

In Mr. Lublin's Store



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A YOUNG TORAH SCHOLAR undertook to stay awake for a thousand nights studying Torah. He was put to the test at many steps along the way and withstood temptation at each turn. He did not allow himself to fall asleep or to stop discussing Torah. At the end of the thousandth night Yefafiyeh, the Prince of Torah, appeared to him and said, "Your nights have brought joy to Heaven, therefore ask and you shall be given." He said to him, "Your Glorious Reverence, what I have learned in the thousand nights is sufficient payment for me and I ask for nothing more." The Prince of Torah said to him, "Since you have understood the greatness of Torah and ask for nothing in return, Heaven is awarding you all the interpretations made by every scholar from the day the Israelites stood at Sinai until now, so that if you call to mind a single verse of the law or a letter of that which you studied during the thousand nights, all the new interpretations that have branched out from these will appear to you." The blessing of the Prince of Torah came true and from that time every single word of the Torah the student remembered was supplemented by all the new insights and interpretations of those insights that branched out from that single word.

What happened to that great scholar of Torah happened to one of the minor Torah students, not as a result of Torah study but through

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an act of kindness. One Sabbath eve I visited the store of my benefactor in Leipzig. He had to go somewhere and had no one to mind his store. I undertook to sit there until his return. Hours passed and he didn't return. I didn't leave but sat deep in thought and reflection. From then on, if I remembered any of those thoughts and reflections I also remembered all the things that branched out from them. To ease the burden I wrote all of them down in the book I now offer you, which I have named after the place where I spent those hours.

Chapter One

1

This Sabbath eve I went to the market to buy food for the Sabbath and to visit the bathhouse as I usually do every Sabbath eve. On my way I visited Mr. Lublin's store. It so happened that Mr. Lublin had to go away on business and he didn't have anyone to look after the store, and stores are not usually closed in the middle of the day. I said to him, "I'll sit in the store until you return." Mr. Lublin left me in the store and went off on his business.

A short while after he had left he returned, took the newspapers and disconnected the telephone to prevent my being disturbed by callers, because in any case I had nothing to say to them. When he left he said, "I'll be back soon. I won't be long, but if I am delayed, take my cane and go into the yard and tap on Lemke's window and tell him to come in and take your place in the store. Here are the newspapers for you to read. But where are they? They seem to have vanished. Disappeared from my very hand! In that case, you're relieved of having to waste your time on them."

I remained alone in Mr. Lublin's store.

Mr. Lublin's store is not the same as other stores, it is a company, and because it is set among all the old workshops in the old market in Böttcher Street that date from long ago when workshops were called

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stores, it is also called a store. Even though his business is substantial, all the work is done by the owner himself. He orders the stock, he responds to the customers either by telegram or telephone or by the letters he writes in his charming handwriting, which has a touch of Gothic in it, because when he was a schoolboy everyone in Germany wrote German in the Gothic script. He took pride in his writing because he had learned to do it when he was poor and scrimping for bread.

Copying letters and filing them, putting stamps on them and taking them to the post office, accounting and retrieving the merchandise from the customs house and from the train station, all this was done by Lemke, Christian Liebbrecht Gotthold Firchtgut Lemke, of the Lemke family who were pastors in the small villages of Thuringia.

In addition to Lemke there is Schwanke who oversees the warehouse, opens the doors of the store, washes the floor, tidies the utensils and empties the waste basket, apart from a few other tasks that he has taken upon himself, like sharpening the pencils, changing the nibs of the pens and the blotting paper, filling the inkwell and rinsing the glasses from which Mr. Lublin drinks cognac, because Mr. Lublin, on the advice of his doctor, usually drinks a small glass of cognac twice a day to strengthen his heart.

