INTRODUCTION

A YOUTH FROM PRAGUE AMONG THE CHASIDIM

Scenes from everyday life are scarcely to be found in these pages. Rather you will feel that you have been transported for a while to some far-off, exotic country where different flowers grow and different stars shine, to some primeval age in which reality was a dream and a dream was reality.

Yet that is not quite how it is. Everything happened in our immediate neighborhood and not so very long ago; almost, one might say, only a moment ago. For in literary creation, which can survey more than three thousand years in the mirror of history, seventy years or a hundred and fifty years are nothing more than a moment!

It is an impassable road to the empire of the *chasidim*. The traveler who pushes his way through the thick undergrowth of virgin forests, inexperienced and inadequately armed, is not more daring than the man who resolves to penetrate the world of the *chasidim*, mean in appearance, even repellent in its eccentricity.

Only a few children of the West have accomplished this journey, hardly as many—when I come to think of it—as there are fingers on the hand that writes these lines.

One summer's day in 1913, a nineteen-year-old youth, brought up like all the youth of his time in the dying traditions of the pre-war generation, left Prague inspired by a secret longing that even now, after the passage of so many years, he still cannot explain to himself, and set out for the East, for strange countries.

Had he a foreboding of what he was losing on that day?

European civilization with its comforts and achievements, its

living successes called careers? Had he a foreboding that his soul would no longer be capable of feeling poetry that up to that time he had been so fond of quoting, that, from the first moment when he heard the rhythms of the chasidic songs, all the magic charms of music would be swamped once and for all, and all beautiful things that his eye had ever conceived would in the future be half hidden by the mystic veil of the knowledge of good and evil?

He hardly suspected that, at the very moment when he believed he had reached his goal, the most impassable part of his journey was only beginning. For the gate to the empire of the *chasidim* never opens suddenly for anyone. It is closed by a long chain of physical and spiritual suffering. But he who has once looked inside will never forget the riches he has seen.

The rulers of this empire are hidden from the eyes of the world. Their miraculous deeds and all-powerful words are only, as it were, of secondary importance—they are merely the hem of the veil in which their being is wrapped, while their faces are turned away from us toward the distant calm of the Absolute. Only a faint reflection of their souls falls on our too material shadows. Yet, even today, years afterward, these shapes haunt me one after the other. Not only those I knew personally but also those I have heard so much about and read about in the old Hebrew books; they rise again before me in all their greatness and strength. I feel overcome. Something compels me to take up my pen and faithfully write down everything as best I can.

It is a Friday afternoon. The small town of Belz, the Jewish Rome, is preparing to welcome the Sabbath.

Small towns in eastern Galicia have all had the same character for centuries. Misery and dirt are their characteristic outward signs. Poorly clad Ukrainian peasant men and women, Jews wearing side-whiskers, in torn caftans, rows of cattle and horses, geese and large pigs grazing undisturbed on the square. Belz is distinguished from other places only by its famous synagogue, its

no less famous House of Study, and the large house belonging to the town rabbi. These three buildings enclose the square on three sides. They are simply constructed. But in this poor, out-of-the-way region of the world, they are truly memorable. Belz has somewhat more than three thousand inhabitants, half of whom are Jews.

It is a long summer afternoon. There are still six or seven hours before dusk, when the Sabbath begins and even the lightest work is strictly forbidden. In spite of this, the shops are already shut, the tailors are putting away their needles, and the casual laborers—wearing side-whiskers like the rest—their hoes and spades. The housewives in the cottages are adding the last touches to their preparations for the festival.

The men hasten to the baths. After a steam bath we dive—always several of us at the same time—into a small muddy swimming-pool, a *mikveh*, or special ritual bath. As though in mockery of all the rules of hygiene, a hundred bodies are "purged" from the spirit of the working day. The water, like all the water in Belz, smells of sulphur and petroleum. . . .

Although everybody is in a tearing hurry on this day, the whole community already knows that a *bocher*, or young lad, has come to Belz all the way from Prague. A hundred questions are fired at me from every side. I am embarrassed because I do not understand a single word. I have never heard Yiddish spoken before, that bizarre mixture of medieval German and Hebrew, Polish and Russian. It was only later that I gradually began to learn it.

The Sabbath candles are already lit in the rabbi's house. I enter with the other guests—there is a long queue of them—to greet the saint for the first time. He has been told that I am the lad from Prague; indeed they have told him a very wonderful thing—that I have succeeded in plaiting (in the prescribed fashion, of course) four fringes to my *Leib-zidakl*, or vest, with my own hands. For this work of art he calls me to him once again.

