S.Y. Agnon

To This Day

translated and with an introduction by

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The Toby Press

Chapter one

During the Great War, I lived in the west of Berlin, in a room with a balcony in a small boarding house on Fasanenstrasse. The room was small too, as was the balcony, but for someone like me whose needs were few it was a place to live. Not once during my stay there did I speak to the landlady or the other boarders. Every morning a chambermaid brought me a cup of coffee and two or three slices of bread, and once a week she brought the bill, which grew larger as the slices of bread grew smaller and the coffee lost its taste. I left the rent on the tray with a tip for her. She knew I didn't like small talk and came and went without a word.

Once, however, she forgot herself and stayed to chat a bit about the boarding house. Its landlady, Frau Trotzmüller, was a widow whose husband had been killed in a duel, leaving her with three daughters and a son, her youngest child, who had disappeared at the front. No one knew if he had been killed or taken prisoner. Despite all the family's efforts to trace him, nothing was known of his fate. Multitudes of soldiers were dead, captured, or missing in action; who could locate a single mother's son, a speck of dust swept away by the winds of war? Frau Trotzmüller and her daughters didn't

impose their grief on their boarders, and their boarders didn't inquire about young Trotzmüller. Everyone had his own troubles; no one had time for anyone else's. It was only because I was a poor sleeper that I heard the grieving mother sobbing for her son at night.

There was another occasion, too, when the chambermaid told me about the boarding house. Its largest room, she said, was occupied by a wealthy young lady from the provinces who had come to attend finishing school. Across from her lived an official in the Tax Bureau, while next to him was an elderly couple who had fled the war zone. The remaining rooms belonged to lodgers who came regularly to Berlin on business. If I'm telling you things I never asked to be told about myself, it's only to explain that I couldn't switch to a better room because there were no vacancies.

The boarders were well behaved and quiet. Even the young lady from the provinces hardly made any noise when she had a birthday party and invited all her friends. I don't believe this had anything to do with our landlady's grief. It was the war itself that made everyone speak softly. While German artillery was being heard around the world, the Germans were talking in whispers.

When the war broke out, I stopped working. I even put aside my big book on the history of clothing. I couldn't write a thing as long as the fighting went on. All I wanted was to crumple the days into as small a ball as possible until it was over. In this way, a winter went by, and then a summer, and then another winter.

When spring came again, I could feel my room getting smaller. Half of it was perpetually dark and half was perpetually cold, and neither got any sunlight. There's a saying that not even the sun likes living in darkness, and I suppose that's what kept it from my room. And I, who had lived in Palestine and knew what a real sun was like, had a craving for light. Yet each time I stepped out on the balcony to warm up I had to retreat inside at once, since the trees were full of dust that the breeze blew everywhere and there were no street sweepers because of the war. Trees planted to make life better were only making it worse. Man, says the Bible, is a tree of the field. That must be why the trees join in when men go to war and spread misery.

So much for my room. As for myself, I should mention that I had no summer clothes or shoes. The more war refugees there were, the more appeals there were to donate clothing. I had given away all my summer things and couldn't buy new ones when the warm weather returned, because the tailors and shoemakers left in Berlin only made uniforms and army boots. Although this didn't matter as long as I stayed indoors, my clothes weighed on me as soon as I went out. And so I spent most of my time in my room, going from its cold half to its dark half, neither of which had any air or light because the trees outside blocked the sun and scattered dust. Even the rain was more dust than water.

God knows how long I might have gone on living in the cold, dust, and darkness of Berlin had not Dr. Levy's widow asked to consult with me about her husband's books, which she didn't know what to do with.

Not that travel was simple when staying in one place was so difficult. Nothing in the country was functioning normally; the smallest journey was an ordeal. The trains didn't run on time and were infrequent and crowded. And if you managed to find a seat, you still had to show your papers to the police. I won't bother to tell you what the police, a nasty lot in peacetime, were like in wartime.

