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THE YESHIVA WORLD OF EASTERN EUROPE AS SEEN THROUGH THE PROSE WORKS OF CHAIM GRADE

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Chaim Grade (1910-1982) is one of the greatest and most important modern Yiddish writers. He is also one of the most unsung.

Grade's father was a maskil, Hebraist, and early Zionist. His mentor was the Hazon-Ish, one of the great Talmudists of the age. The differences between and influence of these two personalities sharply colored Grade's life and literary career. His inner conflict is wonderfully articulated in the tale "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," which was included in I. Howe and E. Greenberg's Treasury of Yiddish Stories.

Grade was a child of pre-Communist Poland. From his childhood through his early teens, he attended a musarist yeshiva. Though he later became a poet and secularist, his writing reveals his nostalgia, understanding and insight into the world he left behind. Grade's portraits of yeshiva life and of pre-war Vilna, such as those found in his stories The Yeshiva and The Well, are uniquely tender and evocative. In them Grade provides a unique personal interpretation of Vilna and its Jewish world that is now virtually a historical rendition.

During the Holocaust, in which he lost both his wife and his mother, Grade was a refugee in Russia. Needless to say, these experiences also touched his creative spirit. His autobiographical volume, My Mother's Sabbath Days, contains a

particularly poignant account of those years.

Grade's novels and stories are available in English translation. This thesis, which is based on those translations, is primarily an in-depth literary analysis of Grade's writing, focusing especially on Grade's unique understanding and portrayal of the pre-war Eastern European yeshiva world.

Grade's objectivity and the historic accuracy of his writing are considered and measured against other sources. A brief study of the Novaredok school of musar learning and its influence on Grade's writing is also included.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chaim Grade was born in Vilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," in 1910, a child of his father's old age. Grade's mother, Velle, was a rabbi's daughter and his father's second wife. His father, a maskil, eked out a living as a Hebrew teacher and died when Grade was still a child, leaving his wife and son penniless. During World War I, Grade was boarded in a home for poor children. But Velle was not about to give up her ambitions for her Chaim. She became a street vendor of fruits and vegetables, and worked hard so that Chaim could study Torah and become a talmid khokhem.[1]

Velle's dreams for her son were not to be fulfilled. Grade was educated in various yeshivot. But as he describes himself in his thinly disguised autobiographical fiction, he was not a keen Talmudic scholar. His father's legacy of learning inspired him to pursue both religious and general studies, and he was soon confronted with the irreconcilability of the world of tradition with that of modernity. Grade found himself to be more fascinated by words and nuances than by pilpulistic achievement.[2] In the yeshiva, he was caught reading secular books and punished for his transgression.

In 1932, Grade broke with the yeshiva world and returned to Vilna to live with his mother in poverty.

His adolescent preoccupation with the world prevailed. He devoted himself to reading secular books, especially philosophy, and he began to write poetry. From his first appearance in print, in the journal Undzer Tog, readers and critics were aware that a new force had entered Yiddish literature. Grade's poetry was soon being published by the major Yiddish literary journals in Warsaw and New York. His first book of poems, Yo (Yes), was published by Vilna's major publisher, B. Kletzkin, in 1936.

Like most first books of verse, Yo described Grade's intimate personal life -- memories of his parents, his friends, his fears and passions. But other poems in the collection drew deeply from Jewish historical experience and traditional sources. His Yiddish, unlike that of other Young Vilna writers, was thickly layered with the Hebrew-Aramaic vocabulary of a learned Jew. This unique linguistic flavor came to distinguish Grade's prose works as well.

The success of Yo made Grade the first and only member of the literati group 'Young Vilna' to support himself, albeit marginally, by writing poetry. [3] He married an attractive, ambitious registered nurse, Frumme Liebe -- a rabbi's daughter who, like Chaim, had turned her back on traditional Judaism. Frumme Liebe

("Liebche" in My Mother's Sabbath Days) and her brother had, to their father's disappointment, become Zionists. After their wedding, Grade's mother remarried and moved out of the wretched cellar hovel in which she and Chaim had been living.

Grade had three great loves in his life -- his mother, his wife, and his writing. In 1941, history permanently separated him from two of those loves. The advance of the German armies caused Grade and his wife to flee Vilna. But the journey proved too hard for Frumme Liebe. She and Grade agreed that she should turn back -- what harm, after all, could the Germans do to women and children? She and Grade parted, not knowing that that would be the last time they would ever see each other again. Frumme Liebe and Velle both perished in the Vilna Ghetto.

Grade fled eastward, joining the flood of refugees who were attempting to escape the German occupation. He travelled deep into Russian territory, and remained there until the war's end. In 1946, Grade returned to Vilna. He remained in Poland for half a year, and then moved on to Paris, where he became a primary force in reconstituting Yiddish cultural life among a vast emigre colony of Yiddish-speaking refugees and survivors of World War II.

Grade lived and worked in Paris for two years. Lucy Davidowicz was also working in France at the time. Of her contact with Grade in those years she wrote:

> He'd become more worldly than I remembered him to have been and more aggressive in his quarrel with the world of Jewish tradition. The confrontation between modernity and tradition, whose battle lines he had drawn before the war in his poem Musarnikes, soon found its most powerful expression in the first story he ever wrote, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," with postwar Paris as its locale and the murder of the European Jews now the centerpiece of the war between the believer and the denier. On one occasion in Paris he read me extracts of a long narrative poem about prewar Vilna which he'd been working on for the last three years, ever since his return to the ruins of Vilna in 1944. Deeply moved, I told him that if he kept working, he'd become one of our great Yiddish poets. He gave me a withering look and asked, expecting no answer: 'And what do you think I

am now?'" [4]

Grade moved on to New York in 1948 and lived there until his death in 1982. Up to 1950 he wrote only poetry. His first work of prose, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," was written in 1950 and published shortly thereafter. "With Yiddish literature and Yiddish-speaking people active in many continents, with Jewish communities yearning for a Yiddish word and for contact with Yiddish writers, Chaim Grade became the modern maggid of Yiddish, traveling to many continents on lecture tours." [5]

During his first twenty-five years of residence in the United States, Grade won all the awards the Yiddish literary world had to offer -- the Leivick Prize, the Lamed Prize, the Bergen-Belsen Memorial Press Award, the Jewish Book Council's annual literary prize, even a special prize in literature from the American Academy for Jewish Research. He was awarded honorary doctorates by both the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew Union College, and was similarly honored in Mexico, Argentina, and Israel. His works in Hebrew translation became Israeli classics; the Hebrew translation of The Agunah was a bestseller, and the Hebrew University once devoted an entire course of study to his works.

Though in life he was a giant of Yiddish literature, today Grade is a near-unknown -- even despite the fact that much of his best work has been translated into other languages, including English.

This rabbinic thesis is but a small effort to bring Grade's writing the continued attention it deserves. No one has done more than Chaim Grade to preserve the memory of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" as it was between the world wars. It is only fitting that someone should preserve his memory in turn.

Notes to Chapter One

1. Lucy Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time, W.W. Norton & Company, 1989, p. 126.
2. Curt Leviant, The Agunah, Twayne Publishers Inc., 1974, p.6.
3. Dawidowicz, p.127.
4. Ibid., pp. 310-311.
5. Leviant, The Agunah, p.7.

All of Grade's books and stories are renditions of history, but none more so than his memoir, My Mother's Sabbath Days. My Mother's Sabbath Days is not a simple story like The Well, yet its narrative is more tightly woven than that of The Yeshiva. In his autobiography, Grade goes beyond reciting the story of his life. He eliminates much of the detail of his own youth and devotes those pages instead to descriptions of life in Vilna between World War I and World War II.

Vella the fruitseller, his mother, is at the center of the novel. Although Grade admits to not living up to her expectations, she was clearly a major influence in his life and in his work. When we see Grade as a youth, it is often through his mother's eyes. Grade's ability to remove himself from himself and take on his mother's viewpoint is one of the extraordinary features of his writing.

Grade also writes about his neighbors: the people who move in and out of the apartment across the courtyard, his mother's customers and those of the other local businesses, the beggars, the town gentiles. The first several chapters read like narrations of a snapshot or the dialogue of a home movie. The mood of these chapters is one of sadness and longing -- a kind

of lament. The Vilna of which Grade writes no longer existed, and when it died, his childhood and young manhood died with it.