Once again he shakes my hand, this time lingeringly, and regards me kindly. He looks at me with only one eye. The other eye is blind. It seems to me that a ray of light shines from his seeing eye and pierces me to the heart.

He is a sturdy, tall, old man, with broad shoulders and an unusual, patriarchal appearance, dressed in a caftan of fine silk, wearing, like all the other men, a *shtreimel*, a round fur hat worn on the Sabbath, on his head, round which hang thirteen short sable tails of dark brown color. (On weekdays, he wears a *spodek*, which is a tall, heavy velvet cap, worn by rabbis, similar to a grenadier's cap.)

Such is the welcome the youth from Prague receives from Rabbi Yissochor Ber Rokach—may his memory be blessed—the grandson of the holy Rabbi Sholem and perhaps the only person still living who can remember the old man. He addresses me in a kindly voice. I realize that he is asking me about Prague. Many years ago he was there with his father, to pray in the Old-New Synagogue and to visit the grave of his famous ancestor, the Great Rabbi Loev.

The spacious Belz synagogue has meanwhile filled with people. There are a hundred lighted candles. In a way the interior reminds me of the Old-New Synagogue in Prague. The men, for the most part tall and well built, old and young, await the arrival of the rabbi, talking quietly among themselves. In contrast to their weekday appearance, they are all absolutely clean. Their festive caftans of black silk reach down to the ground. On their heads the older ones wear *shtreimels*, which smell of the perfumed tobacco they carry in their tobacco pouches. Some are from Hungary, others from far away—from Russia. Owing to the bad state of the roads they have journeyed for weeks on end to get to Belz, and it may be that they will not be staying there more than a single day. The next day, Sunday, they will set out again on the wearisome journey home. Next Sabbath others will come in their place.

Dusk is already well advanced when the rabbi enters the

synagogue. The crowd quickly divides, to let him pass. Perhaps the waters of the Red Sea once divided in the same way before Moses.

With long, rapid strides he makes straight for the *bimah*, or reading desk, and the strange chasidic service begins.

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever."

These words from Psalm 107 are used every Friday by the *chasidim* when they greet the coming Sabbath. So it was ordained by the holy Baal Shem when he was delivered out of the hands of pirates on his abortive journey to the Holy Land.

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever."

It is as though an electric spark has suddenly entered those present. The crowd, which till now has been completely quiet, almost cowed, suddenly bursts forth in a wild shout. None stays in his place. The tall black figures run hither and thither round the synagogue, flashing past the lights of the Sabbath candles. Gesticulating wildly, and throwing their whole bodies about, they shout out the words of the psalm. They knock into each other unconcernedly, for all their cares have been cast aside; everything has ceased to exist for them. They are seized by an indescribable ecstasy.

Do I dream?—I have never seen anything like this before! Or maybe I have? . . . Have I perhaps been here before? . . . Everything is so peculiar, so incomprehensible!

"O give thanks unto the Lord! . . . whom He hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy; and gathered them out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south."

The voice of the old man at the *bimah* is heard clearly above all the rest. It expresses *everything*—in immense, joyous humility, and at the same time in infinitely sad longing, as though it would flow into the Infinite, as though the king's son, after being cast out for six days, were returning to face his royal Father. With deep sobs he does penance for our sins.

"They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them."

At this moment the power of the saint's prayers brings deliverance to the souls of those who for their great sins have found no peace after death, and been condemned to wander through the world. The *sparks* of the holy Wisdom of God, which fell into Nothingness when God destroyed the mysterious worlds that preceded the creation of our world, these sparks are now raised from the abyss of matter and returned to the spiritual Source from which they originally came.

"Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation. Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron. Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the Most High. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. O praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!"

The old man at the *bimah* raises his right hand as though to bless an unseen stranger. It is as though healing balsam flows from his quivering fingers.

"They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters. He raiseth the stormy wind which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths. They stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses. Then they are glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them unto a haven of hope. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men! . . . Come then, Beloved, come to meet thy Bride, let us hasten to greet the Sabbath! . . ."

The old man throws himself about as though seized by convulsions. Each shudder of his powerful body, each contraction of his muscles is permeated with the glory of the Most High.

Every so often he claps the palms of his hands together symbolically.

The crowd of the devout swirls and streams, hums and seethes like molten lava. Suddenly, as though at a word of command, all remain with their faces toward the west, toward the entrance of the synagogue, bowing their heads in expectation. It is at this moment that the invisible Queen of the Sabbath comes in, and brings to each of us a priceless heavenly gift: a second, new, festive *soul.*

"Come in peace, oh crown of the Lord, in the joy and exultation within the true ones of the chosen people! Come, oh Bride, come, oh Bride, come, oh Bride, Sabbath Queen!"