And that wasn't all. Everything was rationed; there were vouchers for every bit of food, and those good for one place weren't good for another. Anyone traveling without a special ration book could die of hunger. There were excellent reasons for staying put.

And yet there was Dr. Levy's widow, all alone with a library that was too much for a woman like her and anxious to consult with me. And so, despite the hardship of travel, my fond memories of her husband made me decide to visit her. I thought of Dr. Levy's town, which I last had seen as his guest before the war. It was a quiet, peaceful place called Grimma, and the days spent in the two rooms of his library had been pleasant. How could I refuse a request to go there now?

I began to prepare for my trip. First, I went through my belongings to see what I needed and what I didn't and could throw out. Then I reviewed my manuscripts. I took my book on the history of

clothing and read it all, discarding every page that wasn't crucial and even snipping off the margins to reduce its size. When I was done, I told the chambermaid I was leaving and went to the police station for a travel permit. Then I returned to my room to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. I was waiting to set out for the station when the chambermaid knocked and asked if I had a few minutes to talk to the landlady. I glanced at my watch and went to see Frau Trotzmüller.

The only time I had ever spoken to Frau Trotzmüller was on the day I rented my room, when she and her daughters came to welcome me. She was a woman of about fifty, with a blond head streaked to the top with gray hairs. When she was young she must have been pretty, perhaps even beautiful, and something of that beauty had remained, though her eyes had a washed-out look. I supposed that came from crying at night for her son.

As I say, I had met her that day with her daughters. There were three of them, each odder-looking and stranger-sounding than the next. Lotte, the eldest, was a stout brunette with a complexion the color of burned fat. Although she was the tallest, this was hidden by her girth, all the more so because she hunched her head between her shoulders and peered up at you when she talked, interrupting her mother in a babyish lisp. Her sister Hildegard was thinner, with pitch-black hair, a narrow forehead, and prominent cheekbones, above which her eyes had to struggle to be seen; her voice had a hard edge to it, and it was she who ran the household and the boarding house. As for the youngest, Gert, she was slim like Hildegard, a freckled, coppery redhead with a nose the size of a barleycorn that sometimes vanished amid her freckles and sometimes jutted up saucily, and an unfinished slit of a mouth from which nothing ever emerged, since each time it opened to speak her sisters shushed her by saying: "Just look at her, hatched yesterday and already wanting to chirp!" I believe I've said enough about the three of them—and if it surprises you that I remember them at all, it shouldn't. In those days, I had so little contact with the world that I can recall every person I met. A mere name, face, or even smell can bring back an entire conversation.

Frau Trotzmüller was seated on a narrow divan when I entered her room, together with her daughters. Lotte was on her right and

Gert was on her left, and Hildegard was watering a potted cactus with her back to me.

Frau Trotzmüller held out her hand and asked me to have a seat. Then she ran the hand through her hair, as though checking for each gray and blond strand, while Gert glanced back and forth between us. Hildegard turned to her mother, her eyes widening above her cheekbones. "I hear you're leaving us," Frau Trotzmüller said. "I wanted to wish you a good trip. I couldn't decide whether to go to your room, so Hildegard suggested inviting you here. Thank you for coming."

"I, too, wanted to say goodbye and to thank you for your kindness," I replied. Frau Trotzmüller's face lit up and she asked if I had enjoyed my stay.

"If I weren't obliged to leave," I said, "I'd gladly stay here forever."

She let out a sigh and clasped her hands in sorrow.

I couldn't imagine what made her so sorry. Surely, it wasn't my moving out. There was no need to fear my room remaining empty. With every house in Berlin full of refugees, it would be snapped up in no time.

To break the silence, I pointed to the cactus that Hildegard was watering and said, "In this country, you grow a plant like that in a pot and treat it with love. Where I come from, it's only good for plowing up."

