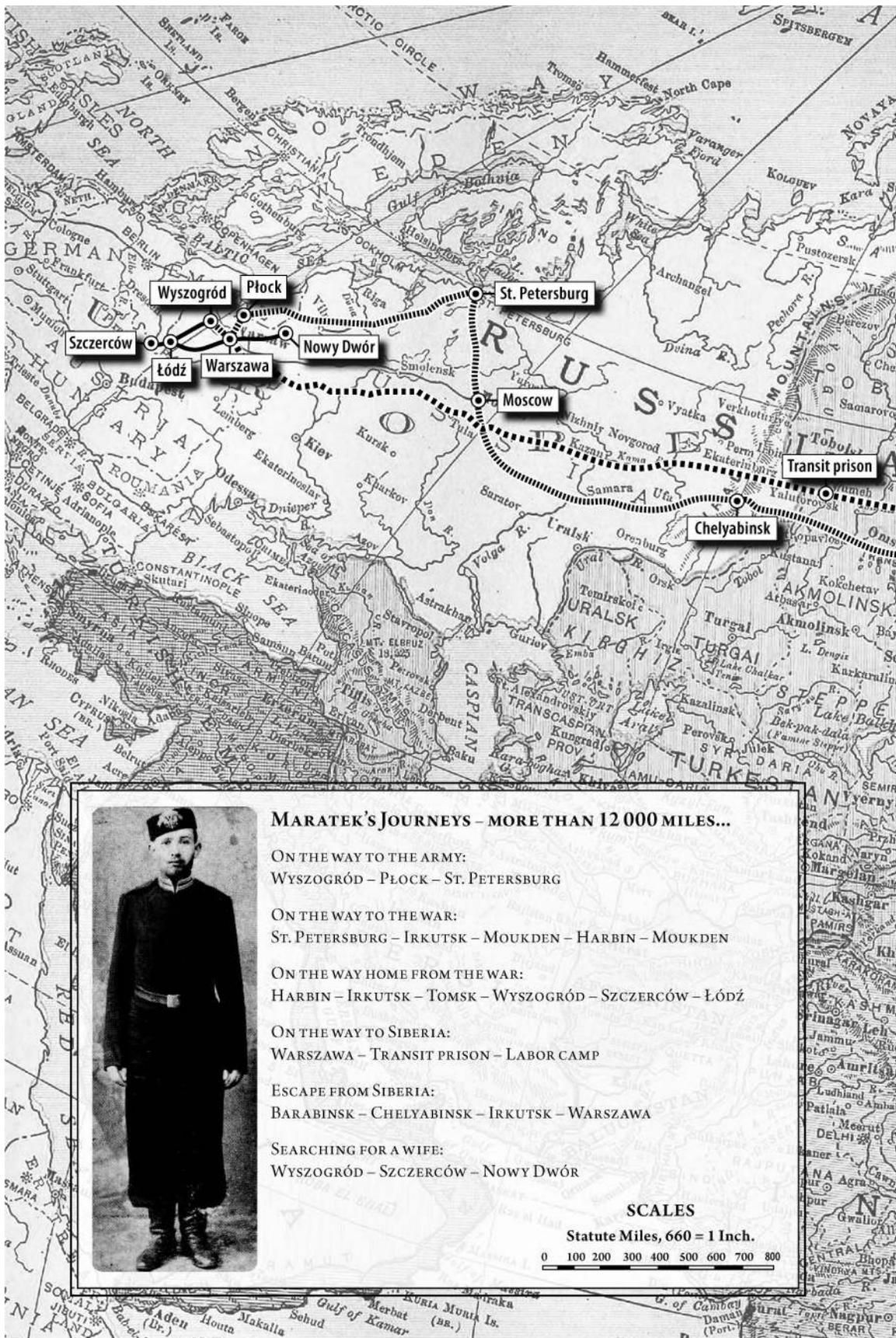


BRITNA KRANZLER

THE ACCIDENTAL ANARCHIST





MARATEK'S JOURNEYS - MORE THAN 12 000 MILES...

ON THE WAY TO THE ARMY:

WYSZOGRÓD - PŁOCK - ST. PETERSBURG

ON THE WAY TO THE WAR:

ST. PETERSBURG - IRKUTSK - MOUKDEN - HARBIN - MOUKDEN

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE WAR:

HARBIN - IRKUTSK - TOMSK - WYSZOGRÓD - SZCZERCÓW - ŁÓDŹ

ON THE WAY TO SIBERIA:

WARSZAWA - TRANSIT PRISON - LABOR CAMP

ESCAPE FROM SIBERIA:

BARABINSK - CHELYABINSK - IRKUTSK - WARSZAWA

SEARCHING FOR A WIFE:

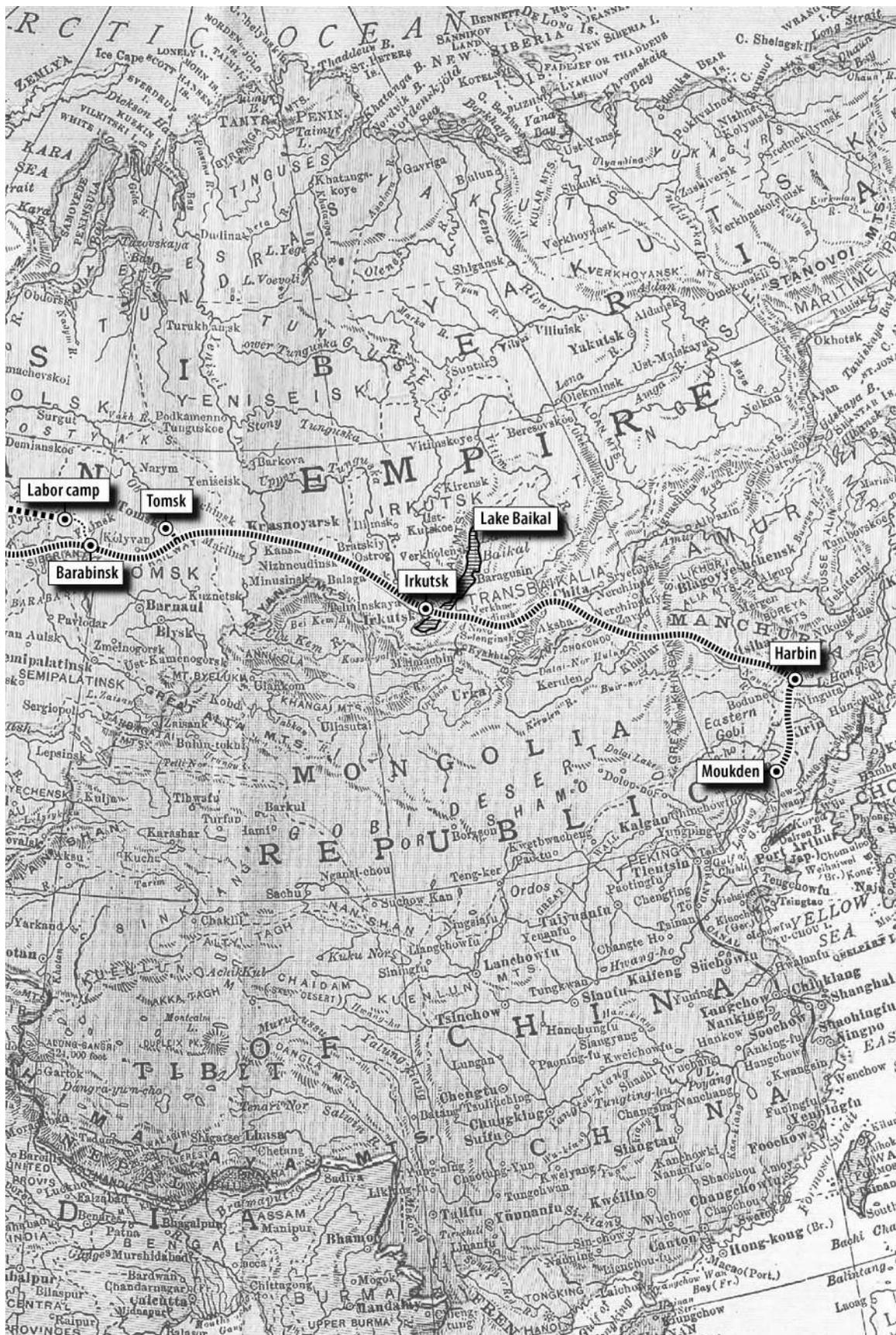
WYSZOGRÓD - SZCZERCÓW - NOWY DWÓR



SCALES

Statute Miles, 660 = 1 Inch.





BRYNA KRANZLER
THE ACCIDENTAL
ANARCHIST

FROM THE DIARIES OF JACOB MARATECK
TRANSLATED BY SHIMON AND ANITA MARATECK WINCELBERG



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1

IN THE BEGINNING

I have no excuse, save for the ignorance of youth and a desire for grand adventure, which may have been one and the same thing. Consequently, the seemingly minor decision I made to end my education before the age of thirteen led me down a path from which each future choice was misdirected by the previous foolish one.

Not that I didn't have a loving family to guide me, particularly my older brother, Mordechai, who had seen me risk my life repeatedly but was unable to convince me to make at least one sensible decision. There was simply too much fun to be had.

The result was that, in a little over ten years, I went from being a *yeshiva*¹ student, a baker's assistant, and labor organizer, to a corporal in the Russian army during the war in Manchuria (in which the men under my command wanted to kill me, simply for being a Jew, as much as the enemy did, simply for being in the way), to a revolutionary. For my efforts, I earned my first two death sentences, which was a little more excitement than I needed.

This limited my curiosity as to whether my end would come from freezing or starvation, from Japanese artillery or Chinese bandits, and whether it would be today or tomorrow. From my experiences with the comically inept Russian army (at least, it would have been comical had our lives not

¹ Hebrew: Jewish educational institution at elementary or high school level, or beyond

been at stake), I learned that, no matter how terrible it was for anyone to be in the midst of a war, it was a hundred times worse being on the losing side.

