

I

Many years ago there lived in Zuchnow a man named Mendel Singer. He was pious, God-fearing and ordinary, an entirely everyday Jew. He practiced the modest profession of a teacher. In his house, which consisted of only a roomy kitchen, he imparted to children knowledge of the Bible. He taught with genuine enthusiasm and without spectacular success. Hundreds of thousands before him had lived and taught as he did.

As insignificant as his nature was his pale face. A full beard of ordinary black framed it completely. His mouth was hidden by the beard. His eyes were large, black, languid and half veiled by heavy lids. On his head sat a cap of black silk rep, a material out of which unfashionable and cheap ties are sometimes made. His body was wrapped in a customary half-long Jewish caftan, the skirts of which fluttered when Mendel Singer rushed through the street, knocking with a hard regular wing beat against the shafts of his high leather boots.

Singer seemed to have little time and nothing but pressing goals. Certainly his life was always hard and at times even a torment. He had a wife and three children to clothe and feed. (She was pregnant with a fourth.) God had bestowed fertility on his loins, equanimity on his heart and poverty on his hands. They had no gold to weigh and no banknotes to count. Still, his life ran steadily along like a poor little brook between sparse banks. Each morning Mendel thanked God for his sleep, for his awakening and for the dawning day. When the sun went down, he prayed once more. When the first stars began to sparkle, he prayed a third time. And before he lay down to sleep, he whispered a hasty prayer with weary but zealous lips. His sleep was dreamless. His conscience was clear. His soul was chaste. He had nothing to regret and there was nothing he would have coveted. He loved his wife and delighted in her flesh. With healthy hunger he swiftly consumed his meals. His two small sons, Jonas and Shemariah, he beat when they were disobedient. But the youngest, his daughter Miriam, he caressed often. She had his black hair and his black, languid and gentle eyes. Her limbs were delicate, her joints fragile. A young gazelle.

He taught twelve six-year-old pupils reading and recitation of the Bible. Every Friday each of the twelve brought him twenty kopecks. This was Mendel Singer's only income. He was only thirty years old. But his prospects of earning more were slim, perhaps nonexistent. When the pupils grew older, they moved on to other, wiser teachers. Life became more expensive from year to

year. The harvests were poorer and poorer. The carrots decreased, the eggs became hollow, the potatoes frozen, the soups watery, the carp thin and the pike short, the ducks meager, the geese tough, and the chickens nothing.

Thus sounded the laments of Deborah, Mendel Singer's wife. She was a woman, occasionally something got into her. She stole glances at the property of the wealthy and envied merchants their profits. Mendel Singer was much too lowly in her eyes. She reproached him for the children, her pregnancy, the rising prices, his low fees and often even for the bad weather. On Friday she scrubbed the floor until it turned yellow as saffron. Her broad shoulders jerked up and down in a regular rhythm, her strong hands rubbed vigorously every single floorboard, and her nails dug into the gaps and hollow spaces between the boards and scraped out black grime, which breaking waves from the bucket completely obliterated. Like a broad, mighty and mobile mountain, she crawled through the bare, blue-washed room. Outside the door she aired the furniture, the brown wooden bed, the sacks of straw, a planed-down table, two long and narrow benches, horizontal boards, each of them nailed to two vertical ones. As soon as the first twilight breathed on the window, Deborah lit the candles in candlesticks made of nickel silver, covered her face with her hands and prayed. Her husband came home in silky black, the floor shone up at him, yellow as melted sun, his face shimmered whiter than usual, and blacker than on weekdays his beard darkened. He sat down, sang a little song, then the parents and

children slurped the hot soup, smiled at the plates and spoke not a word. Warmth rose in the room. It swarmed from the pots, the bowls, the bodies. The cheap candles in the nickel silver candlesticks couldn't stand it, they began to bend. Stearin dripped on the brick-red and blue checkered tablecloth and encrusted in no time. The window was flung open, the candles braced up and burned peacefully to their end. The children lay down on the sacks of straw near the stove, the parents remained sitting and gazed with troubled solemnity into the last little blue flames, which shot up jaggedly out of the cavities of the candlesticks and, gently undulating, sank back, a fountain of fire. The stearin smoldered, thin blue threads of smoke drifted upward to the ceiling from the charred remains of the wick. "Ah!" sighed the woman. "Don't sigh!" Mendel Singer admonished. They fell silent. "Let's sleep, Deborah!" he commanded. And they began to murmur a bedtime prayer.