The lives of Grade and his family are inextricably caught in the web of history. His friends and relatives are among the poor Jewish working masses touched by Communism. In the novel, Grade's nephew is thrown in jail for his involvement with the Party, and two of his friends attempt -- unsuccessfully -- to cross the border into Communist White Russia. Grade sympathizes with the despair of the parents of such young people, most notably through characters like the hunchbacked Velvel the tailor, and Zalman Press, a stocking peddler and frustrated poet.

When the Soviets entered Vilna for the first time in September, 1939, Grade and his wife Frumme-Liebe ("Liebche" in the novel) were put in a precarious position. Poets in Polish and Russian society were highly esteemed, and Vilna was a city pervaded by both cultures. Because Grade was an immensely popular and authoritative poet, his Jewish Communist friends tried to convert him to their cause.

Grade's marriage to Frumme-Liebe, "a clergyman's daughter of a Zionist family in Palestine," was their first great disappointment. The Communists went so far

as to try to disrupt the marriage. They enveloped the couple in nefarious intrigues and put Frumme-Liebe on their "hit list." [1]

During the Soviet occupation of Vilna, local Communists crowded the offices of the Soviet secret police, eager to denounce anti-Communists such as Grade. Grade was relieved when the Soviets left Vilna to the Lithuanians in December of 1939, three months after they had entered. But his sense of freedom was short-lived; the Soviets annexed the three Baltic republics and, in June of 1940, returned to Vilna.

Grade did not join the Jewish Communists who, unmindful of the fate of some of their comrades in the Soviet Union, rejoiced in the Soviet return and fraternized with the occupying soldiers. Rather, he commiserated with the Poles who mourned the fall of their country, and lived an anxious existence with his wife for fear of arrest. Grade and Frumme-Liebe went into hiding and were able to avoid imprisonment. But then the ultimate tragedy came: June 22, 1941, the day the Germans invaded Russia.

Conventional wisdom dictated that the Germans would round up the able-bodied men for hard labor, and leave the women, children, and older men unharmed. Grade and his wife fled Vilna on foot. But as rumors spread of

the Germans' rapid advance, it seemed more perilous to be caught on the run by the Nazis than to be found in one's own city. Grade believed the rumors and, feeling that she would not be able to withstand the rigors of the journey eastward, insisted that Frumme-Liebe return to Vilna.

> When Grade said good-bye to Frumme-Liebe in the village of Rukon, he had no way of knowing it was a final parting. A man from Vilna wrote me that people were convinced the Germans would be defeated in a week or two, so they fled with their apartment keys in their pockets. It was only after Grade crossed the old Polish-Soviet border on a military truck, apparently filled with deserters, found himself in Russia proper, and saw the horrendous devastation caused by just two days of war -- only then did he realize that he had left his mother and Frumme-Liebe forever. [2]

The remainder of My Mother's Sabbath Days describes Grade's experience as a refugee: his travels on foot and on various transport trains; his encounters with victims of the Soviet regime and other refugees. The reader shares Grade's dismay with the sight of a Russian Orthodox Church turned into a barn, and his admiration for the spirit of Russia's land and people.

Although it is not Grade's goal in My Mother's Sabbath Days to give a detailed description of his life in Russia, nevertheless he offers a faithful picture of the plight of the Jewish refugees and of the Russian people during the war. We meet the once elegant and prosperous Warsaw attorney Orenstein, who becomes virtually a beggar, dies in a remote village in Central Asia, and is buried by strangers. There is the refugee from Lodz, Misha Troiman, who, unable to endure the thought of what is happening to his people, to his wife and son in Nazi-occupied Poland, decides that in order to go on living he must start a completely new

life, with new ties -- and is killed as the result of an accident.

Grade left Russia with great love for its people. His experience corroborates that of Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the poet Osip Mandelstam who perished in Stalin's Gulag. She wrote that there is no anti-Semitism among the Russian people, that it is imposed from above, by the government, Imperial or Soviet, but always by the government. In My Mother's Sabbath Days, Grade does not report a single instance of anti-Semitism during his stay in Russia. [3]

Finally, Grade gives an account of his return to Vilna. His vivid description of the haunted ruins of Jewish Vilna represents his personal confrontation with the destruction of European Jewry and with the violent deaths of his mother, Vella, and his bride, Frumme-Liebe. These last chapters, along with an earlier chapter about Grade's initial departure from Vilna, and his powerful dialogue on the meaning of the Holocaust, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," were reprinted in a separate volume, The Seven Little Lanes.

The Jewish Vilna of Chaim Grade's time was a community in transition. Largely poor and impoverished, its grown children had left to find greener pastures -- some to Palestine, some to the Soviet Union, others to Argentina or America. Vella's neighbor and business partner, Blumele, and her husband Reb Boruchl, are more or less typical of the parents of this dissatisfied, wandering generation. While the old folks maintain their own piety, they wonder and worry about their children's relationship to Judaism:

> Reb Boruchl and Blumele's children live in Argentina. Their photographs hang on the wall in a semicircle, and beneath them, like a star in the crescent of the moon, hangs the picture of the Hofetz Haim, the Sage of Radun. He is a tiny Jew with great eyes full of sadness and kindness, wearing a tall winter hat. Whenever the two old people look at the pictures of their children, and their gaze falls upon the Sage of Radun, Blumele straightens her kerchief so that not a wisp of hair may be seen, and Reb Boruchl imagines he can hear the Hofetz Haim sigh:

"Ah, my children, my dear children, the Messiah is coming any day, and you are not ready."

Reb Boruchl's ashen-gray beard quivers. He looks at his sons' pictures and murmurs:

"Who knows whether over there they are still good Jews? Who knows whether they even keep the Sabbath?" [4]

Grade, too, it seems, was destined to wander -- if not physically, then spiritually. He reveals relatively little about his childhood. We see him mostly through his mother's eyes:

"Mischief-maker! Look what I must endure because of you. When you were little, you fought with all the children in the street. The fathers of the boys you beat up would come running to me and shout, `I'll tear your brat to pieces!' And I had to hide you under my apron. Then you got the crazy idea of raising birds, just like little barefoot gentile boys who carry pigeons around in their

shirts. Later you picked up somewhere a big, shaggy black dog that you dragged around with you day and night. Now you've become a peasant with a garden. And as if that weren't enough, you water your flowers on the Sabbath. Don't you know that's forbidden? My great scholar...!" [5]

On the other hand, Grade portrays his mother as something near sainthood. She was particularly pious, modest to a fault, learned in Torah as well as in housewifery, and endlessly patient with her wayward son.

On Rosh Hashanah, sitting in the women's section of the synagogue, she looked more joyous and radiant than any of the rich matrons with their fur collars. She is not a zogerke, a "spokeswoman" -- no one has engaged her to pray for a good year for all Israel -- but the poor, unlearned women crowd around her to listen as she translates aloud into Yiddish the story that is being read from the Torah scroll...

The wealthy matrons hold mahzorim whose covers have corners edged in silver. But they cannot keep pace with the cantor and frequently lose the place. From time to time a broad-beamed matron makes her way from the East Wall corner to the fruit-peddler sitting in the westernmost nook, almost at the outer door:

"Vellenka, a good year to you. What are they up to?"

Quickly and familiarly, Mother turns the gilt-edged pages of the rich woman's mahzor as she thinks to herself: "If only I knew how I stood with the Lord of the Universe as well as I know where the congregation are up to in the prayers..."[6]

Grade's admiration for his mother was not without grounds. She married a widower, raised his children and bore three of her own; lost both her daughters and her husband to disease and poverty, and raised her son by herself. She slaved over her baskets of fruit so that Grade could attend a yeshiva and become a Torah scholar. When her son failed to fulfill her dreams for him, she blamed herself, claiming that she must be unworthy of

having a ben Torah for a son. And when another upright and scholarly widower showed interest in her, Vella declined his proposal; her son should find his bride before she remarried.

