

A DISTURBING REPORT • 1

SPRING IN KRAKOW IN 1649 was a time of widespread mourning. War between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Cossack-Tatar alliance still raged in Ukraine and the eastern provinces of Poland. Many tens of thousands of Jewish people had been massacred, and those who survived lived in deep fear. For the meantime, the violence had not reached Krakow, but its Jewish population was swelled by the influx of refugees from the east.

Among the refugees were Rav Shloime Strasbourg, the rabbi of Pulichev, his wife, his four stepchildren and their infant son. Pulichev had been the scene of a horrific massacre, and the survivors had scattered to the wind. Rav Shloime and his family found refuge in Krakow in the spacious home of Chaim Tomashov, a wealthy merchant who was a longtime friend of the Strasbourg family. Rav Shloime felt decidedly uncomfortable imposing on his friend's hospitality, but there was not very much choice. He could not return to Pulichev and begin rebuilding his community until the war came to an end.

On the first Shabbos after Pesach, Rav Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, the illustrious rabbi of Krakow, invited a newly arrived refugee to address the congregation after the reading of the Torah. The shul was crammed with the regular congregants

and the numerous refugees. There was not a single unoccupied seat and hardly any room for standing either.

The speaker made his way to the front of the shul and shook the rabbi's hand. The rabbi gave him an encouraging tap on the shoulder and returned to his seat. The speaker stepped to the podium and faced the congregation. His clothes were threadbare and ripped at the elbows and knees. His face was drawn, and his eyes were haunted. A ragged scar ran down his left cheek.

"My name is Naphtali Korn," he began in a voice hoarse with emotion. "I am from Tulczyn. We were a peaceful town of several hundred Jewish families, and then the Cossacks came and murdered most of us. I am one of the fortunate few who managed to escape. Fortunate! Am I really fortunate? The past few months have been a horrible nightmare. The screams of my wife and children keep me awake at night and follow me throughout the day. I live in sorrow and misery. I've forgotten what a good day feels like. It would have been better if I had died with my family. Then I would have been fortunate."

He paused to wipe his eyes with his sleeve.

"The person you see standing here is not a man. He is only the shadow of a man. There is no purpose to my life, nothing to live for, nothing to hope for. Except for one thing. And that is why I am here today.

"After my family was murdered and the Cossacks left me for dead, I ran from place to place until I found a place where I could hide until I made my escape. From my hiding place, I saw two Cossacks enter a Jewish home and drag the family into the street. I don't know the name of this family, but I had seen them once or twice in the marketplace. They seemed a loving, happy family.

"The Cossacks murdered the parents and the older children. Only two little boys remained. They looked like twins,

maybe four or five years old. One of the Cossacks was about to kill them as well but the other one stayed his hand. ‘No, don’t kill them,’ he said. ‘We’ll take them with us. We’ll baptize them and raise them as Cossacks. We’ll teach them to kill Jews.’ They both guffawed at the irony of such a prospect. Each flung a little boy over his shoulder, and they walked away. As soon as they were gone, I fled into the night.

“This has become the purpose of my life, the only purpose. I want to rescue those precious Jewish children. I don’t know how to do it yet, but I know it will require a ransom. So in the meantime, I’m traveling from city to city and town to town and begging my Jewish brothers and sisters to help me put together a ransom that the Cossacks might accept in exchange for two little boys.

“I understand that this is a difficult time financially for all of you. The war has disrupted your businesses, and the needs of the refugees are great. But I’m begging you to give whatever you can, even if it’s only a few kopeks. When a respectable sum has been collected, I will seek the advice of your distinguished rabbi and others on how to initiate negotiations.”

He paused to catch his breath and wipe his eyes again.

“We do not have much time. We need to bring them back before they forget that they’re Jewish. Thank you very much for your patience.”

