern Europe*. "It was Russian in its shabby largeness, wide streets half paved with cobbles . . . rambling wooden houses ornamented with scroll-saw trimmings . . . and the swarming uniforms of its minor officialdom . . . The streets were heaped with evil smelling rubbish, amid slimy puddles splashed up by every passing conveyance . . ."

As for the inhabitants of Rovno, Reed saw "a pale, stooping inbred race, refined to the point of idiocy . . . Cringing men . . . faintly bearded boys with unhealthy faces, girls prematurely aged with bitter work and eternal humiliation, grown women

wrinkled and bent . . . People who smiled deprecatingly and hatefully when you looked at them, who stepped into the street to let Gentiles pass . . ."

Although John Reed wrote this description of Rovno more than fifteen years ago, it is still true today. Physically, except for a few improvements, the city hasn't changed much. The streets are still wide, half paved with cobblestones. And the minor officialdom! There seems to be twice as many of them now as there were during the Tsarist régime. They actually clutter the streets. Where does Poland get so many? There are 438,000 civil employees in the little country of Poland. These do not include 150,000 railroad employees (the railroads are under Government ownership) and about 300,000 officers and soldiers. In fact, it seems to me that the whole of Poland is divided into three distinct classes: Petty bureaucrats and officers who are mostly Poles (neither Jews nor Ukrainians hold Government jobs in Poland), ruined business men who are mostly Jews, and unemployed workers composed of Jews, Ukrainians and Poles.

Spiritually, however, a great change has taken place in the ghetto Jews. They are still pale and stooping—a result of war, famine and many years of starvation—but they are no longer the same people that John Reed saw. Indeed, even in the most miserable hovels, I found a strong desire for life.

*What is true of Rovno is even truer of other cities in the Polish Ukraine, for Rovno is the largest and most developed city in Volhynia. It has a population of about 70,000 people, and is regarded as the most important centre in the Polish Ukraine.

Before leaving Kiev, a friend of mine, a Soviet newspaper man asked me if I wouldn't take along a pound of tobacco as a present for his brother who was living in Zdolbunovo.

"Why send tobacco? Why not send something that is practical?" I suggested.

"You'll be surprised," he replied, "how practical tobacco is under the circumstances. There is a monopoly on tobacco in Poland. Cigarettes of any sort are an inaccessible luxury to the impoverished population. My brother is unemployed, so he makes little papirosy (cigarettes) out of this tobacco and sells them for a grosz or two apiece to his fellow sufferers. It is an illegal business. If he is ever caught, he'll probably get ten years in jail. The Poles are very generous that way. But he does it just the same. Apparently it is not such an easy thing to see a wife and children dying slowly of starvation. I wish I could send them money instead, but we are not allowed to send any roubles out of the country, and besides, they are no good in Poland . . ."

So with the pound of tobacco carefully hidden in my pocket I set out upon the second day of my arrival to Zdolbunovo to look for Herman Zaikin, my friend's brother.

I started out early in the morning. It was a cold winter day; the sun shone brightly.

In Zdolbunovo the streets are not even paved with cobbles, and unless the ground is frozen, the mud

there is almost impassable. So I wandered through the muddy streets of the ghetto in search of Herman Zaikin. I passed herring stores, provincial barber shops where the barber performs the functions of barber, dentist and doctor, sorry tailorshops and innumerable cobblers' "establishments," until I reached the centre of the town where Herman lived in the basement of a house whose architecture has centuries of tradition behind it.

Only a great artist like Marc Shagall, it seems to me, could depict to the minutest detail the basement in which Herman and his family lived. But Shagall is a symbolist and a mystic. He would undoubtedly endow this picture of misery with a certain exotic—or is it mystical?—charm. There was nothing exotic, however, about Herman's hovel. It was real, too real, in its wretchedness and ugliness. I have seen unemployed Americans live in the so-called Hoover-villes in shanties that are constructed of scraps of iron, boards and mud, but even these shanties are preferable to the basement which I now entered.

The place was practically dark. Its only tiny window was on the level with the ground. Very little of the sun's light penetrated through it. The floor was earthen. A sickening dampness emanated from it.

When I entered, I saw a figure disappear somewhere in the darkness of a corner. The others—a woman, two children and an old man—were sitting on boxes around a table, eating potatoes and bread.

I inquired for Herman Zaikin.

"*Pana niema domu*—the master is not home," replied the woman in a broken Polish accent. She was

a young woman of about thirty, all bundled up in rags.

"*Pana niema . . .*"

"Too bad," I said, "I wanted to see him. I am an American. I have just arrived from Russia and brought your husband a present and regards from his brother."

"So you are an American," said the father-in-law, a little shrivelled-up Jew with a traditional beard, "if you are an American that's different . . ."

"Buzia," he turned to a little boy, "go call father, tell him it is all right."

"And how is Americhke? I was there in 1904. I didn't know when I was well off. The devil, I suppose, has driven me here . . ."

"Things are bad in America, too," I replied. "There are millions of unemployed. It is not a paradise as you think . . ."

"Bad, you say, bad . . . I wish it were as bad here. Do they beat Jews in America?"

"Not yet."

"They don't pluck the beards of old Jews?"

"No."

"So what's there bad about it? Do they give Jews work? . . ."

At that moment Herman appeared. He was a tall, healthy-looking man with sad eyes. I marvelled that he could look so healthy, living in the surroundings he did.

"You will pardon me," he said, greeting me, "but I took you for a detective. They always keep on pestering me. They've got me on the list as a dangerous

unpatriotic citizen, although there isn't a bit of evidence against me. Every fortnight or so, the police think it wise to throw me in jail for a night or two. They always find something to charge me with. But if I am not at home, they forget about me for a while . . ."

I could see that Herman, too, felt stifling in his damp cellar. I suggested that we look around the city. We walked for a long time, Herman speaking and I listening.

Herman himself was a skilled compositor. He hasn't worked for years. He has very little hope of ever getting work as long as the present régime remains in power, because, as he said, he is a "marked man."

"And how about your father-in-law?" I asked.

"With my father-in-law there is other trouble. You'll be surprised of how many devious ways there are of depriving a Jew of a piece of bread. My father-in-law is a carpenter, a good carpenter, but he can't get a license to work until he passes an examination in the Polish language. Just think of it; for thirty-five years the old man lived in Russia and hasn't learned a word of Russian; for ten years he lived in America and hasn't learned a word of English, and now at the age of sixty he's got to learn Polish . . ."

While we were walking, we passed many of those shadows of Jews aimlessly strolling along the muddy streets. It seemed to me that they were looking strangely at me and Herman. I felt rather uneasy.

"That is all right," Herman assured me, "they see

that you are a stranger. I know most of them, they are my friends. But I never greet them in the street and they don't greet me. Who knows what may happen tomorrow? Suppose I am accused of some crime. Then all these people who were seen greeting me will be thrown into jail with me. Why should anyone of us crawl with a healthy head into a sick bed? . . ."

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I spent the whole day walking and talking to Herman. What he had to say was very revealing. When I was taking leave of him it occurred to me that I hadn't even given him his present.

"O, the tobacco," he said contemptuously, "What's the use? People haven't even got the grosz to spend for a cigarette. Besides, a pound of tobacco is neither going to solve my problem nor anybody else's problem . . ."

"It is true what you say," I agreed, "but what is going to solve your problem?"

There was a look of astonishment on Herman's face:

"You, coming from Russia, should ask such a question . . ."