In the mornings when Mr. Lublin comes into his store at five minutes past eight Schwanke greets him with "Good morning, sir," and takes his briefcase and his cane from him, stands the cane in the corner, places the briefcase on the table and opens it in front of Mr. Lublin, then goes to do his work in the warehouse, and does not show himself in the shop unless Mr. Lublin has told Lemke to call him. Lemke doesn't appear unless he is called. The municipal street sweepers are responsible for sweeping the courtyard and removing the garbage. Before going into the warehouse Schwanke inspects the yard and counts the empty crates standing there, how many are left and how many have been stolen, and he glances at the four shopkeepers in the yard so that they should know that there is a watchful eye on them and if they steal a crate Schwanke will notice. If he has a reason, he picks a quarrel with the shopkeepers, if he has no reason he smoothes his moustache and growls as he enters the warehouse to begin his work. He wipes down the items that have been selected to be sent away and then turns to the shelves, moving an

object here and there to reduce the gap left by those that have been taken away, for an empty warehouse is not attractive. Actually Mr. Lublin will never leave the warehouse empty for three days at a time and every space left bare by an object's removal is refilled. Schwanke does not rely on the arrival of the trains to bring new merchandise, and even if they do it may not suffice to replace that which has gone, because most of it is grabbed before reaching its owners.

These objects we have mentioned are cooking utensils, frying pans, baking dishes and cutlery and crockery, all the products used in the kitchen and dining room. Also, house cleaning tools and the woven baskets the housemaids take to the market. Even in these times when all good merchandise has disappeared from the marketplace Mr. Lublin's loyal clients find it at Mr. Lublin's at a reasonable price. Mr. Lublin is connected to the well-managed, trustworthy factories that remain constant without changing their systems, providing merchandise for their loyal customers. In the same way Mr. Lublin's customers always find what they used to find in his store before the war. Some businesses drive their usual customers away because of the suppliers who seize goods at any price and hide them until they are sold out in the shops and then they become worth their weight in gold. Mr. Lublin keeps away from people like that.

Mr. Lublin has lived in the city for almost forty years. He spent the good and bad days of his youth there, and now he makes an honorable living. He expanded his business with the help of the dowry his wife Nora, daughter of the Nachhut family, brought him. The factories and banks, which were aware of his business dealings and knew of his wife's family, trusted him. It didn't matter much to them that he was only a Jew from Galicia, like the Galician butter and egg merchants whose produce comes from there. Mr. Lublin is different from them, as he is from the fabric merchants, the descendants of the ones who came from Brody whose fathers and forefathers brought wealth and talent from their countries, and whose great elegance not everyone can appreciate. He also differs from the furriers who have taken over the fur district around Brühl Street. His store does not open onto the public thoroughfare and no one passes by the store. It is hidden and concealed in the old market between the old shops in Böttcher Street which were supposed to have been hidden out of sight for a long time until they could be replaced by

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large buildings, like the rest of the old buildings that were screened from sight and built over either in the old style or a new one. One of them is the enclosure that houses Mr. Lublin's company, whose style is preserved as it was ten generations or more ago, unlike other buildings in Leipzig, all of which are new, for there is no building more than forty or fifty years old. Many buildings in Leipzig that seem to be as old as those you have seen in pictures are only built to look like them.

2

Since I am sitting alone in Mr. Lublin's store without newspapers or anything else that can divert the mind I'll think about Mr. Lublin's business, that is, his store, or better still, the building. I have already said something about his merchandise. From now on I'll tell you a little about the business itself, how it works and how Mr. Lublin came to decide on its location.

This is how it came about. Shortly after Mr. Lublin had left old Mr. Nachhut's business and founded his own company he rented a place in Jacob Street which is near Ranstädter Stein Way. Nowadays Mr. Lublin arrives at his office at five past eight but in those days he didn't look at the time. At night, just as during the day, he concentrated on his work and lived at his workplace, his bed was there and it was there that he would cook his light meal on a gas ring. As his company grew he rented an apartment above his office and moved his bed into it.

This was before he married Nora, the Nachhut family's daughter. After he married Nora they altered their apartment to make it suitable for what they needed.