Once again we raise our heads.

"Come, Beloved, come to meet thy Bride. . . ."

The service ends. The ecstasy is over, the mystic vision has melted. Gone is the ecstasy. Now we are again in this world. But the whole world has been made sublime. Joy sparkles in the people's eyes. There is a festive, carefree atmosphere—the peace of the Queen Sabbath.

We walk past the saint in single file and wish him "good Sabbath!"

How hungry we all are!—That is because of the "second soul" that comes on the Sabbath. . . . We hasten to the inns to have a quick meal, so as to be in time at the saint's table. The stars have long since come out in the deep sky above the Ukrainian steppe. They are large like oranges.

The women are not in the synagogue. Their duty is to light the sacred Sabbath candles at home and wait for the return of their husbands and sons. They do not come out till the Saturday morning. We run into groups of them on the square—wearing traditional costumes in which the predominant colors are green, yellow, and white.

Let us not look at them too closely—neither the old women in their aprons and hoods, nor the girls, fair and dark, bareheaded!

They might wrongly interpret our attention, and that would cause no small scandal!

. . . On weekdays I spend most of my time at the *Bes Hamidrash*, or House of Study. It is open day and night for all who thirst after knowledge. The high shelves round the walls are stuffed full of books from the floor to the ceiling. The tables are littered with a jumbled mass of folios. Anyone may take out any book he likes and study in the *Bes Hamidrash* whenever he wishes. Here of course there are only holy, theological Hebrew books. A devout man would not touch any other. Even to know a single Latin or Russian letter is an indelible stain upon the soul. I sit and study the books from morning till evening, leaving them only for a short while to go to evening prayers or meals. Yet even the nights are not made for rest but—as the Talmud says—for the study of the Law of God. Spiteful insects remind me of this impressively enough as soon as I lie down. It is forbidden to kill insects. I already know that it would be a sin, so I prefer to go to the House of Study. I either study or listen to someone else, in another corner, reading aloud to himself in a drawling, plaintive chant. The *shames*, or caretaker, hands us round candles. We hold the lighted candles in our hands so as not to fall asleep over our studies.

One afternoon I dive into the ritual bath in the same way as before prayer, for on this day I am going to the saint with my *kvitel*. A *kvitel* is a small piece of paper on which one of the saint's clerks writes the name of the suppliant and the name of his mother—not his father!—the suppliant's place of origin, and, in a few concise words, the substance of what he is coming to ask of God. The *chasidim*, it must be explained, do not bring their petitions to the saint by word of mouth but in writing. On my *kvitel* are written the words, "*Mordecai ben Rikel mi-Prag, hasmodoh be-limud ve-yiras shomayim*," which means that I am asking God "that I may persevere in my studies and in the fear of God." Not one word more. That was how the *chasidim* advised

me to write it. The saint's entrance hall and room are already crowded—in Belz it is always crowded—with scores of suppliants, mostly women. Some come to ask the saint to intercede with God for success in their business, others for recovery from an illness, others for advice for or against a marriage. The needs of the *chasidim* are many and varied, and only *he*, the saint, can satisfy them through his intercession with the Most High. After reading some of the petitions, the saint asks for details before beginning to pray or give advice. He reads some petitions with obvious displeasure, especially those asking for cures. He scolds the suppliant and tells him to go to a doctor. But he wishes him a speedy recovery. Some bring a *matbeya*, that is, a coin that the saint will endow with secret power and that can then be used as a *kameo*, or amulet. The saint places the coin on the table and draws three circles round it. He does so with obvious reluctance. But once the coin has been consecrated by the saint's hand, the suppliant receives it back with an expression of radiant joy on his face. Besides the *kvitel*, we place a *pidyen* on the saint's table; this is a small sum of money according to one's means. The saint is *in duty bound* to accept gifts. This custom was instituted by the holy Baal Shem, and it has a metaphysical background. When the saint intercedes with God on behalf of us unworthy people, the Lord asks him, "Of what importance is this sinner to you? Have you any obligation toward him, dearly beloved son?" And the saint can reply to God, "Yes, I have an obligation toward him. He has assisted me and my family." Our money offering is thus the only link, mean as it is, between us and the saint; it is the necessary prerequisite for our prayers to be heard. Hence the saint accepts gifts. But he returns the gifts of poor people immediately. From declared unbelievers he will not take any gifts at all. The devout who live outside Belz send their petitions and contributions to the saint's office by post, or if the matter is urgent, by telegram. The suppliant obtains relief as soon as the clerk unsticks the telegram, even though the saint has not yet received the remittance. Those who come to Belz from Hungary

