

The Family Carnovsky





I.J. Singer

THE
FAMILY
CARNOVSKY

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The Family Carnovsky

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Introduction

I.J. Singer: Life and Literature

Anita Norich

Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944) was one of the most well-known Yiddish prose writers of the twentieth century. Like many Yiddish writers, he was both multilingual and peripatetic. Born in the town of Bilgoray in the Lublin province, Singer spent part of his childhood in Leoncin in the province of Warsaw. When he was fourteen, the family moved to the hasidic court at Radzimin (also in the Warsaw province) and then to Warsaw. Singer traveled extensively in the Soviet Union and Poland and settled in New York in 1934. He was the second of six children in a family of Yiddish writers that included his elder sister, Esther Singer Kreitman, and his younger brother, Isaac

Bashevis Singer. (Two younger sisters died when they were toddlers; Moshe, the youngest son, died along with his mother and his wife when they were sent to Siberia after the 1939 partition of Poland.) Singer's reputation as a Yiddish writer eclipsed those of his siblings. Although Bashevis Singer may be more famous among English readers, his older brother was unquestionably the more heralded writer in his own day. Singer's works were translated and met with favorable reviews in both the Yiddish and English press. He died on February 10, 1944, when he was just fifty years old. News of his untimely death appeared in the Yiddish and English press in the United States, often alongside increasingly horrifying news from Europe.

Singer received a traditional Jewish education and worked at various times as an unskilled laborer, a proofreader, a painter, and a writer of stories, novels, essays, travelogues, and literary sketches. He was raised by parents who were learned in Jewish texts and were, by all accounts, ill-matched. They embodied the opposing poles of Eastern European Jewish religious life. His father, Pinchas Mendel, was a follower of Hasidism, a movement characterized by its devotion to a *tsadik* (a "righteous man") and by its enthusiastic, emotional expression of religious devotion. His mother, Batsheva (from whom Isaac Bashevis Singer derived his nom de plume), adhered to the misnagdic [religious opponents of Hasidism] teachings in which she had been raised. Misnagdim were characterized by their devotion to rationalism, learning, and skepticism regarding what they considered the excesses of hasidic practice. Singer rejected both his father's hasidic enthusiasm and its opposite, his mother's misnagdic rationalism. His father was described by him and both of his siblings as the warmer and more gentle parent, but also as naïve and something of a simpleton in worldly matters. Batsheva, on the other hand, was seen as harsher, more aloof than her husband, "*a froy mit a mansbilishn kop*," [a woman with a masculine head], as Singer described her. For Singer, the conflict between his father's passion and his mother's reason meant they had reversed expected gender roles. He summed it up most pointedly when he wrote, "My parents would have been

a well-matched pair, if my mother had been my father and my father, my mother" (*Of A World That is No More*). The siblings, he claimed, put things right because he and his brother were like their unsentimental mother, and his sister was more given to what he considered the emotional excesses of their father.

Singer began writing stories in his early twenties but entered onto the world stage when he published the short story "Perl" (*Pearls*). Written in Kiev in 1920, near the end of his two-year sojourn in the newly established Soviet Union, the story did not find favor among Soviet Yiddish literati who derided it as too bourgeois. But when the story was published in Warsaw, it came to the attention of Abraham Cahan, the powerful editor of the New York Yiddish daily *Forverts*, who reprinted it in his newspaper and offered Singer a position as a correspondent. From 1923 until his death, Singer published serialized novels and short stories in the paper, as well as scores of feature articles or feuillets under his own name and the pseudonym G. Kuper, his wife's (Genya Kuper) maiden name. He published in Warsaw as well, testament to the geographical scope of Yiddish literature in those decades. Singer returned to the Soviet Union in 1927 and described the life he found there in articles for the *Forverts* that were later published as *Nay Rusland* (*New Russia*, 1928). After meeting Cahan in Berlin in 1931, he visited the United States at the editor's invitation in the same year (1932) that the extraordinarily successful stage production of his novel *Yoshe Kalb* appeared. He intended to return to New York with his family but was delayed by the illness and death of his eldest son, Yasha. In March 1934, Singer, his wife and eleven-year-old son Joseph were finally able to settle in New York. Joseph Singer translated several of his father's works (and those of his uncle) into English. Singer brought his brother to the United States a year later, but never again saw other members of his family.

Singer died when Yiddish culture and the Jewish world were in mourning. Just two decades earlier he had entered a vibrant Yiddish cultural world that was international, mobile, and often announced its independence from all that had come before. When he began

his literary career, the most well-known Yiddish writers were the recently deceased so-called *klasikers* [classicists] Sh.Y. Abramovitch (1836–1917, also called by the name of his most famous creation, Mendele Moykher Sforim), Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916), and I.L. Peretz (1852–1915). But this was also the era in which self-proclaimed avant-garde artists and writers could be found throughout the Yiddish speaking world. In Vitebsk (Belarus), prominent artists such as Marc Chagall and El Lissitzky were part of the Russian avant-garde. Like these artists, groups of Yiddish writers asserted that they were producing a new, modern culture no longer bound by the satire, humor, or calls for social reform that many associated with *di klasikers*. The names of some of these short-lived but influential literary circles made their cultural stance clear: *di yunge* [the youth] in New York, *yung Vilne* [Young Vilna], *yung Yiddish* [Young Yiddish] in Lodz, and *di khalyastre* [The Gang] in Warsaw, to which Singer belonged.