Lotte hunched her head between her shoulders, peered up at me, and lisped, "There must be all kinds of plants in your country that we don't know about." Hildegard gave Lotte a stern look and glanced encouragingly at her mother. Frau Trotzmüller, prompted by Hildegard's glance, regarded me with a sad smile and asked if I believed in dreams. Before I could guess what was on her mind she said, "I never believed in them myself. And now that you're leaving us, I believe in them even less."

Not only were her words strange in themselves, they were even stranger in view of the fact that she had barely exchanged a word with me until now. I glanced at her daughters, hoping for an explanation, and saw that they were waiting for one from me.

"I, too, have dreams," I said. "If they're good ones I know they won't come true, and if they're bad ones they don't scare me. The worst dream is no worse than real life. In any case, I never try to interpret them. I'm not Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, and there are no Josephs or Daniels in our age, even if their descendants are said to live in Vienna. Not that I have anything against them, but their theories aren't for me."

Hildegard's eyes widened again and she said, "You must have heard that our little brother was sent to the front and hasn't been heard from." Frau Trotzmüller nodded and repeated, "He hasn't been heard from. He's disappeared."

"So I've heard, *meine Frau*, so I've heard," I answered. I couldn't think of what else to say. I glanced at the grandfather clock on the wall and then stared at the wall itself.

Lotte hunched her head and lisped, "Are you in a hurry to get to the station?"

I took out my pocket watch. "If my train leaves on schedule," I said, "I have time."

"Then perhaps you'll listen to mother's dream," said Hildegard. "Mother, tell him what you dreamed."

"Are your bags packed?" asked Frau Trotzmüller.

"Packed and ready to go," I said.

"Now that all the porters have been drafted," she said, "you won't find anyone to take them. And you'll never find a cab, either. Gert, go tell the doorman that your mother would like him to bring the gentleman's bags to the station and stay by his side until he comes for them."

Gert's little nose jutted up and the slit of her mouth opened as if to say, "Mother, I want to hear your dream, too." Hildegard looked at her sternly and scolded, "What are you sitting there for? Do as your mother says." Gert rose and went to get the doorman.

Frau Trotzmüller ran a hand through her hair and said, "I had the strangest dream. I've already told you that I don't believe in dreams, and now I have even less cause to. They say they're like soap bubbles and I agree, especially since you're leaving us. In my dream, my son came home. And not only did he come home, he came home

because of you, *mein Herr*. Now that you're leaving us, I can see it's all one big soap bubble."

I sat trying to think of what to say to something like that. The clock chimed and I saw it was time to go. By now Gert had returned with the doorman. "You should be on your way, *mein Herr*," said Frau Trotzmüller. "Have a good trip."

I said goodbye to her and her daughters, gave my bags to the doorman, and followed him to the station.

Chapter two

I arrived at the station and fought my way onto the train. The car was packed with passengers: war provisioners, ersatz products dealers, military nurses, officers' mistresses, and amputees back from the front with their crutches, empty sleeves, rubber limbs, glass eyes, noses fashioned from buttocks by plastic surgeons, and terrified and terrifying faces that had lost their human features in the war. All were traveling with baggage—suitcases, duffle bags, bundles, boxes. You couldn't find your arms and legs in the crush.

The car smelled bad. There was no ventilation, all the window straps having been stolen. Everyone had to make his own air, which some did with cigarettes and others with cigars, pipes, and ersatz tobacco. The train jerked so hard that you couldn't tell if it was going forward or backward. The wheels rattled and shook; the pistons pounded up and down, drowning out the voices of the passengers. It took several hours to reach Leipzig.

I grabbed my bags and ran to catch the train for Grimma only to find that it had pulled out. The train from Berlin was late and the Grimma train hadn't wanted to wait. Not having the patience to

wait in the station for the next train either, I checked my bags and looked for the exit to the city.