dining room is small. Deep holes yawn in the unplaned boards of the dirty floor. We crowd together round the table on a narrow bench. There is a great shortage of crockery. We young people often eat two out of one dish, with our hands, of course. To use a fork would be an indecent innovation. The menu is not very varied. For lunch we get a slice of heavy rye bread, a plate of vermicelli or potato soup, which of course we eat with a spoon, and a tiny piece of beef to which a large portion of broad beans must always be added. The older men drink vodka, all from the same bottle (though the Talmud, or rather the *Shulchan Aruch*, forbids two people to drink from the same vessel on hygienic grounds). We often have the famous Belz *purée*, made from sweet-smelling brown buck-wheat flour, called *grapel*, which is remarkably tasty. Sometimes we have fish, small white fish full of treacherous little bones. It is my duty to help to scrape the fish in the kitchen when it comes to my turn.

On the Sabbath the crowd is even greater. It is a real squeeze. We do not eat in our dining room, but press round the rabbi at his table, quite regardless of each other's comfort in our anxiety to obtain straight from his hands some morsel of food that he has first touched and tasted. Each little tidbit of his sweet *kugel* (a hot pudding), each piece of his greasy *chollent* (chaud lit), each drop of his homemade raisin wine contains a complete paradise with all its accompanying celestial delights. He who eats of food that the saint has blessed is sure to obtain both earthly and eternal bliss. At the table the *chasidim* sing their Sabbath songs in praise of Belz, songs whose changing rhythms are a dance of gaiety and sorrow, chaos and desire. Before the grace after the meal the rabbi expounds the Word of God. Every new truth that the saint brings out from the depths of the Law is fashioned by God into a new heaven. The saint's exposition is at the same time a sermon. I hear his deep mystic voice, but I cannot distinguish the words.

On festivals there is dancing. A hundred men take hold of each other's hands, or put their arms round each other's necks,

and form a large circle that rotates with a rocking dance-step, slowly at first and then faster and faster. The dancing begins in the *Bes Hamidrash*, but after a while the whole crowd spreads out on to the square and dances under the rabbi's window. A dance lasts uninterrupted for an hour, or maybe more, till the dancers are exhausted, intoxicated by the endless repetition of the same, mystically colored dance melody. In the same way the celestial spheres dance eternally round the glorious throne of the Lord. We young people are not allowed to take part in the sacred dance of the *chasidim*. We look on and sing, clapping our hands in time to the rhythm. The rabbi dances only a short while during the morning service on the autumn festivals. He dances alone. In his hand he holds a palm branch or a parchment scroll of the Law. The sight of the saint's mystic dance fills us with godly fear.

We take very good care not to catch the saint's eye during a service. As he enters the House of Study we press together in one confused mass, to leave him as much free space as possible. No true *chasid* comes within a distance of *four ells* (about eight feet) of him either during prayer or before it. If we are not sufficiently careful and agile he shouts at us—using words like "cattle!" or even "robbers!"—and sometimes he slips off his *gartel* (belt) and belabors the careless individual who has got in his way. But, surprisingly enough, his blows do not hurt in the least. Nor do his words. We laugh quietly to ourselves with joy, because we know that they are not insults but a high mark of honor, a secret blessing that he disguises with blows and rough words. For the Devil must not recognize them, or he may stop them from ascending to the throne of the Most High. Nevertheless we try to keep our distance from the saint; the farther we get away from him the better it is. Why?—Why do we take such care not to come close to him? Why does he warn us so sternly to keep away? After all, he is well aware that not even with a whisper would we interrupt him but would only pray in the most devout fashion. It is not because we might say anything we ought not to, or knowingly disturb him, but because our *thoughts*—all those silly

thoughts we carry in our heads, even though not expressed, even the most devout—would upset his spiritual, mystic concentration. For our thoughts are so material that they would sully his pure, mystic concentration and detract from the splendor of his thoughts, each of which is a glorious, living angel. Some *chasidim* hide modestly behind the backs of those who happen to stand in front of them. That is foolish, for the saint knows about everybody—even those who are hiding or are far away.

The weekdays slip by monotonously. I continue my study of the Talmud. I have long been fond of these interminable discourses of the ancient Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis on ritual and law, their legends, moral teachings, proverbs, anecdotes, paradoxes, that go to form the Talmud. The Hebrew and Aramaic languages, with their ancient elegance and terseness, have never lost their charm for me. Those picturesque signs in Hebrew writing that even to this day are half hieroglyphic, without vowels or punctuation, have been my favorite reading matter almost from childhood. Now for the first time I can give myself up to this pleasure completely. I sit and learn. When I do not understand one of the complex talmudic problems, I ask an older person to explain it for me. But mostly I study alone. I repeat each page at least six times as I have been recommended to do. I memorize the actual talmudic text; I learn the remarkably exact medieval commentaries that are printed round the text on each page like a wreath of tiny flowers, the diminutive letters of a medieval rabbi's handwriting. Sometimes I use other large volumes containing notes about these commentaries to help me along.