Singer's fame waned in the immediate years following his death. The themes of which he wrote, his critique of Jewish life, and his despair about the future were hardly likely to attract readers after the Holocaust. This was a time for mourning and attempts at consolation, and Singer died before he could memorialize those who had perished or offer solace to those who had survived.

* * *

Singer's early works included the symbolist drama *Erdvey* [(*Earth Pangs*, 1922)]; the short-story collections *Perl un andere Dertseylungen* (*Pearls and other Stories*, 1922) and *Af Fremder Erd* (*On Foreign Ground*, 1925), and the travelogue *Nay Rusland* (*New Russia*, 1928). His first novel, *Shtol un Ayzn* (*Steel and Iron*, 1927) was published in *Forverts* and generated considerable controversy about the place of politics in fiction. Accused of not understanding politics and convinced that his critics were merely political hacks, Singer bitterly renounced Yiddish literature, proclaiming that he was turning to journalism and to other languages instead. But only four years later he published his second

novel, *Yoshe Kalb* (1932). *Savinkov: drame in 12 bilder* (*Savinkov: a play in 12 scenes*) appeared in the Warsaw publication *Globus* in 1933, just before his departure from Poland. He published three more novels after his arrival in the United States: *Di Brider Ashkenazi* (*The Brothers Ashkenazi*, 1936), *Khaver Nakhmen* (*East of Eden*, 1938); and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* (*The Family Carnovsky* 1943). The success of *Yoshe Kalb* on the Yiddish stage was followed by dramatic adaptations of his subsequent novels: *Di Brider Ashkenazi* was first performed in 1938, *Khaver Nakhmen* in 1939, and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* in 1943. In addition, a collection of stories, *Friling* (*Spring*, 1937) appeared in Warsaw and two more books appeared posthumously in New York: his autobiographical memoir *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* (*Of A World That Is No More*, 1946), and *Dertseylungen* (*Stories*, 1949).

Singer is best known for the four novels that followed *Shtol un Ayzn*. *Khaver Nakhmen* is an uncompromising rejection of Soviet communism, exposing the hypocrisy and corruption of its leaders and those who follow them. *Yoshe Kalb* is a psychologically astute novel about an enigmatic figure. *Di Brider Ashkenazi* and *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski* are family sagas that present a view of Jewish history as inexorably cyclical, repeating itself in every generation, even when the rest of the world moves on. Written in the first years of Nazi rule in Germany, *Di Brider Ashkenazi* traces the history of twin brothers and the industrial city of Lodz. Singer's last novel, *Di Mishpokhe Karnovski*, was written with knowledge of what Yiddish writers called the *khurbn* [destruction]. It traces the fates of three generations, following the family from a Polish shtetl to Berlin to New York and ending almost at the moment of publication.

Translations of Singer's works appeared in Europe, North and South America, and beyond. Almost everything he wrote was translated into English, sometimes twice. *Shtol un Ayzn* was published in 1935 by his sister's son, Morris Kreitman, as *Blood Harvest* and again in 1969 as *Steel and Iron*, this time by his own son, Joseph Singer. *The Brothers Ashkenazi* first appeared in Maurice Samuel's 1936 translation and was then re-translated in 1980, again by Joseph Singer. Other

languages into which Singer was translated include Hebrew, German, Polish, Russian, French, Spanish, and Italian. More surprisingly perhaps, some titles also appeared in Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Japanese, Norwegian, Persian, Serbian, and Swedish.

In his prose fiction and in numerous essays, Singer was consistent in viewing social reality as the primary constraint on artistic creativity and also its primary subject. Also consistent was his disavowal of any political solution to the problems besetting contemporary Jews. The corrupting influence of politics always seemed more acute to Singer within Yiddish culture than in other cultures because the Jews were, he explained, always living *in extremis*, forced to respond to uniquely cataclysmic upheavals. At times Singer suggested, somewhat disingenuously, that he sought only to tell interesting stories. He did so by examining the political and cultural upheavals in Jewish life between the two world wars and on two continents. For Jews, as for the populations amongst whom they lived, the interwar period was rife with economic uncertainty, internecine conflicts leading up to and following the Russian Revolution, migration, and U.S. restrictions on immigration. Singer's works focus on the fate of the Jews during these times of seemingly endless wars, class conflicts, pogroms, shifts in borders, and political strife.

Singer's harshest criticism was leveled at those who believed in any messianic solution for these problems. Here, too, the choices – all of them lacking in Singer's view – were many. The fervor of the religious belief in the coming of the Messiah, and the political belief that socialism, Zionism, territorialism, secularism, or Yiddish culturalism were the paths to redemption all seemed equally illusory or unattainable to him. Messianism of any kind suggested a linear, teleological view of history that was at odds with his view of Jewish history as endlessly repetitive. In 1942, as the dreadful news from Poland was uppermost in his mind, he briefly embraced Zionism as an ideal but remained unconvinced that it could become a practical solution to the plight of the Jews. In a letter to his friend and literary colleague Melekh Ravitch he wrote despairingly, "I don't believe there is a cure for us. I

have the diagnosis but not the cure.” Singer was certainly not unique in voicing such despair about life in the Diaspora or the possibility of an antidote. It is indeed difficult to imagine what a Yiddish writer, living in New York, haunted by the fate of his family in Poland, might have embraced as a curative. Singer was a realist in both his narrative art and his political skepticism. He was not arguing against faith or hope, but rather against illusive panaceas. Instead, his stories assert the modern Yiddish writer’s responsibility to articulate and analyze the dilemmas with which his characters and readers must grapple. They insist on the imperative to face the present times and to make compelling, thought-provoking stories out of that reality.