Still, I was slow to put into practice the lessons from my youth and, following the war, became a revolutionary who wanted to overthrow the Czar. This got me involved in amateur spy missions that would have gotten a Hollywood screenwriter fired, but got me sentenced to death for the third time.

As a result, I travelled the width of Russia, from Petersburg² to Siberia, where my adventures were to have come to an end. But even if my record wasn't clean, my conscience was; everything I did was done with the most honorable intentions.

And ultimately provided enough excitement to last a lifetime.

I grew up at a time when most of Russian-occupied Poland was living in poverty. Hence, it was not unusual for a child to leave home at the age of twelve to get a job to support the family. The only alternative was studying in a *yeshiva*.

Spending one's days indoors, rocking over a book of the *Talmud*³ and arguing about the minutiae of Jewish law was never a profitable occupation, but it was the only "trade" in the Jewish community that really mattered. It also wasn't entirely impractical. There were rich Jews who wanted their sons to study with learned men, and were willing to pay good salaries to have one as a private tutor. Sometimes, one even heard that the tutor had gotten to marry a rich man's daughter.

When it was my turn, I looked at the professions being learned by my friends. None exactly made my mouth water. And since I wasn't a fan of hard work, I decided to follow in my brother, Chayim's, footsteps. He hadn't been interested in learning a trade, either, but became possessed by the crazy idea that he would become a great scholar. Since our parents could not support him, he went off to another village where the boys survived on the generosity of the equally poor householders who had been shamed

² As St. Petersburg was known at the time

³ Hebrew: Commentary of the great rabbis from centuries past; focuses on Jewish laws, customs, etc.

into providing meals for the boys. Under those circumstances, as you can imagine, some hosts ‘forgot’ their obligations.

I, too, wanted to become a scholar, but unlike Chayim, I was unable to adjust to eating only every other day; starving I could do from the comfort of home.

Which was why I ran away from the *yeshiva* after barely a week. Unfortunately, I had neglected to tell anyone about my plan to return home, which resulted in no small amount of confusion.

Shortly after I was discovered ‘missing’ from the *yeshiva*, a boy about my age was found to have drowned. Using good Polish logic, the authorities put the missing boy together with the dead boy, and wiped their hands of both cases with remarkable efficiency. Consequently, my parents were notified of my death, and they sat *shiva*⁴ for me for the first, but not the last, time.

One would think that, after my return from the dead, my parents would have been overjoyed to have me home. But it wasn’t long before they reminded me that, having closed the book on the life of the mind, I needed to find a job.

But the limited exposure I’d had to the outside world when I ventured beyond my small, provincial town of Vishogrod⁵ made me realize that there was a bigger world out there just waiting to be discovered.

Even at thirteen, the great world drew me like a magnet with its promise of new experiences. I wanted to go far away, perhaps as far as Warsaw,⁶ which I pictured as a vast, modern metropolis, glittering with golden opportunities. Conveniently, Warsaw was where my older brother, Mordechai, worked as a baker. When I told him that I was sick to death of Vishogrod, he said he could get me a job as a baker’s assistant. Coming from a state of perpetual hunger, the prospect of spending my days in a large, modern bakery, with its delectable smells and the unceasing availability of something to eat, gripped my imagination and wouldn’t let go.

In principle, my father had nothing against Warsaw, but he held to the belief that a boy’s only assurance of seizing his golden opportunity in life lay in having a skilled craft. So he arranged for me to work in a series of

4 Hebrew: Seven-day mourning period for the dead

5 Spelled, in Polish: Wyszogrod

6 Spelled, in Polish, Warszawa

apprenticeships with various tradesmen in town. Why ‘a series’ of apprenticeships? Because I proved incompetent at even the simplest task. As a result, most jobs didn’t last a week; some didn’t last the day. At least one boss predicted that, before long, I would end up in front a firing squad, about which he wasn’t too far wrong.

Soon I found myself in Warsaw, working twenty to 22-hour days (and before *yom tov*,⁷ a full 24), something that Mordechai had neglected to mention in his infrequent letters. The only salvation was *Shabbos*;⁸ without that one day of rest, none of us could have survived.

Having made such a fuss about needing to get out of Vishogrod, I could hardly turn around and go home. Nor did I have enough money to return, even if I wanted to. So, for the next seven or eight years, I worked as a baker’s assistant, and in a variety of other mindless jobs, not one of which had a future.

But what would have been the point of thinking about the future when, at the age of 21, I would be conscripted into the Czar’s army. In the meantime, work was simply a way to stay alive, and sometimes barely that. My sympathies, as I rolled from one deadening job to another, were with the exploited souls who were enslaved by their employers – not that the bosses had it much better.

Meanwhile, my young blood craved adventure. Aside from the revolution, which I personally felt in no position to start, I could try to improve the lot of the people around me. At the time there was no such thing as a “union.” Each worker was on his own. And merely talking about organizing workers was an engraved invitation to scrutiny by the secret police.