Books are greatly respected here, worshiped in fact. Nobody, for instance, sits on a bench if there is a book anywhere on it. That would be an affront to the book. We never leave a book face downward or upside down, but always face upward. If a book falls to the ground, we pick it up and kiss it. When we have finished reading, we kiss the book before we put it away. To throw it aside or put other things on top of it is a sin. Yet the books are nearly all woefully dilapidated by constant use. When

a book is so badly torn that it cannot be used, the caretaker takes it to the cemetery and buries it. Even the smallest scrap of paper with Hebrew characters printed on it must not be left lying about on the floor, or trodden on; it must be buried. For every Hebrew letter is a name of God. We never leave books open except when we are actually learning from them. If we are obliged to slip away for a moment, and do not wish to close the book, we may leave it open so as not to lose the place, but we must cover it with a cloth. If anyone notices another person going away from a book without closing or covering it, he goes over and shuts it himself; but first he will look at the open page and read a few lines out of it. If he were to shut the book without reading it at all, his act of closing it would weaken *the power of memorizing* in the other person who left the book open. The parchment scroll of the Law, which is hand-written, is held in even greater respect than printed books.

I am gradually becoming acquainted with chasidic literature. The first book I read is called "The Beginning of Wisdom" *(Reshit Chochmah)*, a kabbalistic book of exercises for the ascetic. It inculcates humility and self-denial and is full of beautiful quotations from the mystical *Zohar* and a book called "The Duties of the Heart" by Bachya Ibn Pakuda. *Reshit Chochmah* is the work of a famous kabbalist named Elijah de Vidas who lived in Palestine at the end of the seventeenth century. Another book I read is "The Joys of Elimelech" *(Noam Elimelech)* by the "Rebbe Reb" Melech of Lizensk (Elimelech). I shall be telling you something about this book and its wonderful author later on. The first of these books was recommended to me by the saint of Belz himself; the second was brought to my notice by the *chasidim*. I early got to know other books, chasidic, old Hebrew and, after a while, modern ones (see the note on Literature). But the first two are the dearest of all to me. They accompany me on all my journeys; I had them with me even when I was a soldier. When I am alone and no one can see me, I dip into kabbalistic writings that we young people have been forbidden to study.

Mordecai sat in the king's gate." It is meant well. It is a discreet form of praise for my having advanced so far as to sit in the gate of the King of kings, for my having become a real *yoishev* (*yoishev* means: sitting). But to me it does not seem to be any great compliment. I prefer to interpret it as a gentle reproach: I am only in the *gate* of the King; I have still a long way to go before I get to the chamber. . . .

The *chasidim* are becoming kinder to me every day. My lot is being improved in every possible way. Better bread, and milk. But my weakened stomach resolutely refuses all these extra comforts. Moreover, the insects are becoming crueler all the time. They have absolutely no pity on me. The mice nibble at my clothes. I sleep on the ground on a heap of old straw. My whole outward appearance testifies that I am gradually turning into a complete *chnyok* and *katcherak*. These two words are untranslatable nicknames used by the *chasidim* to mock any of their fellows who are totally indifferent to their outward appearance.

Meanwhile the scene itself has long since changed. But the difference is not very great. Instead of the Ukrainian steppe, there is now the Hungarian *puszta*. We are no longer in Polish Belz but in the no less dusty Hungarian town of Ratsfert (Ujfé-hérté), near Debrecin. The Belz rabbi came here for refuge with his entire court at the beginning of the war.

At this time, however, we do not even need to travel to Ratsfert to quench our thirst at the fount of Chasidism. Gunfire has swept the villages and towns, and thousands of bearded Jews are fleeing westward, arousing contempt and disgust wherever they go. Some have succeeded in saving their holy books and old manuscripts. Prague is flooded with Jews from the East who have set up their own synagogues and schools. Among the thousands of refugees are a few dozen genuine *chasidim* who have come from a great variety of places and from all possible directions. For the time being, Prague is part of the chasidic empire.

