

THE PROMISED LAND

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS



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treated like this, but at least there was this excuse for sending them back to Polotzk, that they belonged there. For what reason were people driven out of St. Petersburg and Moscow who had their homes in those cities, and had no other place to go to? Ever so many people, men and women and even children, came to Polotzk, where they had no friends, with stories of cruel treatment in Russia; and although they were nobody's relatives, they were taken in, and helped, and set up in business, like unfortunates after a fire.

It was very strange that the Czar and the police should want all Russia for themselves. It was a very big country; it took many days for a letter to reach one's father in Russia. Why might not everybody be there who wanted to?

I do not know when I became old enough to understand. The truth was borne in on me a dozen times a day, from the time I began to distinguish words from empty noises. My grandmother told me about it, when she put me to bed at night. My parents told me about it, when they gave me presents on holidays. My playmates told me, when they drew me back into a corner of the gateway, to let a policeman pass. Vanka, the little white-haired boy, told me all about it, when he ran out of his mother's laundry on purpose to throw mud after me when I happened to pass. I heard about it during prayers, and when women quarrelled in the market place; and sometimes, waking in the night, I heard my parents whisper it in the dark. There was no time in my life when I did not hear and see and feel the truth—the reason why Polotzk was cut off from the rest of Russia. It was the first lesson a little girl in Polotzk had to learn. But for a long while I did not understand. Then there came a

time when I knew that Polotzk and Vitebsk and Vilna and some other places were grouped together as the "Pale of Settlement," and within this area the Czar commanded me to stay, with my father and mother and friends, and all other people like us. We must not be found outside the Pale, because we were Jews.

So there was a fence around Polotzk, after all. The world was divided into Jews and Gentiles. This knowledge came so gradually that it could not shock me. It trickled into my consciousness drop by drop. By the time I fully understood that I was a prisoner, the shackles had grown familiar to my flesh.

The first time Vanka threw mud at me, I ran home and complained to my mother, who brushed off my dress and said, quite resignedly, "How can I help you, my poor child? Vanka is a Gentile. The Gentiles do as they like with us Jews." The next time Vanka abused me, I did not cry, but ran for shelter, saying to myself, "Vanka is a Gentile." The third time, when Vanka spat on me, I wiped my face and thought nothing at all. I accepted ill-usage from the Gentiles as one accepts the weather. The world was made in a certain way, and I had to live in it.

Not quite all the Gentiles were like Vanka. Next door to us lived a Gentile family which was very friendly. There was a girl as big as I, who never called me names, and gave me flowers from her father's garden. And there were the Parphens, of whom my grandfather rented his store. They treated us as if we were not Jews at all. On our festival days they visited our house and brought us presents, carefully choosing such things as Jewish children might accept; and they liked to have everything explained to them, about the wine and the fruit and the

candles, and they even tried to say the appropriate greetings and blessings in Hebrew. My father used to say that if all the Russians were like the Parphens, there would be no trouble between Gentiles and Jews; and Fedora Pavlovna, the landlady, would reply that the Russian *people* were not to blame. It was the priests, she said, who taught the people to hate the Jews. Of course she knew best, as she was a very pious Christian. She never passed a church without crossing herself.

The Gentiles were always crossing themselves; when they went into a church, and when they came out, when they met a priest, or passed an image in the street. The dirty beggars on the church steps never stopped crossing themselves; and even when they stood on the corner of a Jewish street, and received alms from Jewish people, they crossed themselves and mumbled Christian prayers. In every Gentile house there was what they called an "icon," which was an image or picture of the Christian god, hung up in a corner, with a light always burning before it. In front of the icon the Gentiles said their prayers, on their knees, crossing themselves all the time.

I tried not to look in the corner where the icon was, when I came into a Gentile house. I was afraid of the cross. Everybody was, in Polotzk—all the Jews, I mean. For it was the cross that made the priests, and the priests made our troubles, as even some Christians admitted. The Gentiles said that we had killed their God, which was absurd, as they never had a God—nothing but images. Besides, what they accused us of had happened so long ago; the Gentiles themselves said it was long ago. Everybody had been dead for ages who could have had anything to do with it. Yet they put up crosses everywhere, and wore them on their

necks, on purpose to remind themselves of these false things; and they considered it pious to hate and abuse us, insisting that we had killed their God. To worship the cross and to torment a Jew was the same thing to them. That is why we feared the cross.

Another thing the Gentiles said about us was that we used the blood of murdered Christian children at the Passover festival. Of course that was a wicked lie. It made me sick to think of such a thing. I knew everything that was done for Passover, from the time I was a very little girl. The house was made clean and shining and holy, even in the corners where nobody ever looked. Vessels and dishes that were used all the year round were put away in the garret, and special vessels were brought out for the Passover week. I used to help unpack the new dishes, and find my own blue mug. When the fresh curtains were put up, and the white floors were uncovered, and everybody in the house put on new clothes, and I sat down to the feast in my new dress, I felt clean inside and out. And when I asked the Four Questions, about the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs and the other things, and the family, reading from their books, answered me, did I not know all about Passover, and what was on the table, and why? It was wicked of the Gentiles to tell lies about us. The youngest child in the house knew how Passover was kept.