But by the time I was seventeen or eighteen, I was fed up with being powerless. So one day I went to the boss and told him that his three best clerks and I were quitting. The boss was furious. He accused me of being a Bolshevik, a hooligan, a nihilist, and a spoiled young man who’d never be satisfied with anything short of total chaos, anarchy, and the destruction of the social order.

I got angry, too, but instead of quitting, I called a strike, and demanded – and this was unheard of in Warsaw – a reduction of our working hours from

⁷ Hebrew: Refers to any Jewish holiday

⁸ Yiddish: The Sabbath

twenty to twelve hours a day. I was in a position to do this because I didn't have to worry about losing my job as I was approaching the age of mandatory army service. Which, after working 120-hour weeks and more, didn't sound like such a bad alternative.

Our little strike spread throughout Warsaw as workers and apprentices began walking out and demanding a 72-hour week. Under the guidance of an experienced *Bundist*⁹ who showed me the ropes, I managed to "unionize" over 3000 workers in less than a month. The police harassed me at every turn, arresting me several times, and beating me up once or twice. Although they had me on their list as some sort of political troublemaker, they never figured out exactly what I was up to.

After such a fine start, the strike went off like a ship without a rudder. No one had any idea of tactics or negotiating positions. While I had a knack for agitating, making speeches and signing up members, I had none at all for strategy or administration. We also didn't bother our heads with theories and ideology. We simply wanted to support the cause of oppressed workers.

As a result, the strike dragged on until, gradually, each boss came to some sort of quiet arrangement with his workers. It was like a husband and wife deciding it was better to live together in hatred than to have their self-respect and lie in the street. So one morning I awoke to find myself a strike leader without a strike to lead.

But even though we hadn't achieved our goal of a shorter work week, at least we had shaken Warsaw to its very foundation, and given thousands of workers a sense of revolutionary consciousness.

And it gave an ignorant boy who, once upon a time, had set out for Warsaw to conquer the world, a taste of what he could do.

⁹ Yiddish: Member of Jewish Socialist Labor Party

2

HOW TO BECOME THE CZAR'S SON-IN-LAW

As summer dwindled to an end, a familiar pall of fear began to descend upon our village. Soon it would be the fifteenth of September, a date that struck terror even in the breasts of mothers who were still suckling their sons. For on that day, all young men of military age became subject to immediate conscription into the Russian army.

Do I need to paint a picture of what it meant in 1902, particularly for an Orthodox Jew, to be pitchforked into the Czar's army? Our parents' terror was due only in part to the knowledge that we would be exposed to the traditional dangers and discomforts of military service, but also that we would be subjected to the mercies and whims of superiors who would as soon torment a Jew as scratch themselves. (Such inconveniences were not exactly unknown, even in Vishigrod, among one's own, good Polish neighbors.)

But what Jewish parents dreaded most was the prospect, amply shown to be true, of returning soldiers who, within less than four years, would come home coarsened, brutalized, Russianized and with scarcely a spark of human (that is, Jewish) feeling left in them. Thus, every home rang with heated family conferences, all dedicated to the search for some means by which an innocent child could be preserved from the fatal clutches of *Vanya's*¹⁰ army.

10 A nickname for 'Ivan' used as a general term referring to all Russians

For the rich, there was no problem: they bought their way out. For the poor, however, there was only one avenue of escape: self-mutilation. And since there were any number of equally frightful possibilities to choose from, long evenings of consultation took place.

My Aunt Tzivia strongly recommended a man who would draw out all my teeth. Feibush, the bath attendant, held that the surest remedy would be for me to blind myself in my right eye, without which one cannot aim a rifle. And my Uncle Yonah, never at a loss, knew a man skilled in the art of severing a tendon at the knee. Had I accepted even half the suggestions offered to me, I should not only have escaped military service, but would have ended up a cripple such as the world had never seen. None of these schemes, I am glad to say, found favor with my parents.

Although no one had bothered to ask me, I hadn't the slightest intention of maiming myself. In fact, the prospect of becoming the Czar's *eydem oyf kest*¹¹ for three years and eight months did not strike me as the world coming to an end. I hadn't spent but a short time back in Vishogrod before I became eager for more thrills. I longed only to be sent to the front lines and earn my share of adventures and medals before it was all over and I was obliged to return to Vishogrod and put the humdrum remainder of my life into some matchmaker's hands.

When we prepared to leave our home town – I, full of idiot enthusiasm, and my friend since boyhood, Chaim Glasnik, with a prophetically long face – his mother seized my arm in two trembling hands and pleaded with me to stay close to her son so that we might protect each other. She swore that, if anything happened to him, she would not survive him by even one minute. By the time she was done, my eyes were drowning in tears, while Glasnik merely stood to one side squirming, pretending that she was someone else's mother.