* * *

Di Mishpokhe Karnovski, first serialized in the *Forverts* between October 24, 1940 and May 13, 1941, is I.J. Singer’s last novel and was translated by his son, Joseph Singer, almost thirty years after its publication. It is a family saga spanning fifty years in the lives of three generations of men whose connections to Jewish ethnic and religious identity are inexorably attenuated. Their story ends almost at the moment of publication: the Nazis have come to power; the grandfather left his shtetl for Berlin and now the family must leave Berlin for New York. The novel foreshadows a familiar post-Holocaust trope – that the war showed how benighted were those who believed that pursuing *Haskala* (Enlightenment) ideals would end Jewish persecution and allow Jews all the benefits of citizenship. Schematic in its three-part presentation of place and character, it begins in the shtetl of Melnitz – described as the locus of ignorance and superstition – and with David Carnovsky, a Jew committed to the teachings of Moses Mendelssohn and the *Haskala*. For him, Germany is the site of “the golden mean,” the only place where one can be a Jew learned in both Torah and philosophy. He names his son Moses Georg as a sign that he will be raised – as the Jewish Enlightenment enjoined – to be “a Jew at home and a man in the street.” Georg, as he insists on being

called, rejects his father's beliefs and considers himself a German citizen, free of religious restraints. But he quickly learns that he is considered a Jew on the street as well. His own son, Jegor, is repelled by all things Jewish, particularly the physical mark of the Jewish male he keeps hidden from all but can never escape. In his mind, circumcision, dark hair, and his father's features overwhelm the physical and spiritual beauty of all he has inherited from his Christian mother's Teutonic ancestors.

Repeatedly, the middle ground David seeks is revealed as illusory. The Jew he most admires, Reb Ephraim, devotes his life to two projects: a Hebrew compendium to the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and a German book explaining Judaism to the broader world. Neither can be completed. There are no compromises or syntheses possible in the trajectory the novel traces. Even languages point in only one direction. Like his mentor Mendelssohn, David rejects Yiddish in favor of German which will soon be supplanted by English. He is the last member of his family to understand the Hebrew of religious texts and ritual. As members of each generation move further away from the Jewish world, they find it increasingly difficult to adjust to the new worlds they enter. Inverting the path more commonly associated with assimilation, David's adjustment to America is easier than that of his son's. And the youngest Carnovsky, Jegor, cannot adapt to his new environment at all. By contrast, a minor character like the good-natured Solomon Burak is successful everywhere because he remains firmly rooted in the sensibilities and customs of Melnitz regardless of where he is. He and David fare well in the New World, Singer suggests, because they can depend on the teachings of the Old. They are unabashed Jews, unconflicted about their identities.

Understandably, given its time of composition and publication, Germany under the Nazis is depicted as the site of corruption, madness, degeneracy. This, of course, is how the Nazis depicted Jews. Singer not only rejects such depictions of Jews, but also turns them back on the people to whom he insists they rightly belong. It is disturbing to note how often these signs of degeneracy are linked

to homosexuality as Germans make repellent, often violent sexual advances on the Jewish men they consider inferior, but nonetheless desire. The promise of *Haskala* is belied by the rise of the Nazis who are symbolically contained in the novel by sexual images of impotence and shamefulness. German men may profess the myth of Aryan purity and strength, but they are depicted as weak and effeminate.

Singer sent parts of the novel to Abraham Cahan of the *Forverts* for serialization before it was completed, and he was uncertain about how to end it. What would it mean if the characters embraced their new American identities or, on the contrary, found it impossible to do so? Would Jegor's self-loathing lead to suicide? Would he seek to know more about Judaism and return to the family fold, or embrace his German identity and turn to the Nazis? The focus on Jegor at the end is particularly revealing of the narrative impasse Singer had reached. The novel displaces the terror of contemporary history and politics onto the more comprehensible view of a disturbed adolescent. It is difficult but may nonetheless be possible to address – perhaps even redress – personal trauma and psychic disorder. In this way, the writer grapples with the trauma and disorder of history.



Book I

David

Chapter 1

The Carnovskys of Greater Poland were known for being stubborn and contrary but nevertheless considered sages and scholars with minds like steel traps.

Their genius was reflected in their high scholarly foreheads and their deep-set and restless black eyes. The stubbornness and contrariness exuded from their noses – powerful, oversized noses that jutted from their lean bony faces with a mockery and arrogance that seemed to say, “Look, but don’t touch.” Because of this stubbornness, none of the Carnovskys became rabbis, although they easily could have. Instead, they turned to trade. For the most part they became appraisers in the forests or rode the rafts down the Vistula, often as

far as Danzig. In the small shacks that the raftsmen built for them on the floating logs, they carried Talmuds and books of law that they studied with a passion. This same stubbornness led them to take a strong interest in mathematics and philosophy, and even in books printed in German. Although they were merely well-off, they married their sons to the daughters of the richest families in Greater Poland. David Carnovsky was picked off by the daughter of Leib Milner, the biggest lumber merchant in Melnitz.