The Passover season, when we celebrated our deliverance from the land of Egypt, and felt so glad and thankful, as if it had only just happened, was the time our Gentile neighbors chose to remind us that Russia was another Egypt. That is what I heard people say, and it was true. It was not so bad in Polotzk, within the Pale; but in Russian cities, and even more in the coun-

try districts, where Jewish families lived scattered, by special permission of the police, who were always changing their minds about letting them stay, the Gentiles made the Passover a time of horror for the Jews. Somebody would start up that lie about murdering Christian children, and the stupid peasants would get mad about it, and fill themselves with vodka, and set out to kill the Jews. They attacked them with knives and clubs and scythes and axes, killed them or tortured them, and burned their houses. This was called a "pogrom." Jews who escaped the pogroms came to Polotzk with wounds on them, and horrible, horrible stories, of little babies torn limb from limb before their mothers' eyes. Only to hear these things made one sob and sob and choke with pain. People who saw such things never smiled any more, no matter how long they lived; and sometimes their hair turned white in a day, and some people became insane on the spot.

Often we heard that the pogrom was led by a priest carrying a cross before the mob. Our enemies always held up the cross as the excuse of their cruelty to us. I never was in an actual pogrom, but there were times when it threatened us, even in Polotzk; and in all my fearful imaginings, as I hid in dark corners, thinking of the horrible things the Gentiles were going to do to me, I saw the cross, the cruel cross.

I remember a time when I thought a pogrom had broken out in our street, and I wonder that I did not die of fear. It was some Christian holiday, and we had been warned by the police to keep indoors. Gates were locked; shutters were barred. If a child cried, the nurse threatened to give it to the priest, who would soon be passing by. Fearful and yet curious, we looked through

the cracks in the shutters. We saw a procession of peasants and townspeople, led by a number of priests, carrying crosses and banners and images. In the place of honor was carried a casket, containing a relic from the monastery in the outskirts of Polotzk. Once a year the Gentiles paraded with this relic, and on that occasion the streets were considered too holy for Jews to be about; and we lived in fear till the end of the day, knowing that the least disturbance might start a riot, and a riot lead to a pogrom.

On the day when I saw the procession through a crack in the shutter, there were soldiers and police in the street. This was as usual, but I did not know it. I asked the nurse, who was pressing to the crack over my head, what the soldiers were for. Thoughtlessly she answered me, "In case of a pogrom." Yes, there were the crosses and the priests and the mob. The church bells were pealing their loudest. Everything was ready. The Gentiles were going to tear me in pieces, with axes and knives and ropes. They were going to burn me alive. The cross — the cross! What would they do to me first? There was one thing the Gentiles might do to me worse than burning or rending. It was what was done to unprotected Jewish children who fell into the hands of priests or nuns. They might baptize me. That would be worse than death by torture. Rather would I drown in the Dyina than a drop of the baptismal water should touch my forehead. To be forced to kneel before the hideous images, to kiss the cross, — sooner would I rush out to the mob that was passing, and let them tear my vitals out. To forswear the One God, to bow before idols, — rather would I be seized with the plague, and be eaten up by vermin. I was only a little girl, and not

very brave; little pains made me ill, and I cried. But there was no pain that I would not bear — no, none — rather than submit to baptism.

Every Jewish child had that feeling. There were stories by the dozen of Jewish boys who were kidnapped by the Czar's agents and brought up in Gentile families, till they were old enough to enter the army, where they served till forty years of age; and all those years the priests tried, by bribes and daily tortures, to force them to accept baptism, but in vain. This was in the time of Nicholas I, but men who had been through this service were no older than my grandfather, when I was a little girl; and they told their experiences with their own lips, and one knew it was true, and it broke one's heart with pain and pride.

Some of these soldiers of Nicholas, as they were called, were taken as little boys of seven or eight — snatched from their mothers' laps. They were carried to distant villages, where their friends could never trace them, and turned over to some dirty, brutal peasant, who used them like slaves and kept them with the pigs. No two were ever left together; and they were given false names, so that they were entirely cut off from their own world. And then the lonely child was turned over to the priests, and he was flogged and starved and terrified — a little helpless boy who cried for his mother; but still he refused to be baptized. The priests promised him good things to eat, and fine clothes, and freedom from labor; but the boy turned away, and said his prayers secretly — the Hebrew prayers.

As he grew older, severer tortures were invented for him; still he refused baptism. By this time he had forgotten his mother's face, and of his prayers perhaps only

the "Shema" remained in his memory; but he was a Jew, and nothing would make him change. After he entered the army, he was bribed with promises of promotions and honors. He remained a private, and endured the cruellest discipline. When he was discharged, at the age of forty, he was a broken man, without a home, without a clue to his origin, and he spent the rest of his life wandering among Jewish settlements, searching for his family; hiding the scars of torture under his rags, begging his way from door to door. If he were one who had broken down under the cruel torments, and allowed himself to be baptized, for the sake of a respite, the Church never let him go again, no matter how loudly he protested that he was still a Jew. If he was caught practicing Jewish rites, he was subjected to the severest punishment.