The saint of Belz has fallen ill. After a great deal of persuasion he has decided to visit Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad). We are

carrying him there along the paths through the forest. At other times he is separated from us by his secretaries and servants, as God is separated from our souls by myriads of spheres and worlds. But here among the forest trees we can all approach him. Although he is seriously ill, he talks cheerfully to everybody. We are conscious that his are no ordinary words even when he is talking about things that appear to be everyday matters. All his words, however small, are to be understood metaphorically. The whole time his thoughts are concentrated exclusively on supernatural matters. He talks to us, but we are aware that we understand his words no better than the wooden gnomes adorning the forests of Mariánské Lázně. He converses with these distorted little figures as gaily and unconstrainedly as he does with us living people. When he is not speaking to anyone, he repeats the Talmud to himself, which he naturally knows by heart in its entirety—all thirty-six tractates in their twelve mighty volumes! Once, as we were walking through the forest, he remarked, "If I didn't have you, I would pray with these trees here." He has never made a secret of his pacifist opinions. We have often admired his outspokenness. Once, when he noticed a public collecting box for war contributions on one of the forest roads, he called out with passion, "Is that what we've got to do with our money—so still more people can be murdered?" And on another occasion he said, "The German says: The whole world belongs to me! The Englishman says: The whole sea belongs to me! But my Yossele—that was the name of the *chasid* who led the prayers in those days—my Yossele sings so sweetly: The sea belongs to God, for He made it; the dry land belongs to God, for His hand created it."

Ever since this time I have felt profoundly indebted to the saint of Belz. I know that it is he alone whom I have to thank for my miraculous deliverance from Austrian military service. It was his intercession with God that brought this about. Everything is again as it used to be. My beard and side-whiskers, which I had to shave off while on active service, have grown again.

It is now quite a time since I last saw Gavril, my friend from Prague. He is settled at Hivnev, near Belz, and is making good progress with his studies. He is sure to be enjoying himself, having recently gotten married.

We are at Ratsfert again. The autumn holidays are over. It is 1918. All of us are very run down. Influenza is taking its toll. But a magic word is going through the world: Armistice—peace!

The woebegone lad from Prague is strangely excited. He does not himself understand what is happening to him, as on that day five years ago when he started out on his first journey to Belz. He bids farewell to the saint and the *chasidim*. They do not try to hold him back. Everyone is excited, everyone is looking forward to getting home. They wish him every success and hope he will soon return to them in good health. Some of them go with him a short way. Mechale of Baiberk accompanies him to the station. They eat out of the same dish. A final warm handshake, and the youth from Prague leaves for Budapest and thence on to Vienna. Since then he has not returned to his *chasidim*. Europe has not let him go. He returns to them only in this book. . . .

The heroes of our story are the *tzadikim*, the rulers of the *chasidim*. The word *tzadik* means a perfect and just person, a saint. The word *chasid*, which becomes *chasidim* in the plural, means a deeply devout person who is wholeheartedly devoted to a particular *tzadik*. The founder of Chasidism was Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov, who lived and worked in Poland in the middle of the eighteenth century. (He died about 1761.) To this day hundreds of thousands of chasidic communities live almost totally isolated from the surrounding world, faithful to their unique traditions, and it would be true to say that in eastern Europe they form states within states. Their *real* rulers are the grandsons and great-grandsons of the saints whom I shall be writing about in this book.

To relate stories from the lives of the saints is one of the most praiseworthy acts a *chasid* can do. He will tell of them at every opportunity—during a meal, during his studies, on a train jour-

ney, but especially on the anniversary of a saint's death. He must never forget to add the word "holy" or the phrase, "May his merits protect us!" whenever he mentions the name of a saint. Woe to the listener who protests that he has already heard this or that episode before! Everybody is in duty bound to listen patiently to each story, even if he has heard it a hundred times already. In this way, over the course of years, everything becomes imprinted on the memory—the heroes' names, their wives' names, the characters connected with them, and the place where the various events took place.

Anyone can be a narrator. If you know a nice story about a saint, it will be gratefully accepted, and one of your listeners will immediately reward you with another story about the same saint, or a similar anecdote about another saint, or something a saint has said. If you make a mistake in any detail, you will immediately be corrected by your listeners, for of course they know it much better than you do! . . .

The storyteller does not speak with words alone. If his vocabulary proves inadequate, he can help himself along with gestures, miming, or modulations of the voice. When relating something gloomy, he will lower his voice to a whisper. If he has a mystery to unfold he will content himself with hinting, breaking off in the middle of a sentence with a meaningful wink or squint. If he has to describe some supernatural beauty, he will close his eyes and roll his head about in genuine ecstasy. In this way the listener can understand much more than if we were to paint everything in detail with the choicest and cleverest words. The narrator's style is absolutely simple, without any special pathos, and completely inconsequent. He often wanders from one saint to another—so do not be surprised if I sometimes do the same.