On the very first Sabbath after the wedding, when the new bridegroom had been escorted to the house of worship, he managed to antagonize the rabbi and the town's ranking citizens.

Although a native of Greater Poland, David Carnovsky, the Hebrew scholar and grammarian, recited the chapter of Isaiah in the Book of Prophets in a Lithuanian accent and with such grammatic precision that the hasidic Jews in the house of prayer became irked. When the prayer was over, the rabbi let the young man know that here, in his domain, this form of Hasid-baiting was not looked on with favor.

"You must understand, young man," the rabbi pointed out maliciously, "that we hardly consider the Prophet Isaiah to have been a Litvak, and certainly no enemy of Hasidism."

"On the contrary, Rabbi," David Carnovsky said, "I can prove that he was indeed a Litvak and an anti-Hasid as well."

"Where is your proof?" asked the rabbi smugly as the influential citizens listened with curiosity to the dispute between him and the young stranger.

"It's simple," David Carnovsky said. "If Isaiah the Prophet had been a Polish Jew and a Hasid, he would have been unfamiliar with the rules of grammar and his writings would have reflected the erroneous Hebrew used by all ignorant Jews and hasidic rabbis."

To be so badly shown up by a callow youth before his whole congregation was something on which the rabbi had not reckoned, and from great vexation he began to stammer and to attempt a rebuttal. But his words were incoherent and only increased his panic. David Carnovsky gazed mockingly at the rabbi.

From that day, the rabbi feared the stranger. The affluent Melnitz Jews, who occupied the choice places near David Carnovsky and his father-in-law at the eastern wall of the house of worship, weighed every word they addressed to the sharp-tongued young man. But when, during one Sabbath, he introduced heresy into the house of worship, the rabbi and the town leaders came out openly against him.

It happened during the reading of the Torah, when the worshippers turn their heads from the eastern wall and, facing the lectern, silently repeat the section of the Pentateuch after the reader. David Carnovsky, replete in his new tallit that he wore draped not over his head but across his shoulders as befitted an anti-Hasid, was also silently reading from his Pentateuch when the book suddenly slipped from his hands. He bent to pick it up, but his neighbor, a Jew who seemed to consist of only a tallit and a beard, anticipated him. He swiftly pressed his lips to the open Pentateuch in apology to it for having fallen and was about to return it to its owner when he realized that he had kissed words such as he had never seen in any Pentateuch. They were neither Hebrew nor Yiddish. David Carnovsky held out his hand for his Pentateuch, but the Jew who was only tallit and beard turned it over to the rabbi to examine. The rabbi quickly scanned the book, turned to the title page, and grew red from shock and indignation. "Moses Mendelssohn's Pentateuch," he cried. "Moses Dessauer's *Biyur!* It is a blasphemy against God!" A great tumult and commotion erupted in the house of worship.

The reader rapped his hand against the desk to remind the congregation that they were in the midst of a prayer. The rabbi himself began to pound on the lectern for attention, but the men rumbled and seethed. For all the "shushes" and "well nows" and raps on the lectern, the din only grew louder. Seeing that no one was listening to him anyhow, the reader quickly raced through the required section of the Pentateuch, and the cantor, without his customary trills and quavers, concluded the additional service. As soon as they spat out the final "*Aleinu*" against the strange idols, and even before the prayer was properly ended, the house of worship began to buzz like a beehive.

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“Moses Dessauer’s forbidden book!” the rabbi seethed, pointing to David Carnovsky’s Pentateuch. “Such a thing has never been heard of in Melnitz... I will not permit the words of that Berlin apostate in *my* town!”

“Moshe Dessauer, may his memory be blotted out,” the Hasidim raged.

The unlearned Jews cocked their ears trying to determine what had happened. The Jew who was only prayer shawl and beard skimmed through the house of worship like an animated feather duster. “The minute I saw it I knew there was something wrong,” he announced for the hundredth time. “I sensed it immediately!”

“A fine son-in-law you’ve bought yourself, Reb Leib!” the influential citizens chided the town magnate.

Leib Milner was confused. In his tallit with its silver collar, with his white beard and gold-rimmed glasses, he was a picture of well-bred dignity. He could not comprehend what all the fuss was about. A son of leaseholders whose wealth had been recently acquired, he knew nothing of the Torah outside of the daily prayers. Somehow the word “*Biyur*” had reached his ears, but what sort of beer this was or what it had to do with his son-in-law was beyond him. “Rabbi, what’s going on here?” he pleaded.

The rabbi angrily pointed to the Pentateuch. “You see, Reb Leib, this Moses Mendelssohn of Dessau brought shame upon Israel!” he shouted. “He led Jews into apostasy with his blasphemous Torah!”

Although Leib Milner still did not understand who Moses of Dessau was, he gathered from the rabbi’s tone that he had been some sort of Jewish missionary who had led his son-in-law astray. He tried to restore peace in the house of worship.

