

## XVII

---

### AN AMERICAN LANDSMAN

#### I.

THIS PICTURE OF JEWISH LIFE CAST AGAINST A dark background obscured all other impressions I may have received from returning to the city where I spent my childhood.

Also it did not take me long to discover that I was a stranger in Rovno, a stranger in my home town.

Jewish misery in Poland, as I have described it in a previous chapter, is primarily economical. But that is not all. As a result of the notorious "Polonization" campaign, the Jews, particularly those who live in the *Kresy*, also suffer spiritually.

The "Polonization campaign"! Everywhere I felt its "wonders"!

When I left Rovno it was already under Polish rule. Its culture, however—the little there was of it—was still predominantly Russian. Now, in less than ten years, the "Polonization" campaign has eradicated every vestige of this Russian culture. Rovno became a Polish city, and I, as I have said, felt like a stranger in my home town.

To the vast majority of the Jewish masses in Poland, to be sure, it matters little whether the domi-

nant culture is Russian or Polish. For one thing, the Jews of the ghettos were always more or less isolated culturally, living a life of their own. Secondly, very few of the Polish Jews know the real facts about the status of the Jews in New Russia. Thus, as far as they are concerned, Russian "culture" still means pogroms and persecutions. Isn't that, unfortunately, also true of the new Polish "culture"? The "Polonization" campaign, however, the zeal with which the professional Polish patriots went out to spread this "culture" amidst the starving Jewish masses, merely intensified their misery. It added, to use a popular expression, insult to injury.

What amazed me most during my sojourn in Poland was the seriousness with which the dominant race demands loyalty and patriotism from its Jewish subjects. The following story related to me by a Jewish school teacher is quite indicative of the attitude of the typical Polish bureaucrat towards the Jew.

One day a Polish school inspector decided to visit a Yiddish school—in fact the only school—in a little town in the *Kresy*. As it is well known, every petty Polish official, especially in his relation to the Jews, is a "big shot." A school inspector who is entrusted with the "education" of the youth and who can open and close schools at will, is something like the Almighty himself. When the news about the inspector's proposed visit leaked out, the school decided to give him a royal reception, including a good patriotic show. Lookouts were stationed at the school door and when they saw his "Majesty" approach, they gave the

signal and the whole school stood up to sing the Polish national anthem:

Poland hasn't perished yet while we live  
What a foreign force took away from us  
We shall regain by force, etc. etc. . . .

"The inspector," related the teacher, "was very pleased with this exhibition of patriotism. But not for long. Suddenly his face grew red and indignant. The reason for it was this: One boy of about nine, in his zeal to show the Pan what a good Pole he was, sang at the top of his voice. But alas, he sang the wrong words! He sang a popular parody on the Polish anthem:

Poland hasn't perished yet while we live  
The vodka isn't sour yet while we drink . . ."

This parody, incidentally, was as popular in my day as it is today. The boy, of course, did not know any better. These were undoubtedly the words he heard sung in his house by people who had not the slightest reason for "regaining by force" that which they had never had. The inspector, however, saw in it a dangerous revolutionary manifestation. He first lectured to the children on their lack of patriotism and then closed the school altogether.

There were tears in the teacher's eyes when he related to me this story. He, himself, was a dyed-in-the-wool Yiddishist. He passionately believed—there are quite a few such innocent souls in Poland like him—that if the Government would only permit the Jews to develop their own national language and

culture much of their trouble would be over. As it was, he was panicky lest the official decide to close all Yiddish schools and thereby play into the hands of the Zionists (the anti-Yiddishists, the Hebraists), who are regarded with more favor by the Government.

To tell the truth, as far as I was concerned, this incident was far from being a tragedy. At best it was a tragi-comedy. The Jewish problem in Poland, after all, is much deeper than that. What I could not understand, however, was why the Pole, in view of the treatment accorded the Jews in Poland, should have expected this boy or any other Jewish boy to know the right words of the anthem.

2.

Another thing that made my visit to Poland as unpleasant as could be was the fact that I was always being shadowed by the Polish Secret Police.

In fairness to the Polish officials, I ought to say that they are very cordial to foreigners. As an American, even though a Jew, with rare exceptions, I was treated well. Why then was it necessary always to have a detective on my trail? Perhaps it was because I had just arrived from Soviet Russia. (The Poles were always suspicious of any one coming from that country.) Perhaps it is the custom of every European country to spy upon foreigners. I was often told that in Soviet Russia, too, all foreigners, including

myself, were usually shadowed by the G.P.U. It may have been so; I was never conscious of it. In Poland, however, it did not take me long to discover the young, smartly dressed Pole who always waited a short distance from my house with the attitude of a man disappointed by his best girl. He stood there for days without changing his pose. He never spoke to me, nor even so much as looked at me. But in a small city where everyone knows everybody else, his profession was no secret.