The *chasidim* are aware that by no means everything they relate about their saints actually happened; but that does not matter. If a saint never really worked the miracle they describe, it must still have been one such as only he was capable of performing. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav goes out of his way to point out

that "not everything related about the holy Baal Shem (for instance) is true, but even the things that are untrue are *holy* if told by devout people. The fact is (says Rabbi Nachman) that man is perpetually sunk in a magic sleep throughout his life and is unable to rouse himself except by narrating anecdotes about the saints."

It is as though the chasidic saints had breathed their soul into the legends that the people tell of them. In consequence these chasidic legends are perhaps more faithful in depicting the characters of their heroes than in recording the actual deeds performed or the actual words spoken.

If I do not use a tearful voice when telling about the chasidic saints in this book, that is fully in keeping with the style of the chasidic storytellers who never avoid humor if it befits the occasion. May I be forgiven if in presenting the various stories I follow a different order than the chronological sequence. By way of excuse I would recall what the Talmud says, that "there is neither *before* nor *after* in the word of God." The verses at the head of each section of the book are modeled on the practice followed in old Hebrew books that used to have similar verses in praise of distinguished rabbis. No chapters in this book are specially devoted to the actual founder of Chasidism, Baal Shem, whose spirit pervades all our stories. There is of course a purer strain of poetry in the legends about the Baal Shem, and the truths revealed to him are deeper than the aphorisms of his successors. Above all I have aimed to introduce my readers to some of the more recent representatives of the chasidic movement.[1] Furthermore I have been lured on by the realization

[1]Literature *(A). Hebrew:*—Anonymous: Or 'Olam (Lvov s.a.)—Deutsch, Shimon: Hakme ha-Razim (Mukajevo 5696)—Horodetsky, S. A.: Ha-Hasiduth ve-ha-Hasidim (Berlin 5683)—Israel ben Simha: Eser Oroth (Pietrokov 5667)—Kaddish, Yo'es Kayyam: Siah Sarfe Kodesh (Lodz 5686)—Kahana, Abraham: Sefer ha-Hasiduth (Warsaw 5682)—Kahana, Abraham ("Abrech"): Deyoknaoth ve-Ikunim (Przemysl 5695)—Walden, Aharon: Shem hag-Gedolim he-Hadash (Warsaw 5624)—Zeitlin, Hillel: Ha-Hasiduth (Warsaw 5682). *(B) In other languages:*—Aescoly, W. A.:—L'intro-

that I have an opportunity in this book of publishing various stories that have possibly never been written down before—not even in Hebrew—and that I have learned only from verbal tradition.

It is not the purpose of this book to present a philosophical analysis of chasidic learning. Certainly it is easy enough to bore one's readers and misuse their patience, but it is not godly. My aim is rather to entertain the reader and at the same time to give him a truthful report. The remaining part of this chapter is not primarily intended for the ordinary layman. It is written more particularly by way of anticipating the ill will of the learned philosophers and the most esteemed critics.

Chasidism is the Kabbalah made accessible to the people. It is a particular type of pantheism with a popular appeal of its own and at the same time partly dogmatic, a pantheism that is shot through with the mystic magic of the *idea* of rabbinical Neo-Platonism and subtly interwoven with pseudo-Pythagorean threads, the whole ingeniously grafted on the old stock of Old Testament talmudic Judaism. It grew up long, long ago in Palestine, Egypt, or Mesopotamia, like a hardly discernible plant in the semidarkness of unknown circumstances. It was then transplanted to the romantic environment of Catholic and Arab Spain and subsequently returned to Palestine. But it was not until the last two centuries, on the fertile soil of Slavonic north-eastern Europe, in the shade of the Carpathian forests and on the Ukrainian plains, that it developed into the present

duction à l'étude des hérésies religieuses parmi les Juifs. La Kabbale—Le Hassidisme (Paris 1928)—Bloch, C.: Priester der Liebe (Vienna 1930)—Buber, M.: Die chassidischen Bücher (Hellerau 1928)—Dubnow, S.: Die Geschichte des Chassidismus (Berlin 1931)—Klein, G.: Bidrag till Israels religions-historia, sex föredrag (Stockholm 1898)—Lehmann E.: Illustrerad religions-historia (Stockholm 1924)—Mosbech, H.: Essaeismen et bidrag til senjdendommens religionshistorie (Copenhagen 1916)—Oesterley, W. O. E.: The sacred dance, A study in comparative folklore (Cambridge 1923)—Ysander, Torsten: Studien zum B'eshtschen Hasidismus (Upsala 1933).

fabulous, many-branched tree whose blooms are so remarkable in their variety. Not many reliable dates can be given. A fundamental problem is presented by the *Zohar*, that most important of the kabbalistic books, in that it is not known when and where it was set down in writing. The book appears in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century, when it purported to be an ancient work of Palestinian origin. The dispute about this question—which has a certain analogy in the controversy over the Králové Dvůr and Zelená Hora manuscripts in Czechoslovakia—is not yet at an end. Yitzhak Luria Ashkenazi, who is designated in our stories by the sign holy *Ari*, the great promulgator of kabbalistic doctrines, was born in Jerusalem in the year 1534 and died at Safed in 1572. His teaching, which was edited by Chayyim Vital Calabrese, a disciple of his, was of particular importance for the rise of Chasidism.