“Men, my son-in-law, long may he live, obviously was not aware of the context of this book,” he said. “It isn’t fitting that Jews squabble in a house of worship. Let us rather go to our homes and make the Sabbath benedictions.”

But his son-in-law had no intention of going home and making the Sabbath benediction. He pushed his way through the crowd

toward the rabbi. "Give me back my Pentateuch," he said. "I demand that you return it."

The rabbi had no intention of returning the Pentateuch although he really did not know what to do with it. If it had been an ordinary forbidden book and this had not been the Sabbath, he would have ordered the beadle to light a fire in the stove and to burn the impurity before the entire congregation as the law directed. But this *was* the Sabbath, the blasphemy had been printed together with the Torah, heresy alongside the Holy Word. Still, he did not want to return the book to its owner. "No, young man, it will not see the light of day again!" he cried.

Again Leib Milner tried to intercede. "David, my son-in-law, what does a Pentateuch cost? I'll buy you ten more expensive Pentateuchs! Forget about it and come home."

But David Carnovsky was adamant. "No, Father-in-law," he said, "I will not let him keep this Pentateuch; not for anything in the world!"

Leib Milner tried another approach. "David, Leah is waiting at home for your benediction," he said. "She'll perish from hunger."

But David Carnovsky was so embroiled in controversy he didn't even remember his Leah. His eyes blazed. He was ready to take on the world for his convictions. At first he demanded that the rabbi show him even one word of heresy in the book. Then he began to quote the Torah skillfully to show that the rabbi and the influential citizens neither knew nor were capable of understanding even one word of Moses Mendelssohn's writings. He then fell into such a rage that he claimed that Rabbi Mendelssohn, blessed be his memory, possessed more Torah, wisdom, and fear of God in his little toe than the rabbi and all of his congregation together.

With this statement, the young stranger went too far. The fact that he had defamed the rabbi and the pious Jews and that in a house of worship he had called a heretic "rabbi" and blessed his memory, so severely tried the patience of the Hasidim that they seized him by the arms and escorted him to the door. "Go to hell along with your rabbi, may his name be blotted out!" they cried after him. "Go to that Berlin convert, cursed be his memory!"

And David Carnovsky did just that.

Although he still was entitled to a long period of board at the home of his in-laws, he did not want to remain in a town in which he had suffered such humiliation. His father-in-law pleaded with him, promised that they would leave the house of worship and pray at the synagogue where the men were more modern and progressive. He would even form his own *minyán* at home if David insisted. Leah, David's wife, begged him not to take her away from her parents' house. But David Carnovsky was adamant. "I will not spend another day among these savages and ignoramuses," he insisted, "even if you offer me a roomfull of gold!"

In his anger, he called the men of Melnitz every name he had learned in his worldly books: benighted denizens of the Dark Ages, idolaters, asses.

Not only did he want to abandon the town that had so disgraced him, but all of Poland, which was steeped in darkness and ignorance. For a long time he had been drawn to Berlin – the city in which the sainted Moses Mendelssohn had once lived and from which he had spread his light across the world. From early childhood, when David Carnovsky had studied German from Mendelssohn's Pentateuch, he had been drawn to that land across the border that was the source of all goodness, knowledge, and light. Later, when he was older and helped his father in the lumber business, he often had to read German letters from Danzig, Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin. Each time he did this, a strange feeling of sorcery came over him. The *Hochwollgeborn* that preceded each name breathed of great nobility and grace. Even the colorful postage stamps bearing the portrait of the strange Kaiser evoked within him a longing for this alien yet familiar land. Now he saw an opportunity to fulfill this longing. He proposed to his father-in-law that he pay him the balance of the dowry, which would allow him to resettle across the border.

At first Leib Milner would not hear of it. He wanted his children and his sons- and daughters-in-law by his side. His wife, Nehama, stopped up her ears to drown out such talk. *That's all she needed – to*

let her Leah go to some foreign country! They could offer her the moon and the stars – she wouldn't agree to it... She shook her head so vigorously that her long earrings whipped her cheeks. But David Carnovsky persisted. With a torrent of words, with erudition and logic and a flurry of arguments, he harangued his in-laws. Leib Milner could not long bear up under such pressure, but Nehama wouldn't capitulate so easily. *No and double no!* she insisted. *Not even if it should lead to a divorce!* But at this, Leah herself interceded. "Mama," she said, "I will go wherever my David will tell me."

Nehama hung her head and burst into tears. Leah clung to her mother's neck and cried with her.

As usual, David Carnovsky got his way. Leib Milner paid him the entire dowry, some twenty thousand rubles. With the same persuasiveness, David convinced his father-in-law to go into business with him and to ship him lumber to Germany on rafts and wagons. Nehama baked batches of cakes and cookies and packed innumerable bottles of juice and preserves, as if her daughter were going off into a wilderness and needed to be provided with the good things of life for years to come. David Carnovsky trimmed his beard to a point, put on a derby and a jacket cut to the knees, bought a top hat for Sabbaths and holidays, and ordered a frock coat with silk lapels.