At the end of each week the Sabbath commenced thus, with silence, candles and song. Twenty-four hours later it was submerged in the night that led the gray procession of weekdays, a round dance of tribulation. On a hot midsummer day, in the fourth hour of the afternoon, Deborah gave birth. Her first cries pierced the singsong of the twelve studying children. They all went home. Seven days of vacation began. Mendel got a new child, a fourth, a boy. Eight days later he was circumcised and named Menuchim.

Menuchim had no cradle. He hung in a wicker basket in the middle of the room, fastened with four ropes to a hook in the ceil-

ing like a chandelier. From time to time Mendel Singer tapped with a gentle, not loveless finger on the hanging basket, which immediately began to rock. Occasionally, this motion calmed the infant. But sometimes nothing helped against his desire to whimper and scream. His voice croaked over the holy sentences of the Bible. Deborah climbed onto a stool and took the infant down. White, swollen and colossal, her bosom poured from her open blouse and drew the glances of the boys overpoweringly. Deborah seemed to suckle all present. Her own three older children surrounded her, jealous and desirous. Silence fell. They heard the infant's smacking.

The days stretched into weeks, the weeks grew into months, twelve months made a year. Menuchim still drank his mother's milk, a thin, clear milk. She couldn't wean him. In the thirteenth month of his life he began to make faces and groan like an animal, to breathe in racing haste and gasp in a previously unknown way. His large head hung heavy as a pumpkin on his thin neck. His broad brow folded and furrowed all over like a crumpled parchment. His legs were curved and lifeless like two wooden bows. His scrawny little arms wriggled and twitched. His mouth stammered ridiculous sounds. When he had an attack, he was taken out of the cradle and shaken well, until his face turned bluish and he nearly lost his breath. Then he recovered slowly. Brewed tea (in several little bags) was laid on his meager chest and coltsfoot was wrapped around his thin neck. "It's nothing," said his father, "it comes from growing." "Sons take after their mother's brothers.

My brother had it for five years!” said his mother. “He’ll grow out of it!” said the others. Until one day smallpox broke out in the town, the authorities prescribed vaccinations, and the doctors penetrated into the houses of the Jews. Some hid. But Mendel Singer, the righteous, fled no divine punishment. Even the vaccination he awaited calmly.

It was a hot sunny morning when the commission came through Mendel’s street. The last in the row of Jewish houses was Mendel’s house. With a police officer, who was carrying a large book under his arm, Dr. Soltysiuk walked with broad strides, a fluttering blonde mustache on his brown face, a gold-rimmed pince-nez on his reddened nose, in creaking yellow leather leggings, and his coat hanging casually over his blue *rubashka* due to the heat so that the sleeves looked like another pair of arms, which seemed equally poised to perform vaccinations: thus came Dr. Soltysiuk into the street of the Jews. Toward him resounded the wailing of women and the howling of children who had not been able to hide. The police officer hauled women and children out of deep cellars and down from high attics, out of tiny closets and large straw baskets. The sun brooded, the doctor sweated. He had no less than one hundred and seventy-six Jews to vaccinate. For each one who had escaped and could not be reached he thanked God inwardly. When he came to the fourth of the little blue-washed houses, he beckoned to the police officer to stop searching so zealously. The farther the doctor went, the louder the screaming swelled. It wafted along before his strides. The howls

of those who were still afraid joined the curses of the already vaccinated. Weary and completely disconcerted, he sank down with a heavy groan on the bench in Mendel's kitchen and asked for a glass of water. His glance fell on little Menuchim, he lifted up the cripple and said: "He will be an epileptic." He poured fear into the father's heart. "All children have spasms," the mother objected. "It's not that," declared the doctor. "But I might be able to cure him. There's life in his eyes."

He wanted to take the little one to the hospital at once. Deborah was ready. "They'll cure him for free," she said. But Mendel replied: "Be quiet, Deborah! No doctor can cure him if God doesn't will it. Shall he grow up among Russian children? Hear not one holy word? Eat milk with meat and chickens fried in butter, as they are served in the hospital? We are poor, but I will not sell Menuchim's soul just because he can be cured for free. One is not healed in strange hospitals." Like a hero Mendel held out his scrawny white arm for the vaccination. But he did not give Menuchim away. He resolved to beg God's help for his youngest and to fast twice a week, Monday and Thursday. Deborah decided to make pilgrimages to the cemetery and appeal to the bones of the ancestors to intercede with the almighty. Thus would Menuchim become healthy and not an epileptic.