The din in the large station was deafening. Trains came and went, hissing and clanging. Porters and conductors ran between the tracks and locomotives, vanishing in clouds of steam and reappearing among the cars. It was like being in a city of steel, with steel houses that ran on steel wheels with a clatter of steel beneath a sky of smoke. The whole station was on the run; no one stopped to catch his breath. You couldn't make out a face amid all the faces.

An army transport was slowly unloading wounded soldiers for placement in local hospitals. The orderlies and nurses performed their jobs with aplomb; they had been through it before and knew just what to do. Only the wounded weren't yet accustomed to their pain. Nearby stood another train that was leaving for the front. The departing soldiers' families stood around them. Although you would have thought that by now they would have been used to it, they wept as though for the first time.

Suddenly I heard my name called. I turned around and saw an attractive, elegantly dressed woman holding out her hand with a bright smile. No one else had a smile like Brigitta Schimmermann's. Before I could say hello she said, "My husband and I are lunching at one-thirty. We'd love to have you join us. You will come, darling, won't you?"

"That," I said, "is a perfectly unnecessary question. In my wildest dreams I would never have dreamed of anything like this. Of course I'll come, my dear, of course I will. Without a doubt."

"If I weren't busy now," Brigitta said, "I'd ask you to spend the morning with me. But there's a fresh detachment of wounded and I have to see to their transfer to my nursing home. There are twelve cars full of them and I can barely handle one. When the historians sit down to write about this war, they'll have to invent a new language. The word 'man' will be replaced by 'invalid.' Yesterday I was brought a walking zombie who makes all the others look healthy, a perfect golem. But I'm in a hurry, darling, and I can't tell you everything at once. We'll talk over lunch."

"I only wish, Brigitta," I said, "that the hours until then would go by as quickly as I'd like them to. Give my best regards to Herr Schimmermann. I'll be there at one-twenty-five sharp."

Brigitta smiled her sweet smile. "Don't be late," she said. "I'll see you then."

I had to laugh. As if I might be late to a meeting with Brigitta Schimmermann! Just running into her was a joy, let alone being invited to lunch with her instead of having to look for a restaurant in this frantic wartime city in which you never knew what you were being served.

You must have heard of Brigitta Schimmermann, if only because of her decoration by the Kaiser for opening a nursing home and caring for the wounded like a true sister of mercy. I myself knew Brigitta from long before that, from the days when the world was at peace and she was an actress in a small theater company. Though her talents weren't great, she had a charm that made the critics treat her kindly. And Brigitta, while aware that her abilities were modest, knew there was something special about her and was content to be herself without resorting to the tricks of her trade. Watching her in the theater was like being in a living room with a lovely and gracious young ingénue. Since her father was a rich banker, she had no need for patrons and never fawned on anyone.

As a rule, pretty young actresses remain on stage until they find a husband. After several years, Brigitta caught the fancy of Gerhard Schimmermann, the son of Rudolf Schimmermann, a partner in a large munitions firm. She accepted Gerhard's proposal and they were wed.

Once Brigitta was married, she gave up her acting career. Yet her home was always open to artists and intellectuals and was known for its charity soirées. I remember how, on one such evening, she recited a tragic poem that brought tears to everyone's eyes. When the war broke out and the wounded and maimed were everywhere, she established a nursing home to look after them.

As I've said, I knew Brigitta from her stage days. At the time I was already at work on my universal history of clothing, and hearing

of me, she made me her costume adviser. Her dressmakers were astonished to see her consulting someone like myself, who was far from a smart dresser. They must have thought me a prince in disguise and my armoires the secret source of her wardrobe.

Having no business in Leipzig, where I was stranded because my train from Berlin had been delayed, I had time until my lunch with Brigitta Schimmermann. To help pass it, I left the train station and walked into town. After several blocks of shops and buildings I came to the Brody Synagogue, which was founded by merchants from across the Polish border who came every year to the Leipzig Fair. Further on was another Polish synagogue and beyond that yet another that had broken away from the first and named itself for General von Hindenburg, perhaps in the hope of vanquishing its rivals as he had vanquished the enemies' troops. The thought of troops made me think of all the people I knew in Leipzig. Some were now at the front and those who weren't lived in fear for those who were.