Within only a few short years David Carnovsky managed several notable achievements in the strange city in which he had settled. To begin with, he learned a fluent German, the German of lumber tycoons, bankers, and officials. Second, he prospered in the business and became an important member of that industry. Third, he completed a Gymnasium course from textbooks, a goal to which he had long aspired. And fourth because of his knowledge and erudition, he made the acquaintance of the leaders of the community in the synagogue in which he prayed – not raggedy Eastern Jews but the distinguished descendants of long-settled German Jewry.

His elegant apartment located in front of the house on Oranienburger Strasse became a gathering place for savants and scholars. The walls of his study were lined from ceiling to floor with books, for the

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main part old prayer books and rare volumes that he purchased from the book dealer, Ephraim Walder, on Dragonerstrasse in the Jewish Quarter. Not only the rabbi of the synagogue, Dr. Speier, but other scholars and learned men – librarians, seminarians, and even the aged Professor Breslauer, the oldest member of the Theological Seminary – all gathered here to discuss the Torah and the wisdom of Israel.

When, after three years, his wife Leah bore him his first son, David Carnovsky gave him two names: Moses, after Moses Mendelssohn, a name by which the boy would be called up to the Torah when he grew older; and a German name, Georg, a corruption of his father's name, Gershon, a name with which he could go among people and use in business.

“Be a Jew in the house and a man in the street,” the father of the circumcised child exhorted his son in both Hebrew and German, as if to make sure the infant understood.

The invited guests nodded their heads in approval.

“Yes, yes, my dear Herr Carnovsky,” said Dr. Speier, stroking his tiny beard that was as thin and pointed as a pencil, “ever the golden mean. A Jew among Jews and a German among Germans.”

“Ever the golden mean,” the men agreed, and tucked the snowy napkins beneath their high stiff collars in anticipation of the feast to follow.

Chapter 2

Leah Carnovsky's greatest joy was to hear her child praised, especially when someone remarked on the boy's resemblance to his father.

Although in the five years since the birth of her darling son she had heard countless such compliments, she longed to hear them again and again.

"Look, Emma," she said, and drew her maid away from her work to look at the boy as if for the first time. "Isn't he the sweetest thing?"

"Certainly, Mistress."

"The image of his father, isn't he, Emma?"

"But of course, Mistress."

Like all women, Emma knew that mothers loved to be told that their offspring resembled their fathers, but in this instance no lie was necessary – little Georg was the image of David Carnovsky. His burning black eyes were prematurely framed by brows that were too thick and too sharply etched for a child. The stubborn and arrogant Carnovsky nose jutted prematurely from the childish face. His hair, which his mother would not allow to be cut, was actually blue in its blackness. Emma tried to find some trace of the mother in the boy but it was not easy. Leah Carnovsky had light brown hair, pale skin, gray eyes that occasionally changed to green, and a quality of feminine goodness in her rounded face and figure.

"His mouth is exactly like the Mistress's," Emma said finally, to indicate at least a trace of the mother in the boy.

But Leah would not concede even that. “No, the father’s mouth,” she insisted. “Look for yourself, Emma.”

The women began to examine the boy, who was hard at play astride a wooden horse. The youngster became aware of the women’s inspection, felt his own importance, and stuck out his tongue. Emma was offended. “You fresh little devil!” she reprimanded him.

The boy’s swarthiness reminded her of Satan. Leah Carnovsky felt such a surge of maternal rapture at the boy’s impudent gesture that she hugged him to her bosom and showered him with burning kisses. “Joy, happiness, treasure, my prince, may I suffer your every pain, my sweet little Moshele,” she cooed and pressed the boy’s head to her bosom.

Little Georg tried to tear loose from her arms and kicked his legs against his mother’s lap. “Let me go, Mutti, I must go to my horse!”

He didn’t like it when his mother kissed him so passionately and tweaked his cheeks. He liked it even less when she spoke strange words that he did not understand and called him by unfamiliar names. Besides, everyone called him Georg. Only his mother spoke so strangely. He could not bear it. “I’m not Moshele, I’m Georg!” he corrected her angrily, for which Leah rewarded him with kisses on both his eyes. “Bad boy, wicked boy, obstinate Carnovsky *akshun*, Moshele, Moshele, Moshele,” she murmured.

To mollify him, she gave him a chunk of chocolate, although her David had given strict orders that the boy should not be given sweets. The lad bit into the chocolate and in his delight forgot about the despised name. He even let his mother kiss him as much as she liked.

When the wall clock in the dining room struck eight, Leah took the boy to bed. Emma offered to do it but Leah would not give up this pleasure. She washed the chocolate from his hands and face, took off the sailor suit, and dressed him in a nightshirt that reached to his toes. Setting him astride her neck, she carried him from one *mezuzah* to the other so that he might kiss them before going to sleep. Little Georg kissed the *mezuzas*. He did not know what they were but he

knew that if he kissed them, good angels would come to his bedside and watch over him the whole night through.

Besides, the *mezuzas* were sheathed in small, shiny tubes that he enjoyed touching. But when his mother began to read the bedtime prayer with him, he was overcome with laughter. The Hebrew syllables seemed even funnier than the Yiddish words and he repeated them in reverse. He grew hysterical with laughter when his mother cast her eyes to the ceiling and drew out the phrase, “God is one.” She reminded him of a fowl drinking water and he began to cluck like a hen, transforming the holy words into a chicken’s “cut, cut, cut, cut...”