Too tearful to speak, I simply nodded my agreement. When I felt comfortable exercising my voice again, Glasnik and I pledged to each other that, should either one of us not return from the war, we would take each other's parents into our own home and "honor and support them all the days of their lives." So inspired were we by our generosity that we went

¹¹ Yiddish: Supported or 'kept' son-in-law

further, adding that, if either of us returned to find ourselves orphaned, “My father will be your father, and my home will be your home, for all the days of your life.”

On the appointed day, in such a downpour as might have swamped Noah’s Ark, I was accompanied to the meeting place not only by my near and distant relatives, but also acquaintances who seemed to have come solely for the purpose of adding their tears to the puddles made by the rain. As I said my goodbyes, I stood tall and upright, trying to look older than my face, which only sparingly released those quills of manhood. But anyone would have looked taller than Glasnik whose head seemed poised in advance of his body, never quite certain where it wanted to be.

In that gloomy spirit, we climbed into one of the open wagons with the other 21 year old boys from our district who hadn’t found a way to avoid serving in the Czar’s army. My soldier’s baggage consisted primarily of a canvas-covered box that my mother had filled with bread, herring, chicken fat, and sausages. (Those who did not intend to touch Vanya’s unclean food until they have absolutely no choice had to stock up on such things).

As our wagon prepared to depart, my father, alone, expressed his sorrow by remaining mostly silent. But it was only his three parting words that continued to ring in my ears long after the cart had taken me away. All he said was, “Be a Jew.”

3

A SMALL CHEER FOR CORRUPTION

With a good deal of comradely passing of vodka between Jew and gentile, we jolted toward Plock, the capital of the gubernya.¹² From Plock, we departed from by barge, which rocked along the Vistula River under a weeping sky. I could still faintly glimpse the nebulous hills of my birthplace and, with the sudden sharp realization that soldiers don't always return alive, I wondered if I should ever see it again.

Crowded below deck on account of the rain, we conscripts stood in steamy, suffocating closeness: Jew and Pole, Balt, Ukrainian, and transplanted German – and although the recent Syedlitzer¹³ pogrom was still green in our memories, we managed, somehow, not to be at each others' throats. This may have been because of our common fate. Or because few young people had remained untouched by the prevailing revolutionary spirit with its rosy premonitions of universal brotherhood.

Some time around noon, determined not by the absent sun but by the hunger pangs in our bellies, the barge stopped and we were marched, in a straggling column of twos, toward a passenger train. We were loaded into

¹² Russian: Province

¹³ Spelled, in Poland: Siedlce. *NOTE:* The Siedlce pogrom actually took place in 1906, not prior to Marateck's conscription in 1902. It is likely that, since he didn't write down many of his stories until years after the events described, Siedlce had been the pogrom foremost in his memory, and he had simply confused the dates.

boxcars that had signs advising that occupancy was limited to eight horses or 40 men, but with a little effort were able to hold many times that number. Although it was unheated, we could, at least, sit down.

While waiting for the train to depart, we shared another bottle of vodka providentially carried by one of the Polish boys. A *Vanya* non-commissioned officer with a stripe on his collar came pushing in with a stack of papers and started calling out names. Having, to his visible astonishment, found us all accounted for, he launched into a pompous sermon on how we should conduct ourselves as good, pious subjects of the Czar, meaning we were to jump to obey all of *his* orders. In the meantime, we would shortly be issued our subsistence pay.

Before Glasnik could wonder aloud if this was the right train and not some cattle express bound for Manchuria, another *Vanya* walked into our car bearing a sack of coins. I knew that the Czar didn't pay princely wages, but even I was unprepared to be handed seven groschen for a day's subsistence, which was not quite enough to buy a pound of bread. Among those who raged against this Russian stinginess were some of the gentile Polish boys who had been raised to believe that Poland was their country, and not a Russian colony.

There was a roar of protest, which the second *Vanya* tried to appease by pointing out that at each stop we would also get free hot water. The two non-coms seemed on the verge of being overwhelmed by a spontaneous uprising.

For my part, I wanted nothing to delay my getting to Petersburg, and tried to calm down the Poles by pointing out that it was undoubtedly not the non-coms who were robbing us, but the greater thieves at the top who took the money allotted for soldiers' food, and put it in their own pockets.

I never would have dreamed I'd said anything out of line, but the two non-coms I had saved from a taste of hearty Polish violence, asked me gratefully for my name and let me know they'd have their eye on me now as a revolutionary agitator. Following which, they began to bless us all impartially with good Russian benedictions, ending with the assurance that there was an excellent chance the lot of us would end up sampling the inside of a prison fortress for attempted mutiny.

By this time, being a soldier of the Czar had lost much of its charm. I resolved for the balance of my enlistment to keep my nose out of all brawls, mutinies, riots and revolutions or, in fact, any incidents other than those involving what I grandly thought of as “the honor of the Jewish people.”

After a couple of hours, the train finally left Poland and, in the gloom of a sunless afternoon, began its grudging progress through a desolate landscape of meager fields, occasionally populated by skinny Russian horses and skeletal cows hunting for blades of grass. The Russians may have been a great military power, but they had a lot to learn about farming.