I am not so familiar with the process of trade, particularly in a big city like Leipzig with its many firms. From the little I learned from observing Mr. Lublin's business I believe I am not too far from the truth.

Mr. Lublin's business was somewhat innovative and since everything was done through letters, telegrams and the telephone, the seller didn't see the buyer or vice versa. Apart from the postman, and the person who delivered the telegrams, and Schwanke the storeman and another little clerk, no one was to be seen there. At first Mr. Lublin would acquire his merchandise from Nachhut. Gradually he began to get it from the place where Mr. Nachhut himself purchased it. Like any young man who is intent on learning new things, he contacted new factories that

the House of Nachhut didn't know existed. His wife's relatives, who had cornered most of the market in household goods, didn't regard him as a competitor because Mr. Lublin's company was different from theirs. They didn't compete with him even though they were aware of his success, for as heads of established businesses they didn't deviate from their predecessors' conduct.

From the time of his marriage to Nora, Nachhut's daughter, he made his home in the same building as his company. It was there that two sons and a daughter were born.

For many years Mr. Lublin had wanted to move his business from Jacob Street which is near the Ranstädter Gate to somewhere else, not because he regarded it as shameful or because his wife wanted to live in the more genteel areas of the city but because of lack of space once his business had grown and the place became too small, and also because he wanted to separate his business from his home since they were both in the same building. His office was below and his apartment on top.

He began to view many places but found nothing. Other people had taken the good places and the places that were left were not any good.

He heard that that the city council was selling the old shops in the old market in Böttcher Street and a buyer who had bought them almost for nothing was about to demolish them and build a four-story office building in their place. Mr. Lublin said, "This kind of thing appeals to me. I'll find office space for myself in those shops and a spacious area for my merchandise." A few days later he heard that the purchaser lacked the means to build or to tear down and the purchase funding was not his, and whether or not he was paying compound interest he was certainly paying some interest. A few days later Mr. Lublin heard that the purchaser wanted to be free of the entire transaction even if he lost money.

Mr. Lublin examined his ledgers, did his calculations and considered the value of the merchandise in his business and tried to find out whether the factory owners would allow him to pay off his debts in installments. They all answered him immediately and a few of them even offered to lend him money. He bought the shops and the yard from the purchaser. He didn't borrow from his wife's relatives. From the time of his marriage into the family he was careful not to have to borrow from them and if he bought merchandise from them he tried to pay them in cash.

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Mr. Lublin didn't tear down or build anything. Everything that was meant to survive survived and he vacated all the damaged buildings. He chose three out of the seven self-contained shops and joined them together without changing their style, which was the same as it had been ten generations ago. He did put in electric lighting in the shop and in the cellar which runs the length of the yard.

From the time of Germany's victory over France Leipzig had become used to seeing old buildings demolished and new ones built. Even if some of them were built in the old style the city continues to change. Its former beauty is nowhere to be seen and very little remains of those buildings that made Leipzig into a unified harmony. Mr. Lublin didn't demolish the old or build anything new, he left the courtyard and the stores as Leipzig was used to seeing them. He left everything as it was because he was afraid of incurring debt. All the admirers of the old style, in addition to the city councilors, became aware of him.

3

Now I'll say something unfavorable about the city councilors who bear the responsibility for the city and do what they think is best for it. There is no doubt that they all act in the city's best interests, and want only what is good for it, but their understanding is not always for the best. I won't say anything about their activities, whether they are good or bad. Their instructions for the demolition of the stores were certainly not given wisely. Because of this all those who love the city were angry with them and said, "If something is to be destroyed, members of the council should be first." Yet from the moment Mr. Lublin bought the seven old shops from the vendor and left them as they were people said nothing more. Council members often forget where their benefits come from. As far as those shops and Mr. Lublin were concerned few of them remembered. One of them happened to become acquainted with Mr. Lublin and treated him graciously. When the opportunity arose he spoke with him, and when the opportunity arose once again he was prepared to listen to Mr. Lublin's opinions about the city. I didn't hear a hint of this from Mr. Lublin, but it seems that they realized that his advice was influential because they had only taken action as a result of what he had said.