Not all of Vella's neighbors were as pious as she was. Life was hard in Vilna, and in order to pay their rent, many of Vilna's shopkeepers kept their stores open late on Friday afternoons. This practice was greatly upsetting to the "Sabbath guardians" of the city -- the men who patrolled the streets of Vilna to insure that their fellow Jews did not violate the Sabbath.

> Passing by a grocery, Reb Nossen-Nota observes that the window is shuttered and the door three-quarters closed. "Hatzkel the grocer attends my beth midrash," muses the Gabbai [beadle of the synagogue]. "On Festivals, he's more eager than anyone to be called up to the Torah. On the High Holidays he purchases the honor of opening the Holy Ark. And yet, with all this piety, he still keeps his store just a little bit open." Reb Nossen-Nota pokes his head through the door --

and stands frozen with shock and amazement.

The shop is packed with customers, yet such quiet reigns within that one might hear a feather drop. Evidently the customers know that they must be careful in order not to attract the attention of the "Sabbath Guardians." Hatzkel himself is so absorbed in weighing and measuring and counting money that he does not notice the Gabbai's long curled beard protruding into the open crack of the shop-door. Reb Nossen-Nota, seething inwardly, waits to observe the grocer's expression once he sees him, the Gabbai, standing there.

And at last the long curled beard in the doorway does catch the shopkeeper's eye.

"Reb Hatzkel," roars the Gabbai, "what is the meaning of this?"

The preoccupied shopkeeper, showing no sign of embarrassment, says simply, "I'll be closing up right away."

"Turn the customers out!" orders Reb Nossen-Nota.

"This very minute," agrees Hatzkel. He runs out from behind the counter, and sees

women standing outside who want to enter the store but cannot -- the Sabbath Guardian bars their way. The shopkeeper hastily flings the door open, and the Gabbai all but tumbles head over heals as the throng behind him surges in.

"And you," rants Reb Nossen-Nota, beside himself with rage, "you shut your eyes so piously and sway so fervently when you pray!"

Hatzkel closes his eyes, as though indeed in prayer, and leans angrily forward toward the Gabbai.

"Do you pay my debts? Do you pay my taxes?..."

"It's easy for him to talk," Hatzkel harangues the housewives before him. He's got a hardware store, so he can afford to close early. Who needs locks or bars on a Friday afternoon just before candle-lighting? But let him just try to keep a grocery and sell retail. Here it is, almost Sukkoth. The shop has to be closed for the first two days of the holiday, the day after that is the Sabbath, and then comes Sunday -- not to mention all the gentile holidays. Where's the Gabbai's sense of justice, I ask you? Where

is his human decency, will you tell me?" [7]

The wrath of the Sabbath Guardians was not the only hazard a poor Jew had to look out for:

> The peddlers who have no permanent stands are unable to obtain legal permits to do business. They stand in the streets with their wares, always keeping an eye out for policemen. But the police, in their dark-blue uniforms, have a way of coming upon them stealthily. Abruptly, with no warning, one woman catches sight of a gleaming black boot kicking her basket. The merchandise scatters into the gutter, and the policeman hisses:
>
> "Patent masz?" -- "Do you have a permit?"
>
> The other peddlers begin to run. But rows of policemen close off the street on all sides and the women fall into their clutches.
>
> The street is filled with tumult and weeping. The peddlers' wares are scattered and roll on the pavement, and the women are taken to the station-house.[8]

The poverty which caused these women to risk going to prison by selling wares without a permit had other side effects as well. The Soviet propaganda that trickled in from over the border gained greater appeal among the Jewish working masses in the darkness of their destitute state. For a while, Grade kept company with a poor young seamstress, who along with her friends was seduced by the "good news" coming from the Communist Party:

> From all corners of Poland young lads and girls have streamed toward Vilna. From Vilna they make their way to the Soviet border and then slip across into Communist White Russia. The Soviet Union has opened wide its gates to the unemployed youth of Poland. On the first of May and on the anniversary of the October Revolution she, together with her comrades, listens secretly to the Soviet radio. She hears the happy songs, the Red Army marches, and sees in her mind's eye the demonstrations with banners and the flushed happy faces of the citizens who march and sing, march and dance. She knows that a Soviet worker, even

from the remotest hamlet, can get an official permit to go to Moscow. There people attend the great theaters, walk about Red Square, and visit Comrade Lenin's mausoleum. In the Soviet Union, everyone can realize his ambitions. If you want to become an engineer, you become an engineer; if you want to be a doctor, you become a doctor. She would work in a factory during the day and study at night.

It isn't easy to get across the border. Over there, on the other side, the Soviets let everyone enter, but on this side stand the Poles, and the secret police catch many of the emigrants and beat them, screaming, "You sons of dogs, so you want to go to the Bolsheviks? Just wait, you'll be croaking yet, in your Red paradise, with longing for a Polish prison!" But the young people refuse to be deterred. Couples get married in Poland and then smuggle themselves across the border together: a girl cannot undertake such a journey alone, she dare not entrust herself to the peasants who serve as guides, and even there, in the Soviet Union, it is better to arrive with a comrade.

Baylka raises her head. The cold steel "pony" of the sewing machine has not cooled her feverish thoughts. Her fantasies flow as quickly as the white sheeting under the needle, and she begins to sing, in time with the rhythm of her foot pressing on the treadle, the song of the new happy life of the Soviet proletariat:

> "See the fine house that stands nearby --
> Who built it, created these riches?
> Who finished it with lime and with clay?
> A naked young lad from the ditches." [9]

Baylka hopes that her young writer will marry her and accompany her over the border. But Grade is not persuaded by the rhymes and propaganda. He is aware that the Soviets let the young, impressionable Poles in only because they want unpaid labor for the coal mines in the Donbas and the Urals. For this reason he chooses not to marry the young seamstress.

Disillusioned by his lack of love for her, Baylka decides to return to her hometown of Glebokie near the

Russian border. Their friends Layala and Paysahka do marry, however, and take Baylka home on their way to the border crossing. Partly due to his mother's influence, Grade's sympathies seem to reside more with the father Layala and her husband leave behind than with the adventurous young couple:

> Velvel has thrown back his head, spread out his hands, and uttered a wail of anguish, as if he were chanting the penitential prayer at the lectern, at daybreak in the month of Elul.
>
> "Ahl tashlikenu l'eys ziknoh...Lord of the Universe, forsake me not in my old age, when I will no longer have the strength to sew buttonholes in peasants' shirts. Lord of the Universe, no one believes that I'm already an old man -- people think I'm still a young buck. My bitterness eats me up and will not let me grow old. My bitterness keeps me bony and lean. Who will take pity on an ill-tempered old man? Ahl tashlikenu l'eys ziknoh -- Forsake me not in my old age..."
>
> "Father-in-law, they'll hear you!"

Paysahka is quaking with fear.

"Father, I'm not leaving!" Layala again bursts into tears.

"Indeed, why should you leave?" The distracted Velvel sits down on a stool. "Here, look at Vella. She too is poor, yet she's not letting her only son go. At least wait another week."[10]

Velvel sends his children off in sorrow, and after several months is told that the Party bosses, for fear of spies, will not allow the border-crossers to write home. Velvel is not the only one who suffers on account of his children's dreams. A former neighbor whose circumstances have been reduced also has a child lost in the Soviet wilderness. Zalman Press, the stocking-peddler, makes up rhymes to sell his wares and to take the edge off his misfortunes. His eldest son, a former classmate of Grade's, became involved with the Party in hopes of becoming a great artist. Zalman stoically insists that his son's absence doesn't matter to him -- but his pain is evident in his words as he confides in his son's onetime schoolmate:

"My sons...were supposed to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow. My Yudka used to say, 'In a warlord's Poland, it's impossible for a poor boy to become an artist' -- and so he went off to Russia. And you know what?" He stops once more in the middle of the street. "I don't turn a hair about my Yudka slaving away in Russia, in a coal mine or wherever. If he dreamt of becoming a painter, he should have managed to achieve it." [11]

The scarcity which drove the young people to seek their fortunes elsewhere lingered in Vilna. Grade has no need to embellish it or romanticize it: he draws Vilna's depravation as he sees it, boldly, without flinching. Poverty is the stain which lends color to all of Vilna's street life. There is Hayka the Maiden, the resident whore, who, an orphan herself, bears children for the orphanage every year:

Her wooden face is painted red, paper flowers are stuck in her hair, her dress -- short and tight -- is pulled up high over her swollen, pointy belly so that the calves of her legs, with ribbons tied around her knitted woolen socks, are visible. Her skinny knees seem almost to have grown together, so that she points her feet sideways and sways from side to side. [12]

And there are the other beggars, the ones who overrun Vilna's streets every Monday and Thursday prior to the holy days and festivals in order to support themselves.