The chasidic Kabbalah is linked with Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy in a number of aspects—in its conception of "spheres," in its doctrine of the contraction of the Infinite before the creation of the world, its understanding of all phenomena in a symbolic way (likewise its allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures), and so on. The similarity with Pythagorean philosophy is to be seen in the kabbalists' belief in the creative power of figures (and letters) and in their teaching about the transmigration of souls. On the latter point there is a striking similarity to both Brahmanism and Buddhism. Unlike these two systems, however, the Lurian Kabbalah teaches that the human soul can be incarnated not only in animals but also in plants, waters, and minerals. The connection with the Indian Upanishads is to be seen in the doctrine of the worlds that preceded the creation of our world, while in its emphasis on the world-creating principles of manhood and womanhood the Kabbalah reminds one of Chinese mysticism (Lao-Tse). The idea that man is created in the image of God leads the kabbalists to views about the microcosm similar to those found in Aristotle and Plato, or, for instance, in the Catholic mystic, Nicholas of Cusa. The emphasis on perma-

nent joy as being the most important ethical principle of life links Chasidism with the mysticism of the Mohammedan Sufi, while the functional importance that the Kabbalah attaches to the secret "names" of God and the angels brings us near to Ethiopian and even perhaps ancient Babylonian magic.

In popular chasidic mysticism we find these elements so delicately diffused and elaborated that at first sight we are hardly aware of their presence. In consequence we cannot dismiss Chasidism as a mere inorganic fusion, or medley of mystical ideas culled from various world systems. It may be that Chasidism is a sea into which all mystical streams flow, but if this is so then the fusion took place deep in the subconsciousness of history. It would be possible, perhaps, to reconstruct the bridges linking Chasidism with the mystic centers farthest removed from it both in time and place. Nevertheless the overall impression it gives is so individual and particular that any doubts as to its independent growth are to a large extent dispelled. The *chasidim* point out of course—and not altogether without justice—that in one form or another the elements of their teaching are contained in the ancient Talmud and also, in part, in the Holy Scriptures. In confirmation of this opinion it is pertinent to observe that some Christian theologians in the Middle Ages considered that certain Greek philosophical systems were actually of Jewish origin. In recent times, only Nietzsche has held the view that there is evidence of Jewish influence on the philosophy of Plato. In ancient times the Jewish Essenes were almost perfect Pythagoreans, as is clear from the records left by Flavius Josephus.

In time and place Chasidism is closer to the Orthodox Church than to any other denomination. To a certain extent this is also true, I think, in a cultural sense. However this opinion must be taken *cum grano salis* even if justified in certain details.

In support of this view I might instance the deification of the saints during their lifetime and the eating of food sanctified by their mouths, which are phenomena to be found not only among Orthodox Christians and in Chasidism, but also, for example, in

their authors' names) are written in accordance with academic usage. Well-known biblical names are spelled in the accepted way.

(Where transliteration has been necessary, the following points should be observed: "ch" is always guttural, as in the Scotch word "loch," "tch" is to be pronounced as in the English word "catch," "sh" is as in the English word "shoe," "h" is always aspirate, "u" is always to be sounded as in the English word "put," a final "e" must always be pronounced as in the Italian word "niente," "j" is to be pronounced as a short "ee" sound. Translator's note.)

How a silken young man was not fitted to go into business, or how the predictions of the Seer were fulfilled—a disputation between the Devil and a Messiah, or how our Redeemer was confounded by a woman—how the holy Reb Sholem built a House of God and how the holy rebbe Reb Shimon of Jaroslav visited it and kissed every stone in it—how the holy Reb Sholem lived with his consort Malkele as in paradise—how the holy Malkele expounded the Scriptures and healed a lame man—then it is related how the holy Reb Sholem was incarnated in a citron *(esrig)* and how a disciple unveiled a mystery—how our chasidic stubbornness is our greatest virtue—how a sinner was punished by having to eat swine's flesh, and how another sinner was saved by his stubbornness—how the angels sought an intercessor and how they made the holy Reb Sholem their cantor—how the holy Reb Sholem settled a disturbance after his death, or how he tarries among us at our prayers.

All you, then, who wish to live, enter this gate with me, for there you shall read all this.