I came to Rosental Park. Young mothers walked hand-in-hand with their children or wheeled them in carriages, making sure they got plenty of fresh air so that they could grow up to be healthy young men and go to war like their fathers.

Near the park was a neighborhood of fine homes half-hidden by trees and gardens. In my Leipzig days I had been a regular visitor in some of them. I was especially close to Dr. Mittel, a shrewd old man and first-rate scholar whose *Bibliography of Oenology* had made his reputation. He had even put me in a footnote in its revised second edition because of a story I once published under the title "In Vino Veritas." To this day I don't know whether he mistakenly thought I had written a scholarly article about wine or was just making a friendly gesture. According to my friend Mikhl Rabinovich, he was playing a practical joke on his fellow bibliographers, knowing they would copy the reference blindly as they always did from his books. Now, having nothing better to do, I decided to drop in on him.

But before I tell you about our meeting, allow me to play the storyteller and tell you about Mittel.

Isaac Mittel, better known as Dr. Mittel, came from a small, heavily Hasidic town in Poland and was raised in a Hasidic fam-

ily. When he grew up, he abandoned religion and became a Communist. The Czar's secret police got wind of it and he was forced to flee to Germany, where he settled in Leipzig. There he started a new life, studied for his high school diploma, went on to university, and obtained a doctoral degree.

In his student days, Mittel earned a living by clerking in bookstores, dealing in old books, teaching Hebrew to Christian divinity professors, proofreading Hebrew texts for publishers, and serving as a guide for the Polish merchants who came to Leipzig for the fair. Through the latter he met some local Jewish businessmen, on whom his manly bearing, wit, and sterling qualities made a good impression. Hearing that he socialized with Christian professors—that is, with real Germans such as they, German citizens of the Mosaic faith, never rubbed shoulders with—they befriended him and invited him for coffee and dinner to their homes, where he became a frequent guest. In this fashion he met the daughter of a wealthy family and married her. Her large dowry made him financially independent, and he took to building a library and engaging in bibliographic research that became known for its thoroughness and reliability. Having to be reliable kept him honest and having to be thorough kept him on his toes.

Here I'll say a word about the profession of bibliography. There are bibliographers who systematically compile lists of books, authors, and dates and places of publication, and there are those who read for their pleasure, jot down what interests them, and eventually publish their notes. "I," Mittel liked to say, "have been both kinds. I used to catalogue books for bookstores and now I do it for myself." I hope I've given you some idea of this clever man, whose greatest ambition was to sit at home with his books.

Before paying him a call, it occurred to me to bring him a gift. All I could find in the store I entered was a bottle of seltzer. Well, then, I thought, I'll bring Mittel some seltzer. When there's a war going on and people are hungry, seltzer, too, is a gift.

I climbed the stairs, whose carpet was threadbare, rang a rusty bell, and waited. After a while the door opened a crack and Dr. Mittel appeared in an old jacket, regarding me with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. All the books he had read had affected his sight and

he failed to recognize me. Yet just as he was about to send me away, his curiosity got the better of his suspicion and he asked, "What can I do for you?" I reminded him who I was and said, "If you're busy, I'll be on my way."

Mittel seized my arm and steered me inside. "Did you say busy?" he asked with a laugh. "Busy, you say? Don't you know that our only business these days is doing nothing? Sit down, my friend, sit down. I suppose you've already ransacked every bookstore in Leipzig and left nothing even for the mice, and then remembered this old man at the last minute and decided to see if he was still alive. What's new in the world? Anything besides killing and being killed? First men go mad and start a war and then the war goes on by itself. My only son is fighting in it, too. In case you've never seen him, here's a photograph. Doesn't he look the hero in his uniform? A world conqueror! His dear mother has good reason to be proud of him. I never thought I would be the father of a soldier."