Hatzkel is dumbfounded.

The palm being thrust at him is hard and broad as a shovel. At the same instant he notices a second hand with fingers that are pointed and spread wide, like a pitchfork. A third hand, with a cluster of twisted yellow fingers, twitches, whines, and demands its just portion. Before Hatzkel can recover

himself, he is approached by a lump of solid, hardened flesh attached to a withered bone. The fingerless stump of a wrist thrusts itself at the grocer: Here, look your fill, enjoy.

Hatzkel feels a stabbing pain in his heart, a tightness in his chest, a choking in his throat, as though all these invalids and cripples were tearing him apart, piece by piece. He hurls coins into open palms and steps backward, as if he were throwing food to ferocious beasts. The beggars utter not a word; they turn back to the door in such unyielding silence they might be the dead, risen from their graves to demand their just share of earthly pleasures...

Hatzkel looks forlornly about him. Not one customer remains in his shop -- there is only the line of paupers twisting and turning like a snake, with no beginning or end. It is no longer just a single line; now the beggars come in pairs...three abreast...four abreast. The ice has melted and the Vilja is overflowing its banks! A swarm of locusts has descended upon him! Woe, woe -- all the beggars of the Synagogue Courtyard are coming,

all the inmates of the poorhouses, all the wretched hostels of the poor, all the decaying back alleys are on the march...

In despair, [Hatzkel] seizes a pile of copper coins and runs out to stand at the entrance of his shop.

"Quickly! Quickly!" Hurrying the far-stretching line of beggars along, he distributes his coins. "I see you have plenty of time, just as if this were the afternoon Sabbath after the cholent. Father in Heaven, the line is as long as our Jewish Exile. Exile, when will you end?" [13]

Amidst these diminished circumstances, Grade is able to find modest riches -- not only through his writing, but in the small, everyday things he writes about. When he brings home his intended bride for his mother to meet, we not only learn something of Frumme-Liebe's character; we also get a crash course in comparative culinary practices of Polish and Lithuanian Jews.

"How do they make gefilte fish in your family -- like ours, or differently?"

"We make fish as you do in Vilna, but Polish Jews add sugar to it." Frumme-Liebche's face turns crimson, as though my mother were trying to cross-examine her.

"Sugar?" Mother is astonished. She knows it is customary to cook sweet-and-sour fish for the holidays: one uses raisins, lemon or vinegar for tartness, some bay leaves and other spices, and a piece of cake for browning. But to add sugar to gefilte fish -- that seems very strange to her. "What else do Polish Jews put into their gefilte fish?"

"The other ingredients are the same as in Lithuania," answers Frumme-Liebche, and the blush on her face deepens. "You mix in an egg, salt, pepper, a chopped onion. The finer you chop the fish, and the longer you cook it, the better it is."

"We also put in saffron, to make the fish yellow," adds my mother, her heart now overflowing with joy: a good housewife -- she's already a really good housewife!

"In Vilna," says Frumme-Liebche with a laugh, "I've seen women carrying ground chickpeas in hot, covered pots, which they sell in small paper bags."

"Why, yes." Mother cannot understand what is so surprising about this. "The other vendors buy the little bags and spread the ground chickpeas on slices of bread. Other women sell oatmeal with milk. In the winter, when they sit freezing by their baskets, the women warm themselves with a bowlful of porridge. There's a saying, you know: 'Some cry because they have so few pearls, others because they have so little soup.'" [14]

It is not lack of soup that compels Grade to leave his beloved and beleaguered Vilna, but the German invasion.

While the Poles were still recovering from two weeks of fighting against the Germans, the Soviets crept back into Vilna and were welcomed as heroes: the working-class of Vilna believed that the Soviets' arrival had saved them from falling into German hands. But the Soviets were no saviors. Soldiers from the

"land of plenty" formed lines in front of Vilna's shops. Zalman the stocking-peddler runs out of his wares; the Soviets have cleaned out his wholesalers. And the Soviets deprive Zalman of more than his livelihood. After questioning the new arrivals from his son Yudka's adoptive homeland, the Press family learns that Yudka was executed along with other suspected "spies."

Grade's mood becomes increasingly apocalyptic as he recounts the events which preceded the German invasion. He writes of the Poles who gather in their squares and cathedrals, praying for "an unseen corpse --for Poland laid waste." Breadlines are formed. Grade's nephew Aronchik is arrested --not because he is a Soviet sympathizer, but because he disagrees with his comrades on the question of China.

Abruptly, the Russians leave Vilna, declaring it the capital of Soviet Lithuania. Less than a year later, the Soviets return.

> They stayed on for half the summer, the fall, the entire winter, and then, in the new spring, in honor of the first of May, red banners fluttered and waved in all the streets of Vilna, by day and by night. Red Army

soldiers marched and sang:

If tomorrow never comes, if tomorrow we march,
If the forces of evil attack us,
As one man will our Soviet people arise
To defend their free fatherland.

The young people who marched along responded with jubilant shouts:

"Da zdravstvuvet krasnaya armiya! Long live the Red Army! The enemy will not seize one inch of Soviet soil!" [15]

Once more, the Soviet bravado is deflated, and with dire consequences.

On the first day of summer, 1941, the Germans arrive. The Russians in Vilna do not even put up a fight. They pack up their goods and flee, leaving Vilna's native residents to contemplate their fate.

"Why are they running? They always said the Red Army never retreats -- "one man

shouted aloud.

"A broken old chair is more important to them than saving human lives. People they have enough, but not furniture!" shouted another, still louder.

"It's impossible that the Germans would kill all the Jews," stammered a third. "In the First War the Germans did business with the Jews."

"On the roads the Germans shoot at the refugees with machine guns and the peasants kill them with their hatchets," screamed a fourth. [16]

Grade and Frumme-Liebe do not waste time; they hurriedly take leave of Vella and depart the day after the invasion begins. But as soon as they are outside the city limits, Frumme-Liebe starts to tire. The other refugees begin to convince themselves that their fears are unfounded. Death would certainly meet them on the road, but if they returned to Vilna they might manage to stay alive. By the time they reach the village of Rukon, Grade and Frumme-Liebe are also persuaded of this. Frumme-Liebe turns back -- and Grade proceeds

into the Russian forests without her, unaware that he will never see his wife or his mother again.

Sadness pervades Grade's narration of his travels as a refugee. His story is stark, straightforward, and unembellished, like an official diary. At first he travels alone. But before long he meets the first of many companions he will encounter on his long journey:

> This morning, before dawn, just after we crossed the old Russian border, the truck on which I was riding had stopped dead in the middle of the road: out of gas. The Red Army men had jumped off the back platform, rifles in hand, abandoned the truck, and left me alone amidst the vast and unfamiliar expanses of White Russia. I had stumbled on as God led me, fallen asleep in a cowshed, gotten water to drink in a village. Wherever I appeared, peasant women and children ran to inform the local militia that a suspicious-looking man with a knapsack on his back was loitering in the vicinity. My appearance, my clothing, my accent all betrayed my foreignness, and so I found myself being constantly stopped and then

promptly released.

By now I know what to do whenever I am asked who I am: I show my passport, let my knapsack be inspected, and say, "Ya yevrey -- I'm a Jew -- and I'm running away from the Germans." I said that I wanted to go to Minsk, but was told that Minsk was all in flames, that I should go further, to Borisov; there they would place me with a transport of refugees, for evacuation deeper into Russia. So it is to Borisov that I am now making my way, together with the great throng I have met tonight on the road.

