

# A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT

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# A Guest for the Night



The Great Synagogue of Buczacz in 1922.

*"In my childhood I thought that there was no bigger building in the world than the Great Synagogue, but now its area had dwindled and its height shrunk."*

## *Chapter one*

### I Came to My Home Town

**O**n the eve of the Day of Atonement, in the afternoon, I changed from the express to the local train that runs to my home town. The Jews who had traveled with me got out and went their way, while Gentile townsfolk, men and women, made their way in. The wheels rolled sluggishly between hills and mountains, valleys and gorges; at every station the train stopped and lingered, let out people and baggage, and started up again. After two hours, signs of Szibucz sprouted from both sides of the road. I put my hand to my heart. My hand throbbed against my heart, just as my heart throbbed under my hand. The townsfolk put out their pipes and shoved them into their leggings, got up to collect their baggage, and sat down again; the women elbowed their way to the window, crying “Rubberovitch,” and laughed. The train whistled and puffed, whistled again, then sprawled to rest opposite the station.

Along came the dispatcher called “Rubberovitch”; his left arm had been lost in the war; the new one they gave him was made of rubber. He stood erect, waving the flag in his hand, and called: “Szibucz!” It was many years since I had heard the name of Szibucz coming from the lips of a man of my town. Only he who is born

there and bred there and lives there knows how to pronounce every single letter of that name. After Rubberovitch had got the name of Szibucz out of his mouth, he licked his mustache as if he had been munching sweetmeats, carefully scrutinized the passengers stepping down, stroked his rubber arm, and made ready to send off the train.

I picked up my two valises and walked to the back of the station yard, looking for a carriage to take me into town. The yard lay in the sun; the smell of pitch and steam mingled with that of grass and plants, the odor of railway stations in small towns. I looked this way and that, but found no carriage. This is the eve of the Day of Atonement, I said to myself, time already for the Afternoon Service, so the coachmen are not going out on the road; if you want to get to town you will have to use your feet.

It takes an ordinary man a half hour to walk to the center of town; carrying baggage, it takes a quarter of an hour more. I took an hour and a half: every house, every ruin, every heap of rubbish caught my eye and held me.

Of the large houses of two, three, or four storeys, nothing was left except the site. Even the King's Well, from which Sobieski, King of Poland, had drunk when he returned victorious from war, had its steps broken, its commemorative tablet cracked; the golden letters of his name were faded, and sprouted mosses red as blood, as if the Angel of Death had wiped his knife on them. There were no boys and girls standing on streetcorners, there was no singing, no laughter; and the well spouted water, pouring it into the street, as water is poured in the neighborhood of the dying. Every place was changed—even the spaces between the houses. Nothing was as I had seen it when I was little, nor as it had been shown to me in a dream shortly before my return. But the odor of Szibucz had not yet evaporated—the odor of millet boiled in honey, which never leaves the town from the day after Passover until the end of November, when the snow falls, covering all.

The streets stood empty, and the market too. The town was already resting from its everyday labors, and the shops were locked; surely at that moment the men were reciting the Afternoon Service

and the women preparing the final meal before the fast. Except for the noise of the ground echoing my footsteps, there was no sound.

I paid no attention to the echo from the ground, and walked on, wondering where I could put down my baggage and find lodging. Looking up, I saw a group of men standing around. I went up to them and asked, "Where can I find a hotel here?" They looked at my two bags and the clothes I was wearing, and did not answer. I asked again, "What hotel can I stay in here?" One of them spat out a shred of tobacco from his lips, rubbed his neck a little, stared at me and said: "D'you think there are so many hotels here that you can choose the one you want? Of all the places in town, only two are left." Another said to him: "In any case, the divorcee's is not the right place for this gentleman." "Why?" "D'you hear?" said the second to his fellows. "He asks why. All right, if he wants to go there, no one will stop him." He folded his arms and turned his head away from me, as if to say: From now on I wash my hands of you.