Night fell, and the train sped on without stopping for the promised hot water, while the lot of us scratched our unwashed bodies and groped peevishly for comfortable positions in which to sleep. Finally, due to the suffocating air and the foul smell of our bodies and feet, most of us fell into a state that was not so much sleep as loss of consciousness.

It seemed that I had barely closed an eye when the train screamed and shuddered to a halt. It was shortly after midnight. Military voices roared at us to get off with all of our belongings. We tumbled out, still half-asleep, and were driven like cattle through narrow, dirty streets until we reached a row of barracks where we were permitted to let our gear slide off our backs.

In the mess hall, long tables had been hammered together out of splintery boards. Atop them sat tin bowls filled with lukewarm, dirty water. Floating desperately on top of this brew were a few scraps of roasted pigskin that had probably been too tough to make into boots.

We were each given wooden spoons. And while the others fell upon this soup as though it were fresh-baked bread, none of the Jews in our group tasted a drop. We tore into the provisions from home. Not that we wouldn't, eventually, have to eat the same unclean food as everyone else, but in this way we put off that moment for a little longer.

At two o'clock in the morning, we were herded back to the station. Along the way, our comrades discussed their first military supper. One said it was perhaps a little too salty, another complained there wasn't enough fat in it. A third guessed that the cook had washed his dirty clothes in the water, and a fourth agreed that the soup did have a slight taste of army soap. And all of them roundly cursed *Vanya* for his stinginess with food.

We returned to the box cars, traveling under those inhuman conditions for two days until, at four o'clock one morning, we reached Petersburg. My older brother, Mordechai, who had attained a position of some influence, had planned to meet me at the station. But to my great disappointment he was not there. (It turned out that he had already been to the station several times. In fact, that very morning the stationmaster, with that wonderful Russian efficiency even the Communists could never change, told him that our train was not due until the following day.)

No one at the station was prepared for our arrival with even a caldron of tea. The first snows of September had just fallen. We trudged through this with our belongings along endless Petersburg streets for what seemed like a good five hours. Finally, panting, staggering with exhaustion, and drenched with sweat, we reached the Novocherkassky Barracks.

Our feet were swollen, and a man would have needed an ice pick before he could blow his nose. On top of which, we were hungry as wolves, and our revolutionary spirits were at a pitch not to be reached again until 1904.

I must admit that, on this occasion, *Vanya* treated us all – Jew and gentile, alike – with perfect equality: none of us got a thing. One of our guards explained that they could not give us food because our names were not yet on the roster. They did, however, give us free hot water and I, for one, was relieved to hear nothing more mentioned about our “mutiny” on the train.

By ten o'clock the next morning, we were at the induction center, mother-naked (which raised some comments on the sacred art of circumcision), for a medical examination by several army doctors who fell all over themselves to pronounce us fit. I suspected that, by this time, they had probably seen such an epidemic of remarkably similar injuries that they assumed the boys from the occupied portions of the Russian empire were unusually clumsy or particularly unlucky, and considered their afflictions an acceptable norm.

Later, we were measured like yard goods, next to be assigned to platoons according to our talents. Toward this end, we were asked our civilian occupations. I already knew from some of the veterans back home that getting into a good platoon made all the difference in the world. A ‘good’ platoon meant sitting in an office and being part of *natchalstva*, officialdom. A bad one was bitter as death. As my brother’s letter had advised (no doubt

afraid that, in my youthful stupidity, I would give my profession as “labor organizer” or “terrorist”), I called myself a tailor (which was Glasnik’s occupation), even though I had never threaded a needle in my life. But, possibly because of the incident on the train, I was put into the 15th Company, which had the reputation of being the “Convicts’ Company.” From the first morning on, I understood why.

In other companies, the men were treated in a fairly civilized way. They were awakened at six o’clock in the morning, cleaned their floors, and polished their boots and brass buttons until seven, when they were taken out into the waist-high snow and made to run for an hour.

With the 15th they were less gentle. We were roused at four o’clock in the morning, driven out into the snow at five o’clock and kept running until eight o’clock, by which time the others were already sitting comfortably at breakfast, which consisted of tea with sugar and chunks of shriveled bread.

Since I was healthy enough not to be among those who collapsed during our morning run, I still had not fully realized what I was in for during the next three years and eight months. But I soon received Czar Nicolai’s proper *sholom aleichem*,¹⁴ and that sobered me a little.

What happened was this: having not tasted hot food for three days because our names were still not on the roster, I awoke early one morning with a powerful thirst, and took my own little teakettle over to the cookhouse. The mess attendant explained he was not allowed to give out any hot water until the bugle had sounded. I slipped him a cigarette, got my hot water and ran happily back to my cot to drink my tea.