Soldiers from decimated regiments, peasants from burned-out villages, workers from destroyed factories, all mingle together in this multitude -- one body with many hands and feet, with bearded faces, caps tilted back. A barefoot peasant from a kolkhoz [Soviet collective agricultural settlement] walks beside a Red Army major, also barefoot, his boots tied together and slung over his shoulder to make walking easier. Next to a soldier cradling a lowered rifle is a peasant woman cradling a suckling infant. As though

a storm wind has broken off half of a tree and is now dragging the crown with all its densely foliaged branches across the ground, so does this human throng move all entwined in one mass. Shoulders and arms jostle each other, feet step on other feet, but no one, whether in the front rows or in the rear, separates from the throng; each is afraid to be left alone. The enemy has sent down "angels of destruction," airborne advance units, and stabbing through the tangled forest blackness are steady flashes of blue, red, and green flame -- flares that the newly landed German parachutists are sending up from the dense woods to show their planes where to release their bombs. The planes themselves, droning on in the darkness high above, also emit their own flares to help them spot their targets. The sky is suddenly lit by flames of all colors, flames of a cold, calm immutability which remain for a long while suspended between earth and sky, like enormous lamps set against the backround of a dark-blue ceiling.

"Get down!" comes the shouted order from

the front rows.

Everyone drops instantly to the ground. I throw myself down among a heap of bodies from which rises a salty, sweaty stench. Somewhere, near or far, there is a thunderous roar, a tremendous bang. A peasant lying to my right shudders all over, as though he knows that the bomb has hit his village, his house. To my left a woman lets out a sob, a wail, and presses her mouth against the earth to keep from screaming. Someone behind me emits a short, abrupt laugh and curses himself and his ancestors unto the tenth generation; someone else heaves a deep sigh, as though the very guts were being ripped from his body:

"Gospodi, pomiluy!" "God have mercy upon us!" [17]

Grade shares his journey with a variety of companions: a band of Red Army deserters, a group of Jews from Minsk, assorted kolkhozniks (members of Soviet collective agricultural settlements), a slightly deranged Jew from Poland. One of his more memorable encounters is with a Jew named Lev Kogan. Kogan is a

disillusioned Communist, a former Party secretary from the Ukraine. He had put his faith in the Party in the hope that it would fulfill its promise to "do away with international hatred and to establish a worldwide brotherhood of peoples." For Kogan and others like him, these ideal ends justified Communism's cruel means.

> The beginning of [Kogan's] undoing comes with the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Before then his wife, like the rest of the Soviet population, had been exposed to continuous anti-Nazi propaganda, which she believed. But the agreement with Hitler had shattered her faith, and she concluded that the anti-Nazi attacks must have been a sham. She had refused to leave with her husband for the safer eastern regions, convinced that the Germans would not wage war on women and children. As Lev Kogan's train moves further and further into eastern Russia, he realizes he has left his wife and children to face certain death. Also it becomes clear to him that the war slogan is not "for the Communist World Proletariat," as he had expected, but "for Mother Russia."

> But to him, a Jew, "Mother Russia" is alien. It is all more than he can bear. He has lost his wife and children, lost his ideals, his faith; his life has ceased to have meaning. He commits suicide, and the only one who understands his tragedy and mourns him is the refugee from the west, Chaim Grade. [18]

Another victim of the Soviet regime rides on Grade's train: a durachok or simpleton. This durachok is a convict, one of a group of temporarily freed captives being sent away from the front lines. In just one year of occupation, the Soviets populated the Baltic republics with slave labor camps. Aware that these prisoners might consider the Nazis as liberators, the Soviets put them on the transport trains along with the fleeing civilians.

The Soviets periodically checked the transports for German spies who have parachuted ahead of their advancing army. Grade's train undergoes such a search, and the durachok is mistaken for a spy. The confused convict, tongue-tied with terror, cannot make no excuse for himself. He jumps off the platform and is shot by a guard. The murder of the innocent durachok causes the

other passengers to despair, and provides Grade with a lesson in Soviet "justice."

As he moves deeper into the Russian back country, Grade is drafted for various tasks: digging trenches to stop German tanks in the town of Orsha; helping with the rye harvest on a kolkhoz in the Saratov Region. The train makes its way through the steppes of Kazakhstan, which Grade paints vividly with his pen.

> Through endless expanses covered with a broad-leafed, cabbagelike weed the train speeds nonstop, except for an occasional brief pause in an open field. Relentlessly pursuing it are hungry dogs of the steppes with sharp, protruding ribs. They neither howl nor bark, but constantly run, panting and baring their teeth, at the open freight-car doors, in the hope of being thrown a piece of stale bread or a dry bone.
>
> Atop the telegraph poles ruffled-feathered birds of prey sit in frozen gloom, as if sunk, like the refugees, in melancholy thoughts...
>
> On the railway tracks opposite, a group of Kazakh women are working with crowbars,

spades, and hammers to repair the cross-ties. They wear threadbare men's clothing -- grease-stained trousers and patched jackets. Even from their faces, yellow and wrinkled with high cheekbones and narrow Kalmuck eyes, it is hard to tell that they are women. Only two things reveal their sex: their small stature and, especially, their rhythmic gait, a gait as infectious, as feminine and coquettish, as if they were dancing on carpets, castanets in hand. When they catch sight of our train, they drop their tools and run after us with a cry of "Chai, chai, chai!" They sing out the word with a gentle softness, and one can tell from their pronunciation that it is the only Russian word they know. Their greatest passion is drinking green tea made from large-cut leaves. The more affluent Kazakhs barter for this tea at train stations, paying for it with watermelons, with round, flat, big, hard cakes, with goat cheese. But the poor women laborers working on the tracks beg for it from the transport trains that pass by the regular stations. "Chai, chai, chai!" The word rings out with both feminine charm

and a helpless, childlike plaintiveness, until the women tire and fall behind. [19]

After a year and a half of wandering, Grade arrives in Stalinabad (Dushanbe), Tadzhikistan, near the borders of China, Afghanistan, and India. He observes, not for the first time, that he is not alone.

> All the Jewish refugees from the west were streaming towards Central Asia, ostensibly because it was warm there. But in their eyes there glistened the fervent dream of getting across the border to Iran or Afghanistan, and from there somehow reaching the land of Israel. In the end the refugees realized that nothing could penetrate the wall of Russian bayonets, no, not even a shadow. At the same time we already knew that in the west, the Germans were leaving no survivors. [20]

Stalinabad is crawling with refugees, most of them

weary, dirty, and hungry. Many of them, like Grade, have arrived without their families. All of them struggle to eke out a living. In fair weather, they congregate in the local City Park:

> The Stalinabad City Park is already carpeted with the yellow leaves of autumn. The refugees who habitually stroll about the park have likewise developed a yellowish, parched, and transparent skin with prominent veins on their hands, as if they, too, are burning with autumnal fever. Many have malaria, others are sick with dysentery. In the evenings an orchestra plays in the park, and on the dance platform girls dance with other girls: the young men have been sent to the front, all gradually scooped up like live fish from a fish-monger's tub. And the healthy young men who have gone away have been replaced by a steady influx of maimed and crippled men who during the day go on rampages in the marketplace as they wait in line for tobacco and beer, and in the evenings gather around the orchestra in the park. [20]

In Stalinabad, Grade gets to know another host of characters, all of whom have stories of their own. A Jewish tailor named Misha Troiman has a brother who, like so many others, imagined himself a part of the Soviet brotherhood. When an army of exiled Poles is formed in Stalinabad to help fight the Nazis, Jewish Poles with Soviet passports are prohibited from joining. Troiman's brother and a group of refugees stage a sitdown strike and demand that the government take away their Soviet passports and give them their old Polish documents; they want to return to Poland and help set up the Soviet system there. But their brethren, the Soviets, betray them and throw them in jail. The tailor, who is separated from his own wife and children, is compelled to support his brother's family while his brother is in prison.

Another personality residing in Stalinabad is the lawyer from Warsaw, Orenstein. Grade knew him in Vilna; Orenstein had fled there immediately after the outbreak of war between Germany and Poland. Orenstein is happy to renew an old acquaintance and takes Grade under his wing, showing him how to survive in his new surroundings.

"Stalinabad is Carthage. And the god of Carthage, to whom human sacrifices were brought, was called Baal-hamon. Carthage, you must know, was a colony of Tyre, of the Phoenicians who brought human sacrifices to their idol Melkart. Baal-hamon, Melkart, and Moloch, they're all one and the same bloodthirsty god. Now do you understand?" This is Orenstein's way of telling me that Tadzhikistan is a Great Russian colony and that the same iron law governs here. "Come along with me and I'll show you how to survive in this world. I survive by sampling."