Another spoke up. "I'll explain. When this poor woman came back after the war, she found nothing but the house her father had left. So she set to work and made it into a hotel, for her and her four daughters to earn a living. But when business got worse, she stopped being too careful about her guests, and the house became a rendezvous for sinners. Reb Hayim's wife she was—and he such a scholar, a good man, fit to be the rabbi of the town—and now what has become of her!" "And where is Reb Hayim?" I asked. "Where's Reb Hayim? He's a prisoner of the Russians. They took him and carried him away to the other end of Russia, and we don't know whether he's alive or dead, for we've heard nothing from him all these years, except for the time when he sent his wife a bill of divorce, so that she wouldn't remain tied all her life to a missing man."

I picked up my two bags and asked, "So where *can* one stay?" "Where? Daniel Bach will show you. He's going home and he lives next door."

While he was still speaking, a man came up and said, "You mentioned my name, so here I am. Come with me, sir, and I will show you your hotel."

Daniel Bach was tall and lean, his head small, his hair chestnut, and his beard short, not pointed, not blunt; a kind of smile hung on his lips, spreading into his sunken cheeks; and his right leg was wooden. I walked along keeping pace, so as not to distress him by too long steps. Daniel Bach noticed this. "If you are worrying about me, sir," he said, "you needn't, because I walk like any other man. In fact, this man-made leg is better than the other, which is the work of God. It doesn't have to worry about rheumatism, and beats the other for walking." "Does it come from the war?" I asked. "Oh no," said he, "but the rheumatism in the other I got from the war." Then I said, "If that's the case, then permit me to ask, sir, were you injured in the pogroms?" He smiled and replied: "From the pogroms I came out sound in body. And the hooligans should thank their stars they got out of my hands alive. So where did I get this leg? From the same source as all the other troubles; from things Jews have to do for a living. Hatach, 'the cutter,' the angel in charge of livelihoods, did not find me right with two legs, so he cut one off and made me stand on the other. How did it happen? But you have reached your hotel, and I my house, and you have to hurry for the final meal. I wish you a full atonement." I took his hand and said to him, "The same to you, sir." Bach smiled and said: "If you mean me, it's a wasted greeting, for I don't believe the Day of Atonement has any power to make things better or make them worse." Said I, "If it does not atone for those that do not repent, it atones for those that do." "I'm a skeptic," he replied, "I don't believe in the power of repentance." "Repentance and the Day of Atonement atone for half," said I, "and the troubles of the rest of the year for the other half." "I've already told you I'm a skeptic," retorted Daniel Bach, "and I don't believe the Almighty cares about the welfare of His creatures. But why should I be clever with you at dusk on the eve of the Holy Day? I wish you a full atonement."

## *Chapter two*

### The Eve of the Day of Atonement

**T**he people of the hotel received me as an untimely guest, for they had already finished the Closing Meal and were about to go to synagogue, and they were afraid I might detain them. “Don’t worry,” I told them, “I won’t trouble you much, all I ask is a place to sleep.” The innkeeper looked outside, and looked at me. Then he looked at the food left over from the meal, and looked at me again. I saw that he was considering whether it was still light enough to eat before the beginning of the fast at sunset. I too considered whether it was permissible for me to eat, for we are enjoined to add to the sacred at the expense of the secular, and to begin the fast before dark. I said to him, “There is no time to sit down to a meal,” opened my bag, took out my festival prayer book and my prayer shawl, and went to the Great Synagogue.

In my childhood I thought that there was no bigger building in the world than the Great Synagogue, but now its area had dwindled and its height shrunk, for to eyes that have seen temples and mansions the synagogue appears even smaller than it is.

There was not a man I knew in the synagogue. Most of the worshippers were recent arrivals, who occupied the honorable places



by the eastern wall and left the others empty. Some of them had risen and were walking about, either to show their proprietorship or because they did not feel comfortable in their places. The radiance that is wont to shine on the heads of the sacred congregation on the Eve of Atonement did not shine on their heads, and their prayer shawls shed no light. In the past, when everyone would come to pray and each would bring a candle, in addition to those that burned in the candelabra, the synagogue was brightly lit, but now that the candelabra had been plundered in the war and not all came to pray, the candles were few and the light was scanty. In the past, when the prayer shawls were adorned with collars of silver, the light used to gleam from them upon the heads of the worshippers, but now that the adornments had been carried off the light was diminished.