Gradually he became closer to some of the city council members. I am not exaggerating when I say that some of them welcomed him into their homes. Old Mr. Nachhut said, "We and our ancestors who were born here cannot boast that these city fathers are even aware of us, but this Galicianer goes in and out of their houses." Mr. Nachhut said something significant without giving a reason for saying it but I will supply the reason, which I think is true. Why did the Galicianer achieve what the Jewish notables in Leipzig have not achieved despite their similarity to the city councilors in their activities, thinking and intelligence? The years they and their ancestors and their ancestors' ancestors had struggled to model themselves on people of national importance had made them become like them. Yet despite their best efforts they were superfluous to the city councilors who had no need of them, while this Galicianer didn't even try to be like the Germans. He retained his own style without changing his sensibilities, so if a city council member encountered him he would discover in Mr. Lublin something he hadn't discovered in himself or in anybody else.

I'll mention something that happened to me, not in Mr. Lublin's store and not on the day I was sitting there but at a different time. It was the year I lived between the two cities, Katzenau the city and Katzenau the spa, in a villa that stood on its own at the top of the hill covered with shrubs and flowers.

I was sitting in my room and doing something. Or perhaps I wasn't doing anything. I'm not a man of action and if I don't do anything I don't say that I do. I take the hours and days as they come.

I'll relate a small thing that slightly changes the subject but is connected to what Mr. Nachhut had said and I rely on He who remembers all forgotten things not to let me forget what I wanted to say about Mr. Lublin.

While I was sitting in my room in a house between the two towns of Katzenau the town and Katzenau the spa Mr. Von Herr came to visit me.

Mr. Von Herr is one of the leading arms manufacturers. It was wartime, Germany's war with the entire world. The arms manufacturers were exhausted because of all the work they had. Mr. Von Herr had come to the place where I was staying for a few days. I was there doing

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nothing and he was there to regain his strength to do more. At that time the wife of the German Crown Prince was visiting Katzenau, which is in Bavaria, and with her came a large entourage of the most exalted people in the Empire.

When Mr. Von Herr came to visit me I said to him, "What's this, sir, aren't you going into the city where the kingdom's nobility is taking the air?" Mr. Von Herr replied to me, "I'm sick and tired of Katzenau because of the Jews one runs into on every sidewalk." I said to him calmly, "You surprise me, Mr. Von Herr, you're sick and tired of the Jews and yet you come to visit one." Mr. Von Herr said to me, "But you are not like the other Jews." I said to him, "What I find sad is that those other Jews are too much like you." Mr. Von Herr said, "Allow me to offer you a little conversation." We sat and talked. He told me everything he knew about the Jews and Judaism and I listened. I didn't stop him or contradict a word he said. Because he spoke for so long two good thick cigars went up in smoke without his having smoked them.

When he had finished what he had to say I began to speak while he listened. When I finished speaking I observed his expression and that the third cigar, which he had forgotten to light, was still in his hand. He was like someone who had arrived in a strange country and who makes an effort to get to know the country and its inhabitants.

In the morning he telegraphed a bookseller to send good books written by Jews about Jews and Judaism to his house. A few days after he had returned home he wrote to me that he had read these books and that he had some questions which he asked me to answer. A few days later he invited me to his house. I didn't go but I replied to all his questions. His last letter arrived here in Jerusalem after I had shaken the dust of Germany off my feet.

4

I return to Mr. Lublin.

From the time Mr. Lublin moved his store to Böttcher Street his business continued to grow and he himself was content. Until a man has found his place he does not know how fateful a place is. Here he acquired a spacious office area for himself and found a place for his merchandise in the long cellar that ran the length of the yard with all seven