The market is flooded with Tadzhiks who have led their small donkeys here laden with ripe fruit. Displayed on mats are mountains of watermelons whose rinds, the color of blue water streaked with green veins, look like chunks of marble. Next to them lie mounds of cantaloupes, round ones and oval ones, as transparent as fresh eggs. Orenstein stops at two baskets -- one filled with peaches with flaming red cheeks, the other with ripe apricots that shine like small suns. From each basket he takes a piece of fruit, the

biggest one, and devours both in a trice.

"It's stones you're selling, not fruit!" he shouts at the startled Tadzhik, and before the latter can recover himself Orenstein has already dragged me off. We pass stands with apples, pears, tomatoes, sweet radishes, all of which Orenstein contemplates with gloom-filled eyes but doesn't try to sample. Women stand at these stalls, and women, he explains, are very petty: for a single apple they may scratch out both your eyes. [21]

Grade's benefactor does not remain long in Stalinabad. Orenstein travels on to Samarkand and Bukhara, and eventually dies alone, at an Uzbek kolkhoz. Had he known what his end would be, in some half-barbarous Uzbek village, Grade thinks, Orenstein would have lain down in the middle of the road right outside Warsaw and let the Germans trample him into the earth...

In 1945, Grade returns to Vilna. Wandering through the alleys of the Vilna Ghetto, he confronts the deaths

of his wife and his mother, for whom he was deprived the opportunity to mourn; he confronts the "spirit of the ruins": the loss of his community, his childhood...

> Since my return to Vilna, I have roamed through the seven little alleys that once made up the Ghetto. The narrow alleyways enmesh and imprison me, like subterranean passages, like caves filled with ancient graves. Orphaned, they cast a spell upon me; their emptiness hovers in my brain, they attach themselves to me like seven chains of stone. Yet I have no desire to free myself of them. I want them to carve still deeper into my body, into my flesh. I feel the dark, icy stiffness of bolted gates and doors creep under my skin. Shattered windows stare out through my eyes, and someone within me cries aloud:
>
> "So be it! I want to become a ruin!..." [22]

Grade's pain is immense, his lamentation bitter; there are no bodies left to mourn, only emptiness:

All that is left is walls, roofs, pillars, cornices, tottering beams. All that is left is broken iron bedsteads, the rusty entrails of Primus stoves, twisted forks, knives, spoons -- without the mouths. And I am left with eyes without tears, like window-holes with neither frames nor glass. I cannot squeeze even a single tear from my eyes, just as not even a single solitary Jew sticks his head out a window-hole. Behold! An entire row of shops, shuttered and bolted; an entire street with locked gates and doors. I think I hear laughter -- behind one of the bolted gates someone is stifling his laughter, or perhaps choking on a consumptive cough.

"Open up, you brigand, open up!"

No one laughs, no one answers. [23]

Grade's recounting of his return to Vilna is almost surrealistic. Even his stories about encounters with other Jews -- Jews who have somehow managed to survive the various atrocities, the firing squads, the mass graves -- have an unreal quality to them. Grade is unable to accept the destruction he faces, even as he

stands upon the ruins of the Vilna Ghetto. In his discussion with one of the survivors of the Ghetto, the shoemaker Balberishkin, Grade cries out his refusal to accept that what had happened could ever happen:

"Why did your son flee without you?" I ask the shoemaker, who is still staring at the boot in his hands.

"He was a member of the Communist Youth. His friends had gotten him involved, and people in Vilna were saying it was dangerous for a Communist to stay under the Germans. But that all the Jews were doomed, that nobody believed."

"And I don't believe it even now!" I cry out. If I'd been told that they had driven all the Jews into the Ghetto and that they had all died there in an epidemic, that I would have believed; that an earthquake had swallowed them all, that I would have believed. But that this was done by human beings, by men who have hands and feet as I do, eat and sleep as I do, that I do not believe. I know they did it, but I don't believe it. No

matter how often it is told to me and explained to me, I still do not understand why they did it -- I will never understand it." [24]

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Inna Hecker Grade, "Forward" to My Mother's Sabbath Days, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1986. p. ix.
2. Ibid., p. xii.
3. Ibid., pp. xiv-xv.
4. My Mother's Sabbath Days, p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 7
6. Ibid., pp. 26-27.
7. Ibid., pp. 63-64.
8. Ibid., pp. 66-67.
9. Ibid., pp. 56-57
10. Ibid., pp. 85-86
11. Ibid., p. 202.
12. Ibid., p. 108.
13. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
14. Ibid., p. 132.
15. Ibid., p. 239.
16. Ibid., p. 240.
17. Ibid., pp. 245-246.
18. "Foreword," p. xiii.
19. My Mother's Sabbath Days, pp. 300-301.
20. Ibid., p. 310.

Notes to Chapter Two continued

21. Ibid., pp. 310-311.

22. Ibid., p. 335.

23. Ibid., p. 336.

24. Ibid., p. 345.

The Well in one of Vilna's synagogue courtyards stands in a tragic state of disrepair. Mende the Porter -- also known as Mende the Calf -- is a simple-minded Jew, but he can no longer tolerate the suffering of Jewish women and children who drag themselves across Vilna and pay to use the well of the Christians. Mende decides that the well in the synagogue courtyard must be repaired. His desire evolves into an obsession, and as he travels the town in search of donations to his cause, he becomes entangled in the lives of his fellow Jews.

With Mende as his central figure, Grade focuses in on Vilna's simple people. The intellectuals, the well-to-do merchants and the exceptionally learned also populate this novel, but they remain mostly in the backround. The Well is a story about Vilna's average, everyday folk -- their faith, their superstitions, and their customs.

Reb Bunem and his wife Tsivie-Reyze are separated by sorrow and bitterness over the deaths of their children. Bunem accepts their loss, and even waxes

philosophical about it, comparing his lot to that of Job. He is continually trying to find biblical explanations to placate his wife and to temper her grief. But Tsivie-Reyze refuses to be comforted.

> "Job is a foolish parable. Why," she asked, "did Job's so-called friends plead with him and not with his wife? After all, she was the mother of his children, not his maid. If those so-called friends had tried to convince his wife that their children died because they had been sinful, she would have scratched their eyes out." [1]

In despair of silencing her complaints, Bunem decides to give up his shopkeeper's life and become a porush, a recluse who spends his days pouring over the holy books in a bes-midrash (house of study). Because he is not learned, Bunem knows he is not entitled to the subsidy provided to the other porushim by the community; nor is he capable of earning something on the side as the others do. Bunem therefore relies on the good-will and charity of his own wife. But the other porushim survive by traditional means.

The subsidy that the porushim of the Gaon's House of Study received barely sufficed for three days of the seven. They had to earn something on the side. An overworked storekeeper would hire a porush to study a chapter of the Mishnah in memory of a relative who had died. A widow would hire a porush to say Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, after her husband for a whole year, because she either had no sons or could not rely on them. On the eve of Passover the Gaon's House of Study was a market place. The recluses bought the leavened bread and food that was not kosher for Passover from all the Jews in the city, and according to ancient tradition, they resold it for the duration of the Passover to a gentile, in this case to the gentile who took care of the bath. But the porushes derived their major income from the women who came to have the portents of their dreams interpreted. [2]

Knowing that Bunem has a china shop and might be able to help him in his quest to rebuild the well, Mende

the Porter seeks him out. Bunem takes the request back to Tsivie-Reyze, but she refuses. If he would only come back to work in the shop, perhaps they might make enough money to afford a contribution, she says. Bunem is irritated by her selfishness but does nothing. Only after much cajoling does Mende succeed in persuading the porush to return to his wife and his shop so that they will be able to help him.

Yudke the Freethinker, who dreams of revolution and utopia, Lazar, the embittered bachelor scribe, and Yerochum, the philosopher who believes that everything is an illusion -- all vie for the hand of the widow Badane's daughter, Rebecca. Mende does not attempt to solicit funds from the rebel, but he does ask Yerochum and Lazar for money. In exchange for their pledges, both men enlist Mende as a matchmaker. But Yerochum is dependent upon his father the flour merchant, while Lazar is independently wealthy. Mende decides he'll have better luck representing the scribe.