The cantor did not draw out the prayers—or perhaps he did, but that was my first prayer in my home town, and it was Atonement Eve, when the whole world stands in prayer, so I wanted to draw out the prayers even more and it seemed to me as if the cantor were cutting them shorter all the time. After he had ended the service, all the worshippers surrounded the Ark and recited the mourners' Kaddish. There was not a man there who did not say Kaddish.

After the service they did not recite psalms, nor did they chant the Song of Unity or the Song of Glory, but locked the synagogue and went home.

I walked to the river and stood there on the bridge, just as my father, of blessed memory, used to do on Atonement Eves; he used to stand on the bridge over the river because the odor of the water mitigates thirst and leads men to repentance; for as this water, which now meets your eye, was not here before this moment and will not be here afterwards, so this day, which was given us to repent of our sins, was not yet in the world before and will never be in the world again, and if you do not use it for repentance you have wasted it.

The water comes and the water goes; as it comes, so it goes, and an odor of purity rises from it. It seems as if nothing has changed since the day I stood here with Father, of blessed memory, and nothing will change here until the end of all the generations. Along came

a group of boys and girls with cigarettes in their mouths. No doubt they had come from the feast they had held that night, as they do every year on Atonement Eve, to show that they are not in awe of the Day of Atonement. The stars were fixed in the firmament and their light gleamed on the river; the lights of the cigarettes moved among them. At the same time my shadow fell on the bridge and lay flat before the young people. Sometimes it mingled with their shadows and sometimes it was alone, quivering all the time as if it felt the trampling feet of the passers-by. I turned my eyes away and looked up at the sky, to see if that hand had appeared of which the children tell: they say that on Atonement Eve a little cloud, like a hand, rises in the firmament, for at that time the Almighty stretches out His hand to receive the repentant.

A young woman passed by and lit a cigarette. A young man passed by and said, "Look out or you'll burn your mustache!"

Startled, she dropped the cigarette from her mouth. The young man bent down and picked it up. Before he could put it in his mouth or the girl's, another came up, snatched the cigarette from his hand, took the girl by the arm, and disappeared with her.

The bridge began to empty of passers-by. Some of them went to the town and some turned toward the wood behind the slaughterhouse on the bank of the Stripa beside the oaks. I looked down at the river again. A fine odor rose from the water. I breathed in deeply and savored the air.

The well in the old market at the center of town could be heard again. Some little distance away was the gurgling of the King's Well, and the water of the Stripa also added its voice—not the water I had seen at first, for that had already gone, but fresh water, which had taken its place. The moon shone from the river and the stars began to dwindle. I said to myself: The time has come for sleep.

I went back to my hotel and found it closed. I was sorry I had not taken a key with me, for I had promised the people that I would not trouble them much, and now I had to rouse them from their sleep. Had I known that the *klois* still existed I should have gone there, for there the people would be awake all night singing hymns and psalms, and some would be studying all night long the

talmudic tractates of *Yoma*, treating of the Day of Atonement itself, and *Keritot*, which deals with grave offenses.

I put out my hand to the door, as one puts out his hand when he does not expect it to open, but as I touched it the door opened. My host knew that his guest was outside, and he had not locked the door in his face.

I entered on tiptoe so as not to disturb the sleepers. If I had not worn my boots when I went out, they would not have heard my footsteps. But the streets of the town are dirty and I am fastidious, so I wore my boots, and when I came in they sensed my entrance and turned in their sleep.

A memorial light burned on the table in the middle of the dining room, and a prayer shawl and a prayer book lay there. The smell of warm povidl, which had been put away in the oven, sweetened the air of the house. For many years I had not felt its taste or come across its smell—that smell of ripe plums in the oven, which brings back the memory of days gone by, when Mother, may she rest in peace, would spread the sweet povidl on my bread. But this was not the time to think of such things, although the Torah has not forbidden the enjoyment of odors on the Day of Atonement. My host came out of his room and showed me my bed, leaving the door open so that I could undress in the candlelight. I closed the door behind him and went to bed.

The memorial candle shone into my room. Or perhaps it did not, and it only seemed to me that it shone. I said to myself: This night I shall know no sleep. Rubberovitch's hand or Bach's foot will come to terrify me. But as soon as I lay down on my bed, sleep overcame me, and I slept. And it is almost certain that I did not dream.