I was about to pour the first cup when a Ukrainian non-com with a face like a sheep and a nose like a bulldog, the kind of treasure whom, in Russian-Yiddish, we called a *katzap*,¹⁵ entered the barracks. Reading from the ominous roster in his hand, he asked for, “Marateck, Yakub.”¹⁶

14 A Yiddish greeting. Here the term is used sarcastically

15 Russian-Yiddish: Nationalistic term for a Russian person; someone who is wholly Russian, not a hybrid with another nationality

16 Russian: Jacob

When I answered, he took one shocked look at my cheerfully steaming kettle and promptly gave me a Russian *misheberach*,¹⁷ that is, a blow across the face that sent me sprawling.

Blood-spattered and stunned, I had barely managed to get back on my feet when he screamed, “*Zhydovska morda!* Jewface, pick up your hand and salute!” (Except *morda*, more precisely, refers to the snout of an animal).

Until he said that, I had been willing to overlook his bad manners. But I grew to manhood in a section of Warsaw where a man does not lightly let someone spit into his kasha. So without thinking, I snatched up the full kettle and walloped him once across the head. While I was at it, I also allowed my fist to find a resting place on his broad nose. In the commotion that followed, with plenty of warm encouragement for both sides, he ended up on the bottom and I on top while the blood from our mouths and noses mingled fraternally on the floor.

At the hospital, my injuries turned out to be hardly worth mentioning: a tooth knocked out by the first blow, and a finger cut to the bone by the sharp edge of my own smashed kettle. But the staff insisted on putting me to bed so that my opponent who, among other things, had lost part of his nose, should not suffer by comparison.

It was here that Mordechai found me at two o'clock the next morning. He'd brought his own little welcoming delegation of Jewish soldiers from our home town. But when he found out I had committed violence against a Russian of superior rank, Mordechai, in his loving anxiety over my ignorance and dimming prospects for survival, started to shout that unless I learned to control my “Polack temper,” I would spend my army years going from one prison to another until I forgot what a Jew was.

I listened to him with respect. He was, after all, something of a big shot in *Vanya's* army. Only later did I find out what made him so important. As Quartermaster, he was in charge of the warehouse from which the men obtained their uniforms. The way the *natchalniks*¹⁸ in the Quartermaster worked their racket was as follows: each soldier was entitled to a new uniform once in three years. The old one was supposed to be ripped apart and used for rags to wash the floors. But many of the old uniforms were still in

¹⁷ Hebrew: A prayer said for someone who was ill. Here the term is used sarcastically

¹⁸ Russian: Authority, or Official

good enough condition to wear so that, if cleaned up, and with in a new lining sewn in, they could be sold again, or even issued in place of new ones. There were large sums of money to be made out of these “resurrections,” and everyone from the colonel on down had a lick of this juicy bone.

Mordechai was the only Jew in that entire operation and I suspected that they kept him only because they needed at least one honest man in the management of the warehouse. So, my brother went about burdened with money he couldn't send home without confessing to our father how he had come by it. He knew that, for all his grinding poverty, our father would not have tolerated such a source of income and Mordechai would have been forced to ask for a transfer.

But having been away from our father's influence a little longer than I, he explained that whether money was tainted or not depended largely on what you did with it. And since Mordechai lacked any inclination for gambling, drinking, or whoring, all he could think of doing with his cursed wealth was lend it to those of his officers who never could manage on what they had, or buy vodka for his Russian comrades and superiors who would lap it up, cross themselves, and wish him eternal life.

It mattered little to him that few of the officers ever repaid his favors or loans. As a practical man, he reasoned, what Jew in *Vanya's* army could ever know when a little influence in the right place might not, one day, mean the difference between life and death? Thus, almost despite himself, my brother became a man of some influence.

One of Mordechai's best “customers,” but someone who at least acknowledged some vague obligation to pay him back, was his own captain. A relative of Czar Nicolai Alexandrovich, himself, Captain Mikhailoff was a wealthy man. Yet he knew nothing about holding on to his money, and freely admitted that his army pay, alone, couldn't have kept him in cigarettes. Like most Russian officers, he was a passionate card player, and whenever his luck turned sour, he would tiptoe into Mordechai's quarters in the dark of night, like a drunkard fearful of waking his wife. He always unerringly found his way to my brother's bed, and Mordechai, still half-asleep, would automatically slip him a hundred or two. (We have a saying, “Lend money and you buy yourself an enemy.” This, as it turned out, did not apply to Mikhailoff. He proved to be a good soul with a merciful heart,

which naturally led to slanderous rumors about his having had a Jewish mother.)

The question in my present circumstances was whether Mordechai possessed sufficient influence to keep me out of jail.

In *Vanya's* army it was virtually unheard of for a blood-raw recruit, a "Polack Jew," at that, to raise a hand in anger against a non-com, regardless of provocation. It was sadly agreed that my sentence upon conviction could well come to twenty years. What's more, there was the reputation of the other Jewish soldiers to consider.

Although Mordechai was still in the midst of scolding me, some of his friends reminded him that I had, after all, defended the honor of the Jewish people. Had he forgotten how many Jewish recruits the sheep-faced Ukrainian had beaten and tormented in the past? One man now also recalled having heard him boast that, in a certain pogrom, he personally had killed two Jews.

