

Leaving Home

I

Silence surrounded the village. There was no movement, or sign of life. For once the village was in blessed peace, untroubled by unearthly screams, the gay raucous laugh of the cossacks on their proud beasts or the whimpering of children and women.

The night was crisp and cool. Snow lay on the ground, cladding the village in a blanket of pure white. Above, the sky was, mercifully, clouded. Gradually a door began to open. Stealthily two figures emerged from the half open doorway and crept from the village. As they reached the top of the rise, they began to run keeping between the tall conifers where possible, gradually increasing the distance between them and the village.

His little legs were working like pistons. Up and down, up and down. The tall figure in front surged ahead and the little boy tried desperately to keep up. He set his little mouth in a firm line, pushed out his square, determined chin and battled forward, following the deep tread of the larger footsteps. Nothing would make him turn back. He was going to be free. He, Leon Goronovsky, who at eight years old had tasted the death and cruelty of life, would never again return to the village of V——.

The tall figure in front halted. He turned around, and a small smile played about his mouth, while he watched his young brother running with all the might of his little legs, to keep up. Mark waited and as Leon caught up, Mark lifted him lightly onto his shoulders and walked on, with all the ease of youth and manly strength.

II

The sun began to rise in beautiful colours of gold and orange. As the regularity of walking became automatic, Mark's mind drifted back to his own childhood.

The twelve years before Leon's birth were nothing but a pleasant dream now. He could remember his mother, a feminine comfortable woman always ready to help or answer questions even though she had ten children to care for. His father too was happy then. He would laugh and joke, and take part in all the family festivities, dandling one little girl on his knee, or piggy backing a boy. They were not wealthy. Often they had to scrape, but somehow his mother always had enough food to go around the big wooden table.

He liked to think of the candles glowing over the meal on Friday nights, the walk to the synagogue on Saturday mornings with his mother and father and his nine brothers and sisters all walking with him. At Shul he would sit with his friends and watch all the old men davening, rolling backwards and forwards on their heels as if they were on a ship, their long peyas swinging with the movement; but best of all he liked drinking the wine at Kiddush and then sitting down to the Sabbath meal his mother had ready for them.

Then there was the Passover. The whole family would be gathered around the table and his father would read of the coming out of Egypt of his people. This night he was allowed to drink four glasses of wine, to symbolise the four promises God had made to the Jewish people, and if he was lucky enough to find the arikomin which his father had hidden among the many pillows stacked behind his chair, he would receive a present. The only trouble was that his other brothers and sisters had the same idea. Then there was the meal, and this would be a meal to surpass all others. First would come the hard boiled eggs and salt water to represent the bitterness and tears the Jews endured in Egypt, then there was the gefilte fish, chicken soup and matzo balls. As, those matzo balls! They were light as a feather and melted in your mouth—ecstasy to a little boy who does nothing but think of his stomach. Then came the chicken, with vegetables, too, and your stomach feels heavier and heavier, but still you go on eating your way through delicacies which you have but once a year. Then his father would say grace, and ten little heads around the table would begin to nod, stupefied by the wine and the food and the lateness of the hour.

Then there was Succoth, the Feast of the First Fruits, when everyone would build a Succap of wood and leaves and the whole village would live in it for eight days. The smell of the fresh leaves and the fruit hanging from the wooden beams, the friendship of the villagers, made this a very pleasant time.

One day, when the village was carrying out its usual work, some soldiers came riding into the square. The women gathered their children to them and rushed home. Fear rustled through the village, but Mark was not afraid. He liked the look of the tall swarthy men and their big brown horses. His mother pulled him hurriedly from the window and pushed him into a cupboard, where two of his brothers were already hidden. He was told to keep quiet or he would be severely punished. His mother, with a pale, frightened face, walked out into the village square, where the cossacks had mustered all the villagers.

As he sat, squashed in the cupboard, he heard the most unearthly scream he had ever heard, and then a loud cruel

laugh. He was to hear this scream many more times before he left the village.

He wondered as he trudged through the snow, why it was that God saw fit for him to be tramping through the snow, running away from death and misery, to perhaps another kind of death and misery, because he was a Jew. The Russian peasants were poor and starving, as was his own village, but they did not see this. They saw, that because a few Jews were wealthy, that the Jews had all the money. They had stolen the money of the Russian people and must be punished. Scapegoats, he thought, that's all we are. Scapegoats for the misery and mistakes of others, but what of our miseries. We can be starved, beaten, tortured, even killed, but it is still our fault that the world goes wrong. Then he thought of the poem he had written nine or ten years ago now, and a wry smile appeared on his face.

I am a Jew and I love my God,
Yet this is my only difference.
When I cry, I cry salt tears
But because I'm a Jew I receive jeers
Instead of sympathy.
Nothing is too bad for us.
We can die, be tortured,
Murdered beaten, starved
Yet this is nothing.
But if we are forbidden our religion,
This is something.

Well, this "something" was now happening.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth as he thought of the girl he was going to marry. That is, before another pogrom came to the village. Her name was Anna and she was very pretty. She had jet black hair, rosy cheeks and eyes that sparkled with life and vitality. She was taken by the cossacks and raped by the thirty of them, one after the other, like animals. Oh, it was great sport. She died. It was better so. The expression of horror on her pale dead face, as he saw her for the last time, would live with him forever.