My father knew of one who was taken as a small boy, who never yielded to the priests under the most hideous tortures. As he was a very bright boy, the priests were particularly eager to convert him. They tried him with bribes that would appeal to his ambition. They promised to make a great man of him — a general, a noble. The boy turned away and said his prayers. Then they tortured him, and threw him into a cell; and when he lay asleep from exhaustion, the priest came and baptized him. When he awoke, they told him he was a Christian, and brought him the crucifix to kiss. He protested, threw the crucifix from him, but they held him to it that he was a baptized Jew, and belonged to the Church; and the rest of his life he spent between the prison and the hospital, always clinging to his faith, saying the Hebrew prayers in defiance of his tormentors, and paying for it with his flesh.

It was not easy to live, with such bitter competition as the congestion of population made inevitable. There were ten times as many stores as there should have been, ten times as many tailors, cobblers, barbers, tinsmiths. A Gentile, if he failed in Polotzk, could go elsewhere, where there was less competition. A Jew could make the circle of the Pale, only to find the same conditions as at home. Outside the Pale he could only go to certain designated localities, on payment of prohibitive fees, augmented by a constant stream of bribes; and even then he lived at the mercy of the local chief of police.

Artisans had the right to reside outside the Pale, on fulfillment of certain conditions. This sounded easy to me, when I was a little girl, till I realized how it worked. There was a capmaker who had duly qualified, by passing an examination and paying for his trade papers, to live in a certain city. The chief of police suddenly took it into his head to impeach the genuineness of his papers. The capmaker was obliged to travel to St. Petersburg, where he had qualified in the first place, to repeat the examination. He spent the savings of years in petty bribes, trying to hasten the process, but was detained ten months by bureaucratic red tape. When at length he returned to his home town, he found a new chief of police, installed during his absence, who discovered a new flaw in the papers he had just obtained, and expelled him from the city. If he came to Polotzk, there were then eleven capmakers where only one could make a living. Merchants fared like the artisans. They, too, could buy the right of residence outside the Pale, permanent or temporary, on conditions that gave them no real security. I was proud to have an uncle who was a merchant of the First Guild, but it was very expensive for

my uncle. He had to pay so much a year for the title, and a certain percentage on the profits from his business. This gave him the right to travel on business outside the Pale, twice a year, for not more than six months in all. If he were found outside the Pale after his permit expired, he had to pay a fine that exceeded all he had gained by his journey, perhaps. I used to picture my uncle on his Russian travels, hurrying to finish his business in the limited time; while a policeman marched behind him, ticking off the days and counting up the hours. That was a foolish fancy, but some of the things that were done in Russia really were very funny.

There were things in Polotzk that made you laugh with one eye and weep with the other, like a clown. During an epidemic of cholera, the city officials, suddenly becoming energetic, opened stations for the distribution of disinfectants to the people. A quarter of the population was dead when they began, and most of the dead were buried, while some lay decaying in deserted houses. The survivors, some of them crazy from horror, stole through the empty streets, avoiding one another, till they came to the appointed stations, where they pushed and crowded to get their little bottles of carbolic acid. Many died from fear in those horrible days, but some must have died from laughter. For only the Gentiles were allowed to receive the disinfectant. Poor Jews who had nothing but their new-made graves were driven away from the stations.

Perhaps it was wrong of us to think of our Gentile neighbors as a different species of beings from ourselves, but such madness as that did not help to make them more human in our eyes. It was easier to be friends with the beasts in the barn than with some of the Gentiles. The

cow and the goat and the cat responded to kindness, and remembered which of the housemaids was generous and which was cross. The Gentiles made no distinctions. A Jew was a Jew, to be hated and spat upon and used spitefully.

The only Gentiles, besides the few of the intelligent kind, who did not habitually look upon us with hate and contempt, were the stupid peasants from the country, who were hardly human themselves. They lived in filthy huts together with their swine, and all they cared for was how to get something to eat. It was not their fault. The land laws made them so poor that they had to sell themselves to fill their bellies. What help was there for us in the good will of such wretched slaves? For a cask of vodka you could buy up a whole village of them. They trembled before the meanest townsman, and at a sign from a long-haired priest they would sharpen their axes against us.

The Gentiles had their excuse for their malice. They said our merchants and money-lenders preyed upon them, and our shopkeepers gave false measure. People who want to defend the Jews ought never to deny this. Yes, I say, we cheated the Gentiles whenever we dared, because it was the only thing to do. Remember how the Czar was always sending us commands, — you shall not do this and you shall not do that, until there was little left that we might honestly do, except pay tribute and die. There he had us cooped up, thousands of us where only hundreds could live, and every means of living taxed to the utmost. When there are too many wolves in the prairie, they begin to prey upon each other. We starving captives of the Pale — we did as do the hungry brutes. But our humanity showed in our discrimination



THE GRAVE DIGGER OF POLOTZK