I had nothing to hide from this young Pole, but the idea that I was constantly being watched gave me an unpleasant feeling. I lost all desire to move about.

One day, when I thought that I had sufficiently lulled the suspicion of this "heart-broken lover," I took the train to the little town of "F," about half an hour's ride from Rovno.

"F" is a little Jewish town, similar in almost every detail to those ghettos which I have already described. Like most Jewish towns, "F," too, suffered horribly as a result of the depression.

Upon my arrival at the railroad station of "F," I witnessed a strong commotion among the Jewish passengers—Jews old and young were fleeing from the station in all directions.

"What happened? . . ."

The usually talkative Jews were panicky and wouldn't even stop to answer my question. Only one elderly Jew remained standing in the centre of the platform. He was surrounded by a group of Poles—



some of them soldiers—who were making fun of him. As I came nearer, I saw that the man was crying.

“What happened, *Panie?*”

The man cast a terrified look first at me, then at the Poles grouped about him. He did not reply.

I repeated my question.

The man stared at me, then once more at the Poles, and suddenly, as though he had come to a decision, took hold of the lapel of my coat and began to shout between sobs:

“*Panie*, my dear *Panie* . . . what is there left for me to do but cry . . . to cry so that the whole world may hear. I am a butcher . . . The taxes have ruined me . . . After much trouble I succeeded in borrowing a few zlotys from a *Gemilas Chassodim Kasse* (Free Loan Chest, supported by the Joint Distribution Committee, an American controlled organization). I was going to the village . . . Maybe I would have bought something . . . Maybe I would have made a few groszy . . . My wife and children are waiting for me . . . But the tax collector took my last grosz away . . . He put a rope around my neck . . . A rope is hanging around my neck . . .”

At a distance stood the tax collector, a tall middle-aged Pole with well-groomed moustachios pointed like a dagger, talking to a policeman and smiling cynically.

“Is that true, *Panie?* . . .”

I wanted to ask the tax collector to verify the story but at that moment the policeman walked over to the sobbing Jew, tapped him on the shoulder, and

both disappeared from the station. For the sake of the Jew I decided that it would be best not to ask any questions. Besides, I did not have to verify his tale of woe. I knew that he told me the truth, for such incidents happen often in Poland, particularly in the *Kresy*.

Shortly before I arrived in Rovno, a new tax law was passed, according to which anyone who owes taxes to the Government (and there is hardly a Jew in Poland who does not) may be stopped on the street, his pockets searched and all that he has on him confiscated. If he is in the company of a friend or a stranger, the latter, too, is subject to this law. This is not fiction. The above scene was such an act of legal expropriation. I have witnessed many such incidents in Poland. The hardest hit by this law are, of course, the Jews, particularly the Jewish middle class—storekeepers, petty traders, etc.

Ask any Polish official and he will tell you that there is no special law compelling the Jews to pay higher taxes than the rest of the Polish population. Tell him about this expropriation law and he will reply that the Jews are notoriously reticent about paying taxes and that the Government has to protect itself somehow. Theoretically he will even be right. What he will forget to tell you, however, is that taxation in Poland is so fixed as to place the great bulk of it on the cities where Jews predominate. He will forget to tell you that out of 800 million zlotys in yearly taxes, the Jews—one-tenth of the Polish population—pay about 250 million zlotys. Nor will he

mention the fact that Polish merchants pay 3 per cent interest on credits supplied by the Government while the Jews are forced to pay 14 per cent. But that is how things actually are. Is there any wonder that in the face of Government competition such as the monopoly on tobacco, matches, etc., and because of unbearable taxation, the Jews are continuously closing up their little sorry stores, and walk aimlessly the ghetto streets, depending for their existence upon the negligible help they may receive from the Joint Distribution Committee? Is there any wonder that the Jewish middle class in Poland has been pauperized and proletarianized?

3.

This proletarianization of the middle class would be of special interest to the sociologist. No other people have (or rather had) so many castes, taboos and strict codes of morality as the Jews, particularly the Polish Jews. A son of a drygoods store clerk, for instance, would never have thought of marrying a shoemaker's daughter. A tailor, on the other hand, could never hope to marry a store-owner's daughter. Workers were usually regarded as people of low birth. The worker was at the very bottom of the social ladder; the rich men being on the very top, while the vast and bigoted middle class occupied the middle.