III

Then his mind reverted to the day Leon was born. Mark was twelve years old, and had just returned from his friend's place, when old Mrs. Blum, the midwife, told him, with tears in her eyes, that he had a new little brother but that his mother had gone to Heaven. "You mean she's dead don't you? I'll never see her again." He rushed outside into the snow, threw himself down and stayed there, oblivious of the cold, and conscious of his deep misery.

As night fell in the village he crept into his house and made his way to his mother's bedroom. Arrested in the doorway by the sight of his mother's body, lying in state upon the bed, with the old woman keeping watching over it and his father, sitting shiva at the bedside, with a greyish face, grown ten years older in the last few hours, he moved away, and ran into the room, where his new little brother was sleeping peacefully. As he stared at the sleeping babe, the face of his mother rose before him, smiling and gentle, and she said, "Take care of Leon for me, he is yours." The little boy began to cry when he saw the beloved face he knew so well, for he knew he would never see it again. From that day he swore to care for Leon, with all the intensity he was capable of feeling.

For two years the Goronovsky family, with the help of neighbours and the elder girls in the family, existed, much as they had done before, but without the loving care of a woman. The children squabbled incessantly, rarely were they dressed neatly, except on Saturdays, and Mr. Goronovsky wrapped in a blanket of grief and solemnity, was far away from the mundane cares of his numerous offspring.

IV

One bitterly cold day, as the children were sitting in the kitchen, huddled together for warmth, Mr. Goronovsky walked in and told them they were to have a new mother, and five new brothers and sisters, and that they were to go to the Synagogue next Sunday where he would be wed. The children were at first stunned, and then broke out into incoherent babble. Mark, now a gawky, sensitive lad of fifteen, rose quietly and left the room. This was a new idea to him. He did not know how to cope with it.

Walking down the village road, kicking a stone as he went, he thought of his own mother and all she had meant to him. He tried to imagine how Katerina would fit into his home, and the concept he had of a mother being. Deeply disturbed, he wandered for some time, picturing what life at home would be like now. Katerina was an attractive woman in a shrewdish kind of way. She was a widow, and it was said in the village that she had nagged her husband to death. Her five children, three boys and two girls, were cast in their mother's form and had the same biting tongue which could be sugar sweet when necessary. Mark swore to himself that day, that as soon as Leon was old enough, they would leave the village and all its association with pain, fear and unhappiness.

He was not wrong to be wary. The following week Katerina Rosenthal became Mrs. Goronovsky the second. Mr. Goronovsky

was still the sombre man he had become after the death of his first wife, but he needed a wife, and so a wife he had. Oh, it is true the children were neat and tidy now, and the house was clean, and the food, what there could be bought after Katerina had taken what she considered was her fair share of Mr. Goronovsky's meagre wage, was cooked. Yet no one was happy.

One day Mark, who was apprenticed to Mr. Sorenshine, the tailor, came home to find little Leon in tears. He was now five years old, and Mark had saved his pennies to buy him a train set, which he knew Leon coveted with all his heart. During the day, one of the Rosenthal boys had wanted to play with it, and Leon, with the natural selfishness of a child had refused to let him. Katerina intervened. Firstly she boxed Leon's ears, then gathered the train up and gave it to her darling son. As the woeful little tale came out, Mark became more and more angry, until he went to Katerina and demanded an explanation. By this time Mark was seventeen. He was tall, and strong, self-reliant and could become very angry if provoked. When Katerina saw his gleaming eyes and determined jaw, she was afraid. She quickly handed the train to Mark and walked into the bedroom where she knew he would not follow. She rarely picked on Leon after that.

Slowly the years crept by, Katerina becoming more difficult to live with as she aged, the children growing up, and Mr. Goronovsky, seeming to sink further towards death. Not only did he have nothing to live for, but he had made his own life a hell on earth. Still, he had made his own bed and had to lie on it. Mark, who still remembered the days when his father, though poor, was young and happy, had not the heart to leave him alone with Katerina.

V

Silently the funeral hearse, followed by its band of mourners, wound its way towards the cemetery. The year was 1901. The day was cool but sunny and Mr. Goronovsky, lying in the coffin, was, at long last, smiling. No one cried at that funeral. The Goronovskys were glad to see his suffering ended, and Katerina was not able to weep a single tear for the husband she had not loved.

Mark resolved here and now to leave this unhappy life. All his brothers and sisters, save Leon, were either married or independent. It was for his father and his little brother he had remained at home. He felt no responsibility towards Katerina and her now numerous children. Besides, she had sufficient money from what she had taken from his father to

support her for a while. Several of her children, too, were now working, and she would probably marry again, anyway.

After the eight days of sitting shiva Mark thought out his plan. He would take Leon, walk to the Lithuanian border, staying at different villages along the way, and cross into Europe. This was as far as his plan foresaw. The rest would be left to circumstances.

So it was that early on this cold wintry morning a tall lean figure, with a small one perched on his shoulders, could be seen walking in the general direction towards Poland.

—S. Hartman.