When Mende approaches the widow and her daughter as Lazar's agent, he discovers that Rebecca favors the philosopher. But the widow Badane is a young woman, strong-willed and hungry for a life of her own. She dismisses all matches for her daughter until she can make a match for herself. Her nervous, pale daughter

must put aside her love for Yerochum, just as Mende must put aside his hopes for a matchmaker's fee.

When Reb Kopl the beadle learns that Mende the Porter has been meddling in matchmaking, he becomes upset. Times are changing in Vilna, and as they change, Kopl's prospects for earning a living seem to grow dimmer and dimmer. Even his efficiency as a beadle is challenged, as competition from a neighboring synagogue makes it harder to get a minyan (the quorum of ten Jews needed for prayer services). In Reb Kopl, Grade captures the tensions that existed in Vilna as a result of changing times:

> Reb Kopl was a short dumpy Jew in a linen cap and ankle-boots, who always looked harassed. He was the messenger of the synagogue's judicial council, a beadle, and a matchmaker. But by then Jewish merchants were going to lawyers and to the common law courts to settle their differences, not to the rabbinical judicial council, and the couples around the synagogue courtyard managed their own courtships and didn't require matchmakers. Once a year, at Chanukah, Reb

Kopl sold Chanukah candles, and during the year he dealt in prayer shawls, mezuzahs for doorposts, and prayer books. Jews, however, were impoverished and were forced to pray in their old prayer shawls and with shredded prayer books. So Reb Kopl began to go from door to door at Succoth time with a citron and a palm branch, the two symbols of the feast of harvest, for the housewives to bless and thereby fulfill a mitzva. His customers, the women of the poorest district, complained that they hadn't the money to pay for it... after the holiday, when Reb Kopl came to collect from his customers, they were not home. Their faces burned with shame at having nothing to pay him and when they saw him coming, they ran from their homes. So he had fallen back on his main source of income -- he was the beadle of the Congregation of the Seven Witnesses. The women, however, now hired the recluses of the Gaon's House of Study to say the prayers for the dead instead of asking the beadle as they had once done. And the rival beadle of the Old-New Synagogue often stole worshipers right from under his

nose when he was gathering a minyan for prayers. [3]

Having failed in his matchmaking efforts to raise any funds for the well, Mende resorts to begging in the synagogue courtyard. But before he can do so, he must get permission from the resident beggar, a scowling, bitter, nearly-blind soul, whom the courtyard has named Muraviov after a cruel former governor of Vilna. Muraviov rents phylacteries, prayer shawls, and skullcaps to mourners and other Jews who come to pray in the Gravediggers' shul where he resides. And despite his greatly diminished eyesight, he is an expert beggar. Mende stands in awe of the mendicant's masterful technique -- while Grade shows himself to be a keen observer of human nature and a master of talmudic quotation in his own right:

Immediately after the service, he collected his rented merchandise, extorting as many ten-cent pieces as possible from his customers, then forced his way to the exit. There he stood at the door of the vestibule,

not letting anyone out before he was handed a donation...

Because his eyes had been faulty since childhood, Muraviov never attended even an elementary school. But at the table of the Gravediggers' synagogue, where the preacher studied with members of the congregation, he had absorbed many quotations and talmudic sayings, and he remembered everything that could be of use to him in his profession. A young man, clean-shaven, left the services, the type of young man who discovered a synagogue only when he had to say Kaddish. Muraviov caught the mourner by the arm:

"Give charity. Charity will redeem all your sins."

The young man was frightened by the blind beggar as by a messenger from the world beyond who had come to remind him that because of his misdeeds, his dead father was being tortured in hell. The young sinner snatched some change from his pocket and threw it into the beggar's palm.

"I already gave you twenty cents today for the prayer shawl and phylacteries,"

complained the young man a little sourly.

"For twenty cents you want to bring your father into heaven?" cried Muraviov. "The twenty cents were for rental; now you owe me charity as a poor man."

An elderly Jew, just out of bed after a serious illness, left the synagogue with measured steps. Saved from the clutches of the Angel of Death by the tears and prayers of his wife and children, the invalid had come meekly to the synagogue, prepared to thank his fellow worshipers for wishing him a long and full life. Muraviov blocked his path:

"Give charity. He who gives no charity is worthy of death."

"Why should you curse me? Haven't I been sick long enough?" The invalid's hands and feet trembled as though he were a puppet on a string, and with tears in his gentle eyes he handed Muraviov his purse; he would have done anything to avoid his curse.

A broad-shouldered, pot-bellied Jew left the synagogue, a businessman who owed money, owed back taxes, carried on semi-illegal dealings, but had a good heart and enjoyed

doing favors for people; a genial man who believed in making the best of all worlds, who was a member in good standing of the synagogue and a gay blade among his more jovial friends. Muraviov fell upon him:

"Give charity. He who gives no charity is robbed by the gentiles and put into prison."

"Are you threatening me?" The pot-bellied Jew pretended to laugh it off, putting his hand in his pocket nonetheless, as though Muraviov might really be the governor of the province who had to be bribed. [4]

Mende persuades Muraviov to let him stand in the doorway of the shul and beg for contributions to repair the well. Unfortunately, Mende learns that Muraviov's talent is an acquired one:

[Muraviov] had vacated his usual place at the door. Mende had no time to think about it, because the congregation was already pouring out of the synagogue. He stretched out his hand to the first Jew coming toward

him:

"Give charity for the well. Charity will redeem all your sins."

Instead of saying it, as Muraviov had done the previous day, to a young sinner, Mende was addressing an elderly Jew with a long smooth white beard and piously lowered eyes. The old man looked at the beggar who seemed like a healthy peasant and smiled:

"The people of Vilna complain that there are no castigators to call us to repentance. Yet here we have a new preacher in our midst! Where is the poor man who usually stands here?" The old man looked around till he found Muraviov huddled in a corner, as though he had been driven there by the healthy peasant who deprived him of his place. The old Jew handed the blind man a coin and the beggar replied humbly:

"Giving charity is more important than all other mitzvas combined and for a penny of charity you are assured of a place in the world to come."

Mende saw the invalid who had come in to give thanks the day before.

"Give charity for the well. He who gives no charity is worthy of death." He repeated the same refrain with which Muraviov had attacked the weakened man the previous day. But yesterday's invalid felt a little stronger that day and was no longer afraid of threats. And, besides, this new beggar with the gaping eyes was not as terrifying as the blind beggar had been. He trembled with indignation:

"And if I refuse to give you anything, will you strike me? You impudent scum!"

Mende was bewildered. Muraviov whined from his corner:

"He who gives charity will have long life."

The invalid beamed. Today the blind beggar wasn't cursing him as he had the day before. On the contrary, he spoke with respect, wishing him long life. So he gave Muraviov a generous donation, and moved down the stairs with small steps, wiping his face, neck, lips and beard with a handkerchief as his wife and children had done when he lay feverish and in a sweat.

"Give charity for the well. He who

gives no charity is robbed by the gentiles." Mende pounced on a thin, shabby Jew with troubled eyes and a sullen expression.

"Could I be any poorer than I am? Could the gentiles steal anything from me?" laughed the Jew. "Here, you can have my troubles."

"When a poor man gives charity, he himself is soon enriched," wailed Muraviov like a soft violin.

"That's a good blessing!" The poor man searched through his pockets and gave his last pennies to Muraviov. "Those are the words of a fine Jew, a good Jew, not of the courtyard trash."

Mende was drenched in sweat. He was earning nothing but curses. [5]

Defeated, Mende returns home to his wife, Mikhle, who upbraids him for ignoring their own troubles. Mikhle has been unable to have children, and moreover is mentally unstable, which makes her fair game for her fellow feather-pluckers at the slaughterhouse. To add to her woes, she has "the rose" -- a swelling of the foot.

