

Forward From Exile

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Beresin and Flight

MY ENTRY that day into Beresin was like a prologue to my entry into the great world. On either side of the street was a long row of lofty, thickly-leaved trees, and through the trees peeped magnificent houses—some of them with two stories—built of the finest wood, with grand windows that were actually set in cut-out frames and richly ornamented with brasswork. I saw for the first time a harmonious complex of trees and houses and felt for the first time a genuine aesthetic thrill. My father told me that the whole street was occupied by the younger generation of the Seldoviches, those wealthy timber merchants who ruled the roost in Jewish Beresin and who employed my grandfather Mendel as one of their agents. The older Seldoviches also had a street of their own, called the Golden Street, but their houses were not so fine. The older generation was the richer, but was more modest and did not delight in "making people stare." That phrase was very popular during the pogrom days. The Jewish press was filled with denunciations of Jews who displayed their wealth ostentatiously and was forever warning against the danger of "making gentiles stare."

I was left by my father under the protection of my uncle Chaim Eli, a son of grandfather Mendel Astrakan, and was immediately at home with the family, which consisted of two sons, Bereh and Nissan, and the "baby," Zireh, a girl who was a year or two younger than myself. A third son, Isaac, was already married and had set up house for himself. The Chaim Eli family belonged to the more educated circle; the three younger children had received a more modern training than was customary with the Jewish middle classes. I was at once provided with a teacher of Russian and German and a teacher of Talmud. My education in Hebrew was regarded as completed. The young Astrakans, who became my new friends, were also good Hebraists and kept me supplied with the Hebrew literature of the Haskalah period, as well as with the latest publications.

The ramifications of my mother's family in Beresin were no less broad and no less complicated than my father's in Svislovitz. A great number of houses were thus thrown open to me—uncles, aunts, cousins, relatives by marriage and relatives of indeterminate degree. I was embarrassed by the multiplicity of invitations. The homes were all those of the decent, middle class, and though I was welcome everywhere I did not find them particularly interesting. The one house where I felt perfectly at home was the one I lived in—Uncle Chaim Eli's.

The influence exerted on me by Beresin was immediate and powerful. Compared with Svislovitz this was a city; the streets were livelier, the people quicker. For the first time I was in a place where I did not know everybody. In Svislovitz my position had been unique. I had permitted myself to behave as I liked, speak as I liked, uttering whatever came to the tip of my tongue. In Beresin I had to create a position for myself. I became more thoughtful, I paused before I spoke and I ordered my thoughts in advance. The break in the tempo of my being was hard on me, but I was endowed with a deep feeling of responsibility. I grew up very quickly.

The largest element in this change was my friendship with the youngest generation of the Seldoviches. They were boys of my age, or a year older at the most. But from their earliest childhood they had been admonished never to forget—not for a moment—who

they were: Seldoviches. They were taught to bear themselves with a certain pride, to walk slowly, with measured steps, to speak slowly, with measured words. I mentioned "friendship," but it was hardly that. The refusal came from their side; they could not accept me, there was too great a difference in the social status of our respective families; and it was quite a concession on their part that they let me approach them and bathe in the glory of their presence. I owed this concession to my Talmud teacher, who had spread the rumor that I was an extraordinarily gifted village youth, with a rich education in all branches of Jewish knowledge, Hebrew in particular.

I grew older, therefore, in another respect. In Beresin I knew for the first time the bitter taste of class distinction, and learned the role that money played in Jewish life. I suffered. I observed that the friendliness of those young people toward me was purely external, courtesy rather than friendship, manners rather than feeling. I had no special respect for them; the great majority were mediocrities, some, in their Jewish studies, downright ignoramuses. True, they knew Russian much better than I, and some of them even had a smattering of German; but this could not compensate for ignorance in Jewish studies. The distinction was therefore one of money: their parents were richer than mine. But what did that have to do with us? Was I asking favors of them? Did money questions ever rise between us? No, it was just the presence of money, the mere association with it, which created the ineradicable distinction. It was an attitude of genuine idolatry. I now felt that there were two exiles for poor Jews. All Jews were in exile among the nations, and the poor Jews were in exile among their own people—an exile within an exile.

What I had heard about before regarding the Seldoviches and the Jews of Beresin I now saw for myself. I perceived how complete was the domination exercised by the many-branched Seldovich family, how complete was the self-abasement of the community. The middle classes lay as prostrate as the poorest Jews, and in the presence of a Seldovich no one else was of any account. There awoke in me a deep contempt for the oppressed and a hatred of the oppressor. But when, unable to restrain myself, I spoke out to my friends Bereh and Nissan, they smiled. They did not laugh, they only smiled, as if to say: "A village boy like you comes to live among us for a few months and breaks out in bitter criticism. We were born here and have always lived here and we are silent. Neither you nor we will change the order of things, which scores of generations have set firmly."

It must be borne in mind that I came upon this "order of things" at a time which should have created a new feeling of solidarity among Jews; for all Jews, without distinction of class or rank, were living, even when at a distance from the scenes of the pogroms, under a common threat. But the rich, snobbish Jews could not bring themselves to admit that in any respect whatsoever they could be classed with their poor co-religionists. In that hour of terror they insisted on trembling apart.

Observing the life of this tiny provincial town I got an insight into the attitude of the Ginzburgs and Poliakovs and the other wealthy Jewish notables of the capital who pretended to direct the affairs of the Jewish people. I began to understand why the best Jewish writers of the time were unanimous in their derision of the politics and actions of the wealthy Jews, and in that miniature world I learned how deep the gulf was between the wealthy Jews and the masses.