A hush fell over the congregation as the speaker descended from the podium with eyes downcast. Rav Shloime glanced toward the back of the shul where his friend Elisha Ringel was sitting mesmerized, his eyes staring blankly into space, his mind clearly in a different place. Rav Shloime had no doubt that the speaker’s tortured words had transported his friend to Polnoye and the experiences the two of them had shared in that stricken town. After a moment or two, Elisha shook his head to bring himself back to the present. He noticed Rav Shloime looking at him, and he nodded sorrowfully.

Late that night, Chaim Tomashov found Rav Shloime in the study rocking his infant son in his arms and peering into a large Chumash.

“How is Mendele doing?” Chaim asked.

“Quite well. He sleeps like a baby.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he wakes up every two hours and cries. I hope he doesn’t disturb you at night.”

Chaim smiled. “When I’m asleep, it takes more than a baby’s cry to wake me. My wife as well.”

“I’ve been thinking of returning to Pulichev,” said Rav Shloime. “I hear that our province is quiet.”

“Why would you plan to go back while the war is still raging? You’re so close to Ukraine. The fighting could spill over into Pulichev again.”

“Well, I think some of those who fled may start returning. And I’m really uncomfortable taking advantage of your hospitality for so long.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I really am. There are seven of us living in your house and eating your food. How long can we continue to impose on you? I feel we’ve already overstayed our welcome.”

“Please, Rav Shloime. You’re making me uncomfortable. It’s my greatest pleasure and honor to have you and your family in my home. I’m a wealthy man, and I don’t even feel the expense. I assure you that you are not imposing on me. You can go home when the war is over. In the meanwhile, you’re here. And in my humble opinion, you should send a message to all your people not to return until you do. They should not risk their lives.”

“Do you know what the Midrash says about guests?”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“You’re right. According to the Midrash, the proper custom is for the host to feed his guests poultry on the first day,

fish on the second, meat on the third, vegetables on the fourth and progressively less expensive foods until he feeds him only beans.¹ Hopefully, the guest will realize it's time to leave."

Chaim chuckled. "My mother used to say that guests are like fish. They don't smell that good after three days. I don't understand something. Isn't meat more expensive than poultry?"

"That's how it is today, because poultry is very plentiful. Apparently, it wasn't so plentiful in the times of the Talmud. It seems to have been a delicacy only the rich could afford. Fish was more plentiful, but not as plentiful as meat."

"Very interesting. But seriously, as I said, none of this applies to you and your family. These are not ordinary times. Your lives are in danger should you go home, so you have to remain here."

Rav Shloime sighed. "Very well. Perhaps we'll stay for a little while longer, but if this war drags on, we'll have to find a place of our own."

"Why don't we talk about it in a few months? The winter is over, and the fighting season will soon commence. Perhaps the war will be over by the end of the summer."

"Perhaps. Ay, Reb Chaim, we live in trying times."

"Indeed, we do. But we must still consider the future. Which brings me to a different topic I wanted to discuss with you. How is Elisha Ringel doing? Do you see much of him?"

"I see him every once in a while, but it's unpredictable. For the time being, he's living in Krakow and doing business in the surrounding area. Actually, he was in shul today."

"Really? I didn't see him."

"Not very surprising. He's quite short and slight, there was a big crowd, and he was sitting in the back. But why do you ask?"

1. Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 16.

"I'll tell you in a moment. How old is he?"

"Thirty."

"Does he want to get married?"

"I suppose he does. Eventually."

"Did you ever discuss it with him?"

"Briefly. I think he wants to make his fortune first."

"Well, I have a suggestion for him. Her name is Dvusha Miller from Ternopol in Ukraine. She was recently widowed, as were many others. She's a really fine woman."

"You understand, of course, that Elisha is quite an unusual person. It won't be easy to find the right *shidduch*² for him."

"I understand. I know him, although not as well as you do. I can only make suggestions. It's up to him."

"Of course. What would you have me do?"

"Bring him to my house tomorrow night. I'll talk to him."

2. Match.