At this, my blood was boiling again. I bravely announced that, if I'd known this, I wouldn't have stopped until I had dispatched him to the Other World, prison or no prison. This instantly rekindled Mordechai's anger, but he raged at me like a loving father and I didn't take it too much to heart.

One of his friends now said to him, "All right, big shot. Let's see what connections you have at headquarters to keep this from going any further."

My brother mumbled and grumbled that his supposed influence was severely limited and that he didn't even know to whom to go. His captain? He couldn't be sure. The very idea of a Jew committing violence against a Russian of superior rank had too much of a "man bites dog" novelty about it to be hushed up. Further, knowing the Russian officer class a good bit better than I, Mordechai had genuine doubts about whether his considerable investments in good will over the past two years would actually prove negotiable.

But Mordechai came through for me. Captain Mikhailoff appeared genuinely glad to have an opportunity to repay his many favors. Mikhailoff assured Mordechai that I had nothing to worry about, nor would I need to incur the expense of a lawyer, for he, himself, would defend me.

I had no way of knowing whether he actually understood the nature of the crime with which I had been charged, or what kind of legal training qualified him to defend a soldier in a court-martial. It did me no good to suggest to Mordechai that, since it was my life, or at least my future for the next twenty or 30 years that would be determined by this military court, perhaps I would be better off with a professional lawyer. But as my brother pointed out, who was I to say “No” to a blood relative of the Czar?

The day of the trial arrived and I still had not so much as set eyes upon my ‘defense attorney.’ The Devil-only-knows how he intended to present my side of the case. In between biting his lips and shouting at me not to be such a worrier, Mordechai conceded that there were some grounds for uneasiness only when the trial had actually begun, and there was still no sign of Mikhailoff.

Meanwhile, my accuser entered the courtroom as though he, personally, were about to sit in judgment of me. I noted that the repairs on his nose and face had been carried out so artistically that, although he still bore a brotherly resemblance to a sheep, he looked notably less ugly than before.

The prosecutor painted our little brawl as an outrage committed by me, alone, an act of unprovoked savagery and insubordination that, unless punished so severely as to set an example for future generations, surely would lead to a speedy and total breakdown of all military discipline and inevitably to the dreaded revolution – a word that, in those days, tended to be followed directly by a death sentence.

I saw immediately that the judge was not in my corner. Any minute now I would be called upon to speak in my own defense. And what could I talk about? “Jewish honor?” I could already see myself blindfolded and tied to a stake.

Especially since my aristocratic defender, who had finally strolled in and taken his seat, one hand vainly attempting to comfort a throbbing brow, listened to the prosecutor like a man who couldn’t wait to put this tedious performance behind him and get back to bed.

The aggrieved sergeant, bearing his scars as officiously as battle wounds, took the stand first. He delivered a good, strong recitation on how I had attacked him, totally without provocation, in what he could only assume to be a Polack Jew’s typical frenzy of rebellion against good, Russian dis-

cipline. With each minute he spoke, I could almost see the judge adding another soldier to the firing squad.

At this point, Mikhailoff, who until now had maintained a morose, hung-over, rather self-pitying silence, rose to my defense. Once he had found his feet, he straightened his body with remarkable steadiness. To my horror, though, he did not seem quite certain who in the room was the defendant. Nor, once he found me in response to Mordechai's frantic chin-wagging, did he pay the slightest attention to any of the charges against me. Instead, he launched into an impassioned attack on those non-coms who, by their unrestrained brutality and total disrespect for the proud traditions of the Imperial Army, had already turned Heaven-only-knows how many innocent and patriotic recruits into embittered revolutionaries against his relative, the holy Czar.

It sounded like a speech he had long been eager to get off his chest, and I suspect he would have made the identical one had I been on trial for blasphemy or wetting my bed. Although my defender was plainly the sort of man who had more growing under his nose than inside his head, I saw the judge repeatedly nod in respectful agreement. However, that still did not dispose of the crime for which I stood trial.

Only when the captain had, at last, finished delivering his heartfelt harangue and seemed ready to sit down did he briefly take note of "the so-called defendant." True, he conceded, perhaps a more experienced soldier might have tried to moderate his righteous anger. But as what I had done was so patently an attempt to defend the honor and security of the Czar, Captain Mikhailoff simply failed to comprehend why it was me and not the other man who was on trial. Much as I wanted to agree with my defender, even I had to admit that his argument lacked logic, not to mention common sense.

But to my astonishment, the judge showed himself to be totally persuaded by this line of reasoning. While I was let off with the most gentle of reprimands, Pyotr, my opponent, who hadn't been accused of anything, suddenly found himself reduced in rank. But that was not the last to be heard of him.

How much this verdict cost my brother, he never let on. For all I knew, my advocate may have defended me in all sincerity. But the outcome certainly

made me a good deal more tolerant toward the all-pervasive atmosphere of corruption in the Russian army. Without this constant lubrication of the wheels, the most appalling injustices would have passed unnoticed, and men in positions of power might never have felt the slightest inducement to lift a finger for another soul.