Mittel, who had a memory that never forgot a single title, had forgotten my visit on the day his son left for the army. I remembered the boy's mother scrutinizing every item that he packed in his kitbag, her eyes bright with joy at the sight of her boy going off to defend the Fatherland. That same day Mittel told me one of his stories about the author and publisher Heshl Shor, which I'll skip to avoid getting sidetracked. I'll only say that it was then, and on the next day, that I helped the rabbi of the Von Hindenburg Synagogue, Nachum Berish, prepare writs of divorce for the wives of Russian Jewish soldiers who were prisoners in Germany. They had been put to work in the coal mines and taken up with Christian women, making their marriages null and void.

"But let's forget about the world," Mittel went on, "and I'll tell you some real news. You know, Rabbi Boruch of Mezhibov was very wise when he said, 'The only justification for wars is that they make musicians write marches that my Hasidim turn into holy melodies that are sung at my table at the end of the Sabbath.' A week ago I received a letter from Hirsmann. What did it say? He had received a shipment of books that he thought might interest me and he wrote, 'If your legs happen to take you to the street my store is on, do drop

in.' I read the letter and thought: as if Hirsmann doesn't know that legs don't go anywhere without being told! And so I dressed, slipped out of my slippers and into some shoes, and told my legs to take me to Hirsmann's store.

"On my way I encountered Herr König. He saw me and said, 'What good luck to run into you like this!' I said, 'Call it luck if you want, but what's so good about it?' König said, 'All my life I've worked on redesigning the Hebrew letters. Now I've finally located a foundry to cast the type—and here you are, in the nick of time for me to show it to you.' I asked, 'And who is going to publish the books you set in your type?' 'Publishers,' he said, 'I already have.' 'In that case, Herr König,' I said to him, 'you can see how unfairly I've been treated. I've been accused of being ungenerous toward the younger generation of bibliographers—but not only can they have their share of the books you print, they can have my share too, because I don't even want to look at them.' He said, 'But you should!' I said, 'I'm afraid my eyeglasses are too accustomed to the old letters to appreciate your new ones. Still, I'm happy you've succeeded.' 'You don't look happy,' he said. I said, 'Saying is the same as looking. That's why, when God gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, the Bible tells us, "All the people saw the voices." I'll tell you something else, too. Once someone brought Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi a new book on Hasidism. He looked at it and said, "I see the letters, but where is the book?" In your case, Herr König, I haven't seen the letters, but I can imagine the books that will be printed with them.' After taking my leave of König, I kept my head down to keep from being recognized. Leipzig is a city of fairs and you never know who'll turn up with his merchandise. One man makes ersatz letters, another ersatz food, another ersatz arms and legs, and the Reich makes ersatz men and calls them soldiers. To tell you the truth, my friend, this is turning into an ersatz story. I'd better get back to Hirsmann.

"I came to Hirsmann's store. He had some books to show me that had arrived from conquered territory in Russia. I cleaned my glasses, reached into a pile, and pulled out some prayer books. Although they were of no importance to a bibliographer, they had been important enough to the Jews who had prayed from them. On

the other hand, now that those Jews no longer had them, they had plenty of time to read war novels."

Mittel laughed a hoarse, jagged laugh. There was anger and anguish in it. Although I was sure he was about to vent his fury on modern intellectuals, as he was wont to do at such times, he restrained himself. His story, it seemed, mattered more to him than his anger.