But things have changed. (And here, incidentally, the sociologist will be able to find the real reason for

changing social customs.) Work is now a kingdom. Having lost their middle class income, the Jewish middle class of Poland is also beginning to lose its *Bürgerliche* tradition. I found this also to be true in Russia and Germany.

The story of my American landsman whom I met in "F" is a case in point.

On the very first day of my arrival in Rovno, I heard about the American *landsman*. Gossip from "F" to Rovno travels fast. In this case there was special reason for excitement. For, as the story went, "Motia, Jacob the tailor's son, returned from America a rich man and was going to marry Nathan Lebenson's youngest daughter."

"Is it the same Motia?" everyone inquired.

Yes, it was the same Motia, the very same Motia who more than twenty years ago—then a lively tailor boy of nineteen—fell in love with Nathan Lebenson's eldest daughter. According to women who know the whole story "from the beginning to end," Lebenson's daughter loved Motia, too. The only thing that prevented their marriage was old Lebenson's set of middle class taboos. In those days, as I remember him, the old man was a prosperous owner of a tobacco store. He had a long black beard and a gold chain stretched across his corpulent abdomen. He always sat in the most honored place in the synagogue.

"What," Nathan Lebenson said, "my daughter marry a tailor boy? . . . Never, never . . . Over

my dead body will she become the wife of a tailor . . ."

He confined the girl to a room and soon rumors began to spread over the city that she went out of her mind. In the meanwhile Motia, broken hearted and, incidentally, in order to escape military service in the Tsarist army, went to America.

But that happened twenty years ago and, as the Rovno housewives are fond of saying, "much water has already flown by under the bridge that extends across the tiny river of the city." As a result of the War, the civil war, the arrival of the Poles, particularly the establishment of the Government monopoly on tobacco, the old man was forced to close his store. When I last saw him, his corpulence was gone and his beard gray. He lost his fortune and, with it, the honored seat in the synagogue since he was no longer able to contribute lavishly to the synagogue's upkeep.

When Motia announced his intention of marrying Lebenson's youngest daughter (he said she reminded him very much of his first love who had in the meantime died after being raped by several Petlura soldiers during a pogrom) everyone in town wondered: "Will the old man permit it?" But the old man had long since lost his sense of family honor and he offered no objections. The daughter, whom I knew well as a child, confided to me that she did not particularly relish the idea of marrying Motia. But then, she said, "I would even marry a man of eighty in order to escape from the deadly atmosphere of 'F'."

Besides both father and daughter had the idea that Motia was a "rich American uncle."

And my landsman, a cynic and what we call in New York a kibitser, let them all keep the illusion that he was indeed a rich man. In reality, he was only an operator in a New York dress shop who had managed to save up a few dollars and decided to take this long thought of trip before the depression "ate up" what he had saved. When I met him he was dressed in an outlandish costume: gray striped trousers and a green jacket. It was winter and extremely cold, yet his hat was of a light gray color. His first words upon greeting me were:

"I am pleased to meet a landsman any time and anywhere but I don't think you are quite wise coming dressed up here like a European gentleman."

"Why?"

"Why, you ask? Because unless you are dressed up like a nut these dummies around here will not take you for an American and will have no respect for you. I know their psychology. They still think that Americans wear shoes with long pointed toes as they did twenty years ago."

"And why should you want them to respect you?" I asked.

He smacked his lips.

"You see, my boy," he replied, "that's my revenge."

"And do you get much respect from Lebenson?"

"Sure. The old hypocrite, although at times he still hints at his family honor, is willing to forget my low



origin because he believes that my pockets are stuffed with money . . .”

Motia seemed to be very happy. He asked me to stay for his wedding. In fact, even before he met me, he had sent a note to Rovno's Yiddish newspaper, as I later found out, about my being a “famous” American journalist.

“I want to have a ritzy wedding, real American style,” he said, winking ironically, “with a representative of the ‘press’ present. Let 'em all remember how Motia, Jacob the tailor's son, got married.”

Unfortunately, I could not remain for the wedding, although I knew that Motia would put on a real “show,” true American style, and that this would be one of the gayest occasions that the town of “F” had had in a long time. I had already bought a railroad ticket and my train was leaving early in the morning for Warsaw, the capital and nerve-centre of Poland.