Leah Carnovsky grew pale. She was afraid that the good angels whom she had summoned to guard over her child’s bed – Michael on the right, Gabriel on the left, Ariel at the head, and Raphael at the foot – might take revenge upon the boy. Don’t do this, my child,” she entreated him. “Repeat after me, my treasure: ‘With your whole heart and soul.’”

“Belebebeche chelelecheche,” the boy said, and shrieked a loud, piercing laugh that penetrated to all the rooms of the apartment.

Despite her fear of blasphemy, Leah could not contain herself and burst out laughing. She felt that she was sinning but she could never resist joining in when someone laughed, and she laughed until the tears came. But soon she reminded herself that her David was liable to hear her in his study and she knew that he hated laughter. Besides, he was entertaining important visitors, and she muffled her face in Georg’s pillow.

“Go to sleep! Go to sleep!” she admonished the overstimulated boy and kissed him from head to toe. First, his every finger, then, his every toe. Finally, she turned him over on his stomach and planted a kiss on his very bottom. “Sweet as honey,” she sighed.

After covering him and begging God’s forgiveness for the boy’s foolish antics, she headed for the dining room, exhausted from the maternal emotion and the laughter.

“Emma, tea for the gentlemen!” she ordered.

Rearranging herself and fixing her hair, she went into her husband's study to serve refreshments to his guests. Only men were present, all of them senior to her husband by many years. They wore black knee-length coats and snowy linen. Most of them wore glasses.

One patriarch wore a tiny skullcap and smoked a long, porcelain pipe that made him look like a small-town rabbi, but at the same time he spoke a very elegant German and was a professor.

"Good evening, Herr Professor!" said Leah, blushing.

"Good evening, my daughter, good evening," said Professor Breslauer, his ruddy, childish face shining among the thickets of snow-white hair and beard.

Afterwards, she greeted the other men who, although they were dressed like gentiles, were clean-shaven, and spoke German, retained the appearance of yeshiva students. But their manner was very worldly and they addressed Frau Carnovsky with exaggerated politeness.

"Good evening, gracious lady!" they said, bowing awkwardly. "How are you?"

Each of them took a tiny skullcap from his pocket, put it on to make the benediction over the food, and promptly put it back. They made the benediction very quietly, barely moving their lips, except for Professor Breslauer, who intoned it aloud. And just as loudly he complimented Frau Carnovsky on her homemade strudel. "Ah, you're a master baker," he said. "Such genuine Jewish strudel I haven't tasted in sixty years. You have a clever wife, Herr Carnovsky."

The men nodded agreement. The only one to outdo Professor Breslauer's compliments to Frau Carnovsky was the rabbi, Dr. Speier. Stroking his beard, he commended not only her strudel but her beauty as well. "The praiseworthy Frau Carnovsky surpasses the proverbial Woman of Valor. Because of the other it is written that her grace is deceitful and her beauty is vain and only her virtues are praised. But the esteemed Frau Carnovsky is the kind of valorous woman whose grace and beauty are not deceitful and vain but go hand in hand with her moral virtues."

Professor Breslauer beamed. “You are a real ladies’ man, my dear Rabbi Speier,” he admonished him, wagging a finger roguishly. “Be careful I do not tell your wife...”

Everyone laughed and enjoyed the repartee, which was a welcome respite after the Torah and the wisdom. But not the host, David Carnovsky. Although he was younger than the others and his face still reflected energy and vitality, he could not abide idle chatter. He wanted to tell his guests about a rare volume he had found among the trash at Reb Ephraim Walder’s bookstore and he could not bear time wasted chatting with a female. “I want you to know, gentlemen,” he interrupted, “that I have located a remarkable old *Midrash Tanhuma*, published in the year –”

Leah left the study. About *Midrash Tanhuma* she had nothing to say. Besides, she knew that her David did not like her to linger in his study when he entertained distinguished visitors. To this day she did not speak German well. She made errors and interjected expressions from Melnitz and caused her husband great embarrassment. Therefore she hurriedly left the room, somewhat ashamed of herself. Despite all the extravagant compliments, she felt like a servant who had finished her tasks and been dismissed.

The chandelier in the dining room cast dark shadows and Leah was filled with a deep sorrow when she sat down to darn her husband’s socks. Although she had lived for years in this strange city, she was still as lonely as when she first came. She still longed for her parents’ house, for her girlfriends, for the town where she had been born and raised. Her husband treated her well. He was faithful to her and provided her with all the good things, but he had little time for her. During the day he was occupied with his business; at night, with his books or his guests with whom he discussed Torah and wisdom. She understood neither his business nor his Torah. Her neighbors were strangers to her and Leah did not know to whom to turn in her loneliness. She seldom went out with her husband. Only during the holidays they went to the synagogue together – he in his top hat, she in her holiday finery and jewelry. They strolled slowly, arm in arm,

and on the way they met other couples walking with festive calmness and serenity. The men tipped their hats, the women nodded. But that was the extent of it.