He said, "I reached into the next pile. This time I came up with another prayer book, a Yiddish collection of women's devotions, and the Slavita edition of the *Zohar*—also no great cause for excitement. And what I found in them when I opened them, such as a pair of spectacles in the prayer book and some gray hairs in the *Zohar*, was nothing to write home about either, even if the devotions were half washed away by tears. I put them down and went on to another pile. It wasn't worth invading Poland for such stuff. One item was yet another little prayer book in which was stuck a piece of parchment with a handwritten plea to God to make the writer a better Torah scholar. What else was there? Ah, yes: a Jerusalem wall plaque, an illustrated Scroll of Esther, and some decorations for a Sukkah, the kind we made when we were children. By now I had had enough of this plunder, taken from poor Jews driven from their homes and robbed of all that was dear to them. Yet since a bibliographer can't keep his hands to himself, I kept rummaging through pile after pile. Finally, I fished from one of them a book of dirges for the Ninth of Av in an unknown edition. That is, it was an edition I had seen when I was young and had written about, and that Steinschneider mentioned in a footnote with an exclamation point as if to say, 'So says Mittel, and you can believe him if you care to.' You know me well, my friend. I've never wished anyone ill. Still, at that moment I couldn't help feeling sorry that Steinschneider was dead, because had he been alive, the one to feel sorry would have been him.

"But it was the next book I picked up that made me feel faint. I needn't tell you that there are towns all over Europe, some so small you won't even find them on the map, in which Jews were printing books when their Christian neighbors didn't know the alphabet. If someone were to bring me a Hebrew volume older than the Gutenberg Bible, it wouldn't surprise me in the least. After all, movable type

was invented in China, and the Mongols possessed printed books long before anyone in Europe had heard of them; who is to say Jews didn't copy the technique? We know the Mongols introduced Europe to gunpowder, which the Jews left for the Germans—but books, my friend, books were something Jews had a use for."

He broke out laughing and said:

"I'm not only a bibliographer, I'm a mind reader. And if you'd like, I'll read your mind. You're thinking that this old man has taken leave of his senses. Well, I may really be too old to see my theory confirmed. But you, my friend, will live to see it. Meanwhile, let me show you something you've never seen before."

While taking out an old text he had found, held in place by slabs of wood like those used by the early bookbinders, he related an amusing anecdote about two bibliographers—one of whom, though a scholar, had made several embarrassing mistakes, while the other had made only one, which was to think he was a scholar. Mittel was still talking when I saw that it was time for my lunch with Brigitta Schimmermann.

I rose to go. "What's the hurry?" he asked.

"I have a luncheon appointment," I told him.

"With Frau Schimmermann," he said.

"You *are* a mind reader," I declared.

"As a matter of fact," Mittel said, "she telephoned before you came."

"But if you knew I was in Leipzig," I said, "how come you didn't recognize me?"

"It was precisely because I did know," Mittel said. "I waited so long for you to come that I lost my sixth sense and didn't realize it was you. Intuition is everything, my friend."

I said, "But I never told Frau Schimmermann that I planned to visit you. How could she have guessed?"

"You must have told her and forgotten," Mittel said.

"I couldn't have," I said, "because I didn't know I was going to visit you, either."

"Then you should be ashamed for not knowing," he said. "Frau Schimmermann knows you better than you know your own self. Who

else were you going to visit? Even someone like me, who never goes anywhere, would visit someone like me if he existed."

"What exactly did Frau Schimmermann tell you?" I asked.

"She told me," Mittel said, "that she had forgotten to tell you that she and her husband would be at the Lion's Den."

"Well, then," I said, "I'll be off to the Lion's Den. Where is it?"

"You're asking me?" Mittel said. "How would a stay-at-home like me know something like that? Let's look in the phone book."

Mittel looked in the phone book and couldn't find it. Then he went through all the hotels, inns, restaurants, pubs, and beer cellars in the yellow pages and couldn't find it there either. He gave me a baffled look, said, "I know Leipzig like the back of my hand and never heard of any Lion's Den," and called information. No one there knew a thing about it. "Maybe," I said, "it wasn't the Lion's Den. Maybe it was the Leopard's Perch, or the Antelope's Horns, or the Eagle's Wings, or some other place mentioned in the Bible."

Mittel made a wry face. "You're making fun of me. Frau Schimmermann will think I'm just a dumb Polack who can't be trusted with anything."