Nonetheless, after the hour of the vaccination, fear hung over the house of Mendel Singer like a monster, and sorrow blew through their hearts like a constant hot and biting wind. Deborah could sigh, and her husband did not reprimand her. Longer than

usual she held her head buried in her hands when she prayed, as if she were creating her own nights, to bury her fear in them, and her own darkneses, so as to find grace in them. For she believed, as it was written, that God's light shone in the dimnesses and his goodness illuminated the blackness. But Menuchim's attacks did not cease. The older children grew and grew, their health clamored evilly in their mother's ears like an enemy of Menuchim, the invalid. It was as if the healthy children drew strength from the sick one, and Deborah hated their shouting, their red cheeks, their straight limbs. She made pilgrimages to the cemetery through rain and sun. She struck her head against the mossy sandstone that grew from the bones of her fathers and mothers. She invoked the dead, whose silent consoling replies she believed she heard. On the way home she trembled with the hope of finding her son healthy. She neglected her duty at the stove, the soup boiled over, the clay pots cracked, the pans rusted, the greenish shimmering glasses shattered with a harsh crash, the chimney of the petroleum lamp was darkened with soot, the wick was charred to a miserable stub, the dirt of many soles and many weeks coated the floorboards, the lard melted away in the pot, the withered buttons fell from the children's shirts like leaves before the winter.

One day, a week before the high holy days (the summer had turned into rain, and the rain wanted to turn into snow), Deborah packed her son in the basket, laid wool blankets over him, placed him on the coachman Sameshkin's cart, and traveled to Kluczýsk, where the rabbi lived. The board seat lay loosely on the

straw and slid with every movement of the wagon. Deborah held it down with only her body weight, it was alive, it wanted to jump. The narrow winding road was covered with silver-gray mud in which the high boots of the passersby and the bottom halves of the wheels sank. Rain veiled the fields, scattered the smoke over the isolated huts, ground with endless, fine patience everything solid that it struck, the limestone that here and there grew like a white tooth out of the black earth, the sawed-up logs on the sides of the road, the fragrant boards piled in front of the entrance to the sawmill, also Deborah's headscarf and the wool blankets under which Menuchim lay buried. Not one little drop should wet him. Deborah reckoned that she still had four hours to travel; if the rain didn't cease, she would have to stop at the inn and dry the blankets, drink tea and eat the poppy-seed pretzels she had brought along, which were now soggy too. That could cost five kopecks, five kopecks with which one must not be careless. God showed understanding, it stopped raining. Above hasty wisps of clouds a dissolved sun paled for scarcely an hour; in a new deeper twilight it finally sank.

Black night had settled in Kluczýsk when Deborah arrived. Many helpless people had already come to see the rabbi. Kluczýsk consisted of a few thousand low straw and shingle-covered houses, a kilometer-wide marketplace that was like a dry lake wreathed with buildings. The carts that stood around in it were reminiscent of stranded wrecks; and they were lost, tiny and meaningless, in the circular expanse. The unhitched horses whinnied next to the

carts and trod the sticky mud with tired, slapping hooves. Solitary men wandered with swaying yellow lanterns through the round night to fetch a forgotten blanket and some rattling dishes with provisions. All around, in the thousand little houses, the arrivals were taken in. They slept on plank-beds next to the residents' beds, the infirm, the misshapen, the lame, the mad, the idiotic, the heart-afflicted, the diabetic, who bore cancer in their bodies, whose eyes were contaminated with trachoma, women with infertile wombs, mothers with deformed children, men threatened by prison or military service, deserters who prayed for a successful escape, those given up on by doctors, cast out by mankind, maltreated by earthly justice, the troubled, the yearning, the starving and the satiated, deceivers and the honest, all, all, all . . . Deborah stayed with her husband's Kluczy'sk relatives. She didn't sleep. She crouched all night beside Menuchim's basket in the corner next to the stove; dark was the room, dark was her heart. She no longer dared appeal to God, He seemed to her too high, too great, too remote, infinitely far beyond infinite heavens, she would have needed a ladder of a million prayers to reach even a hem of God's garment. She sought help from the dead, appealed to her parents, Menuchim's grandfather after whom the little one was named, then the patriarchs of the Jews, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the bones of Moses, and finally the matriarchs. Wherever support was possible she sent a sigh. She pounded on a hundred graves, on a hundred doors of paradise. For fear that she wouldn't reach the rabbi tomorrow because too many supplicants were there, she