Although she was companionable, good-natured, and liked to laugh, Leah could not make friends with the respectable ladies from the synagogue. She felt alien among them and afraid. And just as alien to her were the prayers of the cantor in the synagogue. Although they were said in Hebrew, they sounded as if they were spoken by a priest. The choir and Dr. Speier's sermons felt just as un-Jewish to her. Rigid and icy, the rabbi spoke with an assumed fervor and broad gestures that were incongruous with his stiff face and figure. He also used a highly exalted German full of flowery phrases and quotations from German writers and philosophers, seasoned with verses from the Scriptures and excerpts from prayer books. The women of the synagogue were enthralled with Dr. Speier. "How divine he is!" they gushed. "Don't you find it so, Frau Carnovsky?"

"Yes, of course," Leah agreed, but she did not understand a word of what she had heard. Neither did she understand the prayer book in German translation, which, to her, did not transmit Yiddishkeit. The synagogue, the Holy Ark, the Torah, and even God Himself, seemed alien in this luxurious, churchlike edifice. Just like her mother back home, she was eager to indulge her familiarity with her beloved God and to call Him "Papa." But she dared not do this in the heathen palace that seemed more like a bank than the Lord's house.

David Carnovsky was very proud of his synagogue and its distinguished congregation. Not only did its leading members treat him as an equal, they had even made him an officer of the synagogue's board of directors. From time to time they gave him the honor of helping the reader remove the Torah from the Holy Ark and replacing it after the reading. In addition, he pointed with the *silveryad* [italicized], or *fescue*, to the proper page during the reading. The men shook his hand afterward, as is the custom, and greeted him with a "Good Sabbath," and David Carnovsky felt highly exalted because of these honors. After the Melnitz house of worship and its boorish worshipers, it

was to him a great achievement to win such respect from the honored old citizens of Berlin – the magnates, scholars, and men of enlightenment – and he wanted Leah to share in his glory and to feel proud. But Leah felt uneasy with her husband's friends – uneasy and lost.

She felt even more uncomfortable during their visits to Dr. Speier's house, to which they were occasionally invited. The rabbi's wife was very pious, even though her husband was a Reform rabbi. She not only prayed three times a day but kept washing her hands and making benedictions over each glass of coffee, each sweet and fruit. She was a great student of literature and, like her husband, quoted writers freely and recited poetry from memory. A native of Frankfurt and the product of generations of rabbis, she was steeped in erudition that she showed off like a scholarly man. Because she was barren she never discussed children, but spoke of the wisdom and learning of her great-grandfathers, the rabbis. She was also familiar with the genealogy of all the better Jewish families, not only in Frankfurt and Berlin but throughout the whole country. She knew who stemmed from whom, who was betrothed to whom, and how much everyone was worth. Her guests were just as distinguished and wellborn as she. They were for the most part elderly women who were no longer interested in fashion, pregnancies, and child bearing and spoke of engagements, dowries, wedding gifts, and family trees. The rabbi's wife dominated the conversation. She pontificated rather than spoke, frequently quoting her father or grandfather. "As my late grandfather, the famous Rabbi of Frankfurt, once remarked in his famous Sabbath of Repentance sermon..." she said every other sentence.

Leah Carnovsky had nothing to say regarding her ancestors, who were leaseholders in obscure Polish villages. In order to get a word in, she occasionally tried to describe some of her son's antics but the rabbi's wife wanted no part of such talk. Leah Carnovsky breathed freely when she left the rabbi's house. "David," she begged her husband as they walked home, "don't take me along on these visits again, David dear."

David Carnovsky flared up at her: "For God's sake, speak German!"

To him, German signified light, culture, Moses Mendelssohn, and the highest form of Yiddishkeit, while Leah's jargon reminded him of the rabbi of Melnitz, the cult of Hasidism, of stupidity and ignorance. Besides, he was afraid to be mistaken for an inhabitant of Dragonerstrasse. Only after they came home did he lecture his wife sternly. For the hundredth time he prompted her to remember her position. She was no longer some insignificant little housewife from Melnitz but the wife of David Carnovsky, a friend of old Berlin families. He could not go visiting by himself like some aged roué who was separated from his wife. They had to go together, as was fitting and proper among people of standing. She had to accustom herself to converse with educated people and to associate with respectable ladies. She also had to improve herself and read as he did, so that she would not disgrace him. Above all, she had to improve her speech, her grammar, and always speak German instead of that Melnitz Yiddish that crippled her pronunciation. She had to acclimatize herself to this new world just as he had. No one could possibly detect that he was a stranger. Leah listened to her husband's complaints and accusations and did not know what to say in her own defense. She felt wretched.

As usual when she was depressed, she wrote long letters in a homely Yiddish to her parents, to her sisters, to her brother in America, to relatives, to her girlfriends back home, and poured into them all her sorrow and longing.

David could not understand how his wife could find so much to write. True, he also wrote a lot, but only concerning important matters – business correspondence, orders for lumber, or scholarly commentaries. What possibly could fill the letters of such a simple woman was beyond him. Still, he said nothing to her but, examining a page out of curiosity, chuckled at her errors in spelling and ran his warm, tanned hand over her silky hair. Leah nuzzled up to him with her soft, feminine body. "David, love me," she pleaded. "Whom else have I but you?"

Caught up in the emotion of love, Carnovsky forgot wisdom and respectability. But one thing he did not forget was his German. Even

in moments of great ecstasy he whispered endearments to Leah in that language. She was offended – his words of endearment in that strange, guttural tongue were repugnant to her. They did not contain the true flavor of love.