My stomach was beginning to growl. To calm it, I took a glass and poured myself some of the seltzer I had brought. Mittel said:

"Just look what we've come to! A Jew has a visitor and doesn't offer him food or drink. Soon my dear wife will come home and make us coffee. She's so busy feeding the world in that soup kitchen she volunteers in that she forgets she has a husband to feed, too. By now I'm used to fasting, but if I live to be a hundred I'll never get used to having a hungry guest in my home. The only reason I decided to keep a kosher kitchen was so that I could offer hospitality to every Jew. Even if it was time for prayer, we Kotzk Hasidim never asked a guest, 'Have you prayed?' before asking, 'Have you eaten?' I've spoiled your lunch, my friend. Wait until my wife comes home and she'll make you a meal in place of Frau Schimmermann's."

"I'd better go," I said.

"Where?"

"I'm on my way to Grimma."

Mittel looked disappointed and fell silent. Then he sighed and said: "I suppose you're going to see Levi's widow. If I weren't an infirm old man who hates travel and the company of women, I'd go with you. What will become of Levi's library? Who will use it now? The dealers will sell it off piecemeal. What a man that was! He had eyes that didn't need glasses until the day he died. They say you could see nothing wrong with him even as he lay dying and writing his will. When is the next train for Grimma? You still have two hours, don't you? You may as well spend them with me. I'll put on something presentable and walk you to the station, although to tell you the truth, all the soldiers and cripples in the streets make me want to stay home. Sit down, my friend. Sit and I'll tell you a story.

"Perhaps you've heard of Shlomo Rubin. I knew the man and can tell you that his books were nothing compared to him. I heard many stories from him, one of which I'll pass on to you.

"There was once a tireless shoemaker who stayed up all night making shoes—cutting the leather and shaping the soles and stitching each shoe. One night an imp appeared and stuck out its tongue at him. The shoemaker took his knife and cut off the imp's tongue. The imp stuck out another tongue. The shoemaker cut that one off, too. To make a long story short, the imp kept it up and the shoemaker kept it up, and when morning came the shoemaker saw that every piece of leather in his shop had been slashed to pieces.

"Do you follow me? The Germans are tireless. They keep lashing out at their enemies and in the end they harm only themselves. This war won't end so quickly. The Germans are a stubborn people. Once they start something, they see it through. They began this war and they won't stop it until either they or their enemies are beaten. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter who beats whom. Both sides are war-crazed and victory-mad. But if you ask me, the winners will be Germany's enemies, because they have numbers on their side.

"If I wrote fiction, I'd write a story set in the future. I'll tell you how it would end. Germany has been vanquished and divided up by the victors. Nothing is left of it but a tiny principality, and all that remains of the Germans is a small, destitute people. They're so poor they can only think of where their next meal will come from. Their

universities and libraries are converted into tenements and all their books and works of art are burned for heating and cooking. In the end, not a page survives from all of German literature and philosophy. You say one war couldn't do that to a great nation? But one war leads to another. After a second war and a third war, the Germans have been beaten to their knees. There's no more talk of victory or fighting on. All anyone wants is a bit of food to eat, some clothes to wear, and a roof over his head.

"Time goes by. Little by little, the life of the mind resumes—and with it the memory of how once there were great poets and philosophers whose work has vanished because it was used to heat ovens. From afar comes a rumor that in a land called America live Jews who came there from Germany. And since Jews are traditionalists who preserve the languages of the countries they have lived in, they still know German and read German books. Messengers are sent to America to bring these books back to Germany, just as Hebrew books are now being brought from the conquered territories. And don't ask me why go all the way to America when German is also spoken in Switzerland and in Austria and in other places, because this isn't a page of the Talmud whose logic has to be impeccable. If you weren't in such a hurry, I'd flesh it all out for you. If I'm still alive when you pass through Leipzig again on your way back from Grimma, I'll do it then. And though you may think this is pure fiction like any tale about the future, you have my word that it's perfectly true."