first prayed for the good fortune to make it there early, as if her son's recovery would then be child's play. Finally she saw through the cracks of the black window shutters a few pale streaks of morning. She rose quickly. She kindled the dry pine chips that lay on the stove, sought and found a pot, fetched the samovar from the table, threw in the burning chips, poured in coal, held the urn by both handles, bent down and blew into it so that the sparks flew out and crackled about her face. It was as if she were acting in accordance with a mysterious rite. Soon the water boiled, soon the tea brewed, the family rose, they sat down in front of the earthen brown dishes and drank. Then Deborah lifted her son out of the basket. He whimpered. She kissed him rapidly and many times, with a frantic tenderness, her moist lips smacked on the gray face, the scrawny little hands, the crooked thighs, the bloated belly of the little one, it was as if she were striking the child with her loving motherly mouth. Then she wrapped him up, tied a cord around the package, and hung her son around her neck so that her hands would be free. She wanted to clear a way through the throng in front of the rabbi's door.

With a sharp scream she plunged into the waiting crowd, with cruel fists she forced apart the weak, no one could stop her. Whoever, struck by her hand and pushed away, looked after her so as to send her back was blinded by the burning pain in her face, by her open red mouth, from which a scorching breath seemed to stream, by the crystal gleam of her large rolling tears, by her cheeks, ablaze in red flames, by the thick blue veins on her craned

neck, in which the cries gathered before they broke out. Like a torch Deborah wafted along. With a single shrill cry, in the wake of which the terrible silence of a whole dead world ensued, Deborah finally reached the rabbi's door and fell down before it, the latch in her outstretched right hand. With her left she pounded against the brown wood. Menuchim grazed the ground in front of her.

Someone opened the door. The rabbi stood at the window, his back to her, a thin black line. Suddenly he turned around. She remained at the threshold, she presented her son on both arms, as one offers a sacrifice. She caught a glimmer from the man's pale face, which seemed to be one with his white beard. She had planned to look into the holy man's eyes so as to convince herself that powerful goodness truly lived in them. But now that she stood there, a lake of tears lay before her gaze, and she saw the man behind a white wave of water and salt. He raised his hand, she thought she discerned two scrawny fingers, instruments of blessing. But very close to her she heard the voice of the rabbi, though he only whispered:

“Menuchim, Mendel's son, will grow healthy. There will not be many of his like in Israel. Pain will make him wise, ugliness kind, bitterness gentle, and illness strong. His eyes will be far and deep, his ears clear and full of echoes. His mouth will be silent, but when he will open his lips, they will herald good things. Have no fear and go home!”

“When, when, when will he be healthy?” Deborah whispered.

“After long years,” said the rabbi, “but don’t question me further, I have no time and know nothing more. Do not leave your son, even if he is a great burden to you, do not give him away, he comes from you just as a healthy child does. And go!”

Outside the people cleared the way for her. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes dry, her lips slightly opened, as if she were breathing pure hope. Grace in her heart, she returned home.

II

When Deborah returned home, she found her husband at the stove. Grudgingly he tended the fire, the pot, the wooden spoons. His upright mind was directed toward the simple earthly things and tolerated no miracle within range of his eyes. He smiled at his wife’s faith in the rabbi. His simple piety required no mediating power between God and man. “Menuchim will grow healthy, but it will take a long time!” With these words Deborah entered the house. “It will take a long time!” repeated Mendel like an evil echo. With a sigh Deborah hung the basket from the ceiling again. The three older children came from their play. They set upon the basket, which they had missed for a few days, and swung it forcefully. Mendel Singer seized his sons, Jonas and Shemariah, with both hands. Miriam, the girl, fled to her mother. Mendel pinched his sons’ ears. They howled out. He unbuckled his belt and swung