

Haim Hazaz
GATES OF BRONZE

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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Book one

Chapter one

It was not the biggest town in that part of Russia, and it was not the smallest. Mokry-Kut was an ordinary *shtetl*, huddled between the river and the forest, surrounded by peasant villages and fields. Chmielnitski in his time had passed this way, and later Gonte and his Haidamaks had come and reaped an equally bloody harvest. But still the big old wooden synagogue stood, its tiered roof giving it the appearance of a Hasid with a hat perched on top of his skullcap. There it stood, a grim reminder of days gone by, a warning of what was yet to come.

Mokry-Kut had always been a town of shopkeepers and peddlers, artisans and other plain Jews, each after his own kind, but all of them poor. To be sure, there were usually two or three who were a little better off than the rest. These would generally be appointed by the townsfolk as community leaders.

Poor as the town was, it was rich in study houses, each the home of a *hevra*, a brotherhood dedicated to one beneficent purpose or another. There was a society for the study of the Mishnah, a *hevra* of Psalm-readers, a brotherhood for visiting the sick, another

for dowering the bride, and of course the most powerful of all—the burial society, the mighty *Hevra Kadisha*.

At any rate, that is the way it used to be. But now times were changing. The study of Torah had declined, and Hasidic virtues were in eclipse. The ambitious young men of the town were becoming *externes*, busily preparing for the entrance exams to the *gymnasia*, the coveted Russian secondary school, and then going on their way. Those who stayed behind were the simpler types, tailors, cobblers, harness-makers, and the like, and when the Revolution came to Mokry-Kut, they eagerly took up its cause. “It’s just like during the *Yizkor* service,” quipped Reb Simcha Hurvitz. “All the young people have abandoned the synagogue.”

His own daughter, Leahtche, had thrown her lot in with the young revolutionaries. She was a sharp-witted girl, with reddish-blond hair and a captivating manner. Now she went about proclaiming the slogans of the day: “End the imperialist war!” “No more confiscations!”—and so on.

“What are you raving about?” Reb Simcha would storm. “Stupid girl! Silly fool! Who asked your opinion?”

“People ask,” she would fling back, her cheeks aflame with revolutionary fire. “They ask, and they’ll keep on asking!”

Agh, a plague on the lot of them, may the cholera carry them off!

Chapter two

Those first days of the Revolution were heady days filled with promise, like blue spring skies, like distant hazy fields. People rushed about from demonstration to demonstration, their heads abuzz with dreams and hopes of peace and plenty, of a world of freedom and ease everlasting.

The people of Mokry-Kut knew little about what was happening in the distant centers of power. They heard that a man called Kerensky had become Prime Minister. They knew that a certain Lenin, who had spent his days in exile, had come back from Germany in a sealed train and had joined up with Trotsky—“one of our own.” But they knew more about what was happening in the nearby towns and villages. In one place a policeman had been killed, in another an officer, here the peasants had burned down the landowner’s house, there they had killed the squire and his family.

Sorokeh joined hands with the peasants, egging them on, even though they had no need of his advice, for they themselves knew what had to be done. But there he was, nevertheless, not only inflaming them with his words, but actually leading the mob into the fray.

Night after night the fires burned. Tchopovsky’s estate went up

in flames, and so did Kovalevsky's, and Graf Branitsky's. The night-time sky glowed like the dawn, the smell of smoke was everywhere. The stars were hidden, the moon could scarcely be seen. In Varnitsa the flour mill heaved and groaned and church bells tolled throughout the countryside, in Sloboda the dogs set up a howling.

Mokry-Kut stood alone, afraid, surrounded by the night. Its people gazed at the flames on the horizon, and furrowed their brows as at a difficult passage in the Talmud, sighing, muttering, "Such things going on in the world!"

"It's all Sorokeh's doing," said Reb Simcha, standing in the middle of the street, his eyes fixed on the red sky. "He's stoking the fires of the Revolution, apostate that he is! He has to take up the cudgels of the gentiles." And even as he spoke a great cloud of red smoke billowed up to the sky.

So it went from night to night, for days and months on end, all that summer long, until finally the landowners were wiped out, and the peasants had looted their estates and divided the lands among themselves. Whereupon they began to turn on each other, neighbor against neighbor, village against village. As for Sorokeh, who tried to make peace between them, they sent him packing.

"Go to the devil's grandmother," they shouted, "don't mix in our affairs. This is a matter for us *pravoslavi*, for true believers, and no business of yours!"

One day the peasants of Bielosuknia attacked Mokry-Kut and burned down the market. The flames touched off many houses in the streets nearby, and they too went up. And so Mokry-Kut was the first of the Jewish towns to feel the hot breath of the pogroms, for this was before Petlura, and Denikin, and the Polish hordes, and all the rest of those roving bands that ravaged the Jewish communities in the old Pale of Settlement.

Chapter three

One cold wet day, after the High Holy Days, Sorokeh came to town, a young fellow of medium height, intense and quick-moving, with tiny honey-colored, self-assured eyes. He sauntered down Post Office Street in an old greatcoat, a black lambskin hat jaunty on his head, dragging a machine gun and whistling the marching song of the anarchists.

His pals greeted him with great to-do. “Hey, Sorokeh,” they shouted, sticking out their hands and slapping him on the back. “So you finished off feudalism, eh?”

The older people came toward him, scowling like black thunderclouds. “You!” they shouted. “You’re the cause of our troubles! All your pity was for those hoodlums, kind soul that you are. But they had no mercy on us, they came and burnt us out!”

The womenfolk wept and wailed and cursed the *goyim* and Sorokeh and the Revolution, all in one breath.

“Who needed this Revolution?” they cried.

Sorokeh looked about for a room, but there was none to be had. Any rooms there might have been were all taken by the victims of the fire. Then he had an idea.

“Is the old bath-house empty?”

“It is, may the world be emptied of our enemies.”

Sorokeh grabbed his gun. The crowd separated. “Off we go,” he said, and headed toward the bath-house.

He turned down a narrow street, dragging the gun and piping his song of the Revolution. A bunch of young boys trailed after him, joining in the song.

“Hey, comrade, where to?” said a sharp-faced youngster with impudent eyes. “Are you going to the old bath-house?”

“Yes, comrade.”

“What a miserable place! It’s full of ghosts and goblins. They’ll keep you up all night.”

“What? Ghosts?” Sorokeh pretended to be frightened.

“There aren’t any ghosts,” chimed in a pale youngster with a frost-reddened nose.

“There were, but they ran away to the capitalist countries,” put in another, a freckle-faced boy with buck teeth.

“Right you are,” said Sorokeh. “That’s where they’ve gone.”

“They were scared,” laughed buck-tooth.

“That’s it. Tell me, what are you doing out here?”

“It’s recess.”

“Students, eh?”

“What else?”

“And what do you learn?”

“Hebrew, Russian, math—the works.”

“Do you have books?”

“We will.”

“Notebooks?”

“We’ll have them.”

“Do you get anything to eat?”

“What a question! Whatever you want—jam, goose fat, cream, chocolate. Only, we have no appetite.”

Sorokeh burst out laughing. “Nothing but the best.”

“It’s meant for the best,” said the pale-faced boy, his nose redder than ever.

One of the boys pointed his chin at the gun. "Is that a Maxim? Give us a few bullets. Let's have just one."

By this time they were at the bath-house. A thin rain had started to fall.

"All right, fellows. Off to school."

The boys gave a shout and ran off pell-mell, like a tribe of savages on their way to war.