Mende comforts his wife, and manages to convince her to contribute a few zlotys for the well. Her donation brings him luck; on his way to the healer for a cure for Mikhle, he finds work in his own profession: Reb Avigdor, Yerochum's father, has a shipment of flour to be moved into his store. While Mende is waiting for his wages, the widow Badane wanders into the shop. Since Reb Avigdor shows obvious interest in the young and flirtatious widow, Mende is able to negotiate a handsome contribution for the well by pointing out that the poor woman must draw her water from ten streets away.

Having collected ten zlotys toward the well from Reb Avigdor to add to the five he received from Mikhle, Mende proceeds to the healer for a cure for his wife's foot. The Well is a veritable treasure house of old wives' tales; practically all of its characters are superstitious. Through the character of Sarah the Conjuror, Grade shows himself a master of his subject. (pp.258-259)

> "It's nothing, it's nothing," chuckled the old woman. "Hang a horse's tooth around his neck and he'll stop screaming in his sleep.

If that doesn't help, tell him to lie with his eyes closed and think of a waterfall, and he'll fall asleep, sure as gold..."

"You must never call a sickness by name. Just tell me where it hurts and I'll know myself what ails her," bristled Sarah, and her toothless gums ground out prescriptions and cures. For headaches she suggested that water be poured over a hot stone till the steam enveloped the patient's head. Also that oats be boiled in vinegar and applied as compresses. More effective still would be to boil a head of cabbage in wine, to drink the wine, then apply the cabbage to the head. But for the gout there was no cure except smearing whiskey and mustard mixed with soap bubbles over the patient's body, tying a knot of hair shorn off a black dog around her neck, and telling her to avoid looking at dead cats or dead fish. [6]

For her cures and conjurings the old woman takes no fee for herself; she insists only that the supplicants drop a few coins into one of the multitude of charity boxes which surround her chair. After observing her

a while, Mende concludes that she is an even better collector than Muravioy the beggar. He pleads the case of his neighbors and their broken well before her, and she generously offers him the money given her for miscellaneous causes.

Mende hastens to take the box of coins to Reb Bunem and Tsivie-Reyze to have its treasures counted. The weight of the box proves misleading; Tsivie-Reyze determines that its contents amount to a mere eight zlotys and seventy cents.

Downcast, Mende returns to the widow Badane and asks he to prevail on Reb Avigdor for more money for the well. But the widow refuses Mende's request, even as she refuses to deny her own happiness for the sake of her miserable daughter.

Tsivie-Reyze suggests that Mende and Bunem go to the town's Zionist rabbi for help. Their visit to his synagogue, Tiferes Bochurim, provides a glimpse of how religion and politics were mixed in Vilna.

> Young men who were not overly pious, yet refused to doff their Judaism, would study and pray in the junior congregation. The members of Tiferes Bochurim were quiet, refined boys

from decent families who were not brazen enough to go bareheaded or to play football or row along the River Viliye on the Sabbath...From time to time some students would attend, children of rabbinic families who had left the yeshiva for the university. In vain had their fathers threatened to expel them from home and to mourn them as dead like regular converts. All threats had proved useless. But when these students entered their fourth or fifth semesters, they were drawn back to the synagogue. They would wake up on a Sabbath morning and find it impossible to shave. So they would put on their four-cornered student hats, take along a prayer book, and head for Tiferes Bochurim.

The rabbi of the congregation was Rabbi Yechiel Sroelov, a short, thin man with a small, gray beard, a voice that was forever hoarse, and a great hump on his back. Every Sabbath he studied the Haftorah, the section from the Prophets that is read after the Pentateuch, with his students. Although he was hoarse, his incantation was so sweet and so expressive that even older Jews would make

the climb up the winding stairs of Tiferes Bochurim to hear Rabbi Sroelov interpreting the Prophets...

The more orthodox and non-Zionist segment, however, the members of Vilna's Agudah Organization, did not approve of Rabbi Sroelov. Their head was Yudel Tsafones, son of a wealthy and prominent family, whose father-in-law was one of the biggest men in the town...

Yudel Tsafones had heard that in Tiferes Bochurim, at the closing meal of every Sabbath, the "Hatikvah," the national hymn of Zionism, was sung, and that silver shekels, whose proceeds were used for reclaiming the Land of Israel, were sold. Rabbi Sroelov was once said to have chanted the Haftorah "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubabel thou shalt become a plain" with the interpretation that "we are blessed with Zerubabels in our own time too -- Doctor Herzl, for example, who intervened with the Turkish Sultan; and Nahum Sokolov, second president of the World Zionist Organization, who could speak twelve languages." More recently, it had been rumored that Rabbi Sroelov studied the Bible with his

students using Moses Mendelssohn's commentary, and that he had the temerity to refer to Moses Mendelssohn as a great innovator.

"Moses Mendelssohn was a hunchback and Sroelov is a hunchback. His brain is more twisted than his back," said Yudel Tsafones, and the saying spread through town. But the Jews in the neighborhood of the synagogue courtyard despised Tsafones. [7]

Reb Bunem and Mende set out on their mission of mercy on a Sabbath with the idea that the pledges customarily taken for the honor of blessing the Scroll of the Torah might be donated toward the repair of the well. Their idea is immediately subject to criticism because of a historical fact:.

In Vilna every organization had its Sabbath, and the Sabbath following the fast day of Tisha B'Av belonged to the Zionists. On that day Tiferes Bochurim, stronghold of the religious Zionist organization, Mizrachi, was filled with worshipers and decorated with colored streamers, blue and white flags, and

paper Stars of David. [8]

It is also the day, as Reb Bunem and Mende are told, that the congregation collects donations for Palestine.

But Mende is not dissuaded. He addresses Rabbi Sroelov, who gladly agrees that donations be taken for both Palestine and the broken well.

"Rabbi, our neighbors are without a drop of water, " pleaded Mende, heartened by the rabbi's having consulted him as an equal.

"Water, water!" Rabbi Sroelov unexpectedly banged his lectern to get the attention of the congregants. He began speaking to the chant of the Haftorah. "In today's passage, 'And I besought' from Deuteronomy, we read that God was angry with Moses and refused to let him enter the Land of Israel because of the waters of Meribah. The Children of Israel wandered through the desert, parched with thirst, and cried: 'Give us water! Water!' And Moses answered in anger, 'Hear me,

you rebellious ones!' And that constituted Moses' sin, that he said to the Jews, 'Hear me, you rebellious ones!' Today we too are in a similar situation. The Jews of the synagogue courtyard have no water to drink because the well is broken. So today when we go up to the reading of the Torah, we must contribute for the well, so that we may someday live to enter the Land of Israel." [9]

Some protest ensues, but the rabbi remains firm. The first two witnesses show their displeasure by stipulating that their pledges are for Palestine only. But the third makes a generous pledge of fifty zlotys, to be divided evenly between each cause, and his magnanimity inspires more of the same. As a result, Mende is able to raise seventy-five zlotys to add to the sum he has already collected.

Since the workmen want two hundred zlotys to fix the well, the porter's work is only half done. Reb Bunem installs a charity box on the counter of his china shop. But it is once again Mende's audacity and courage that finally nets the necessary sum.

When the sage Rabbi of Radun, the Chofets Chaim,

calls for a rabbinical assembly in Vilna, the town rolls out the red carpet, dramatizing the love of Jews for Torah and Torah scholars. The convention is held in a local theater. Grade describes the rabbinical assembly so vividly, it is as if the reader were witnessing the event.

> In the very back rows and along the walls sat students of Vilna's Rameles Yeshiva, young boys with fuzz on their cheeks and the first show of hair on their upper lips, like newly-blossomed saplings in spring. They looked with respect, curiosity and envy at the young rabbis in the rows ahead of them, and their soft young eyes glowed with their own dreams of becoming rabbis.
>
> The rustle and swirl of midsummer occupied the middle rows, in the pine tree foliage of thick, velvety beards and pointed, bristling goatees. These were the young men who had inherited town rabbinates from their fathers-in-law, or had bought them outright for money. Their wives were still young, pretty and in good health. Their children were still small

enough to obey their parents. Their dowries were not exhausted, so that they hadn't yet begun to quarrel with the synagogue trustees. Rabbinic assemblies provided them with the opportunity for seeing old classmates and boldly discussing a rise to better congregations, just as they had once discussed a rise to greater wisdom or to a better match.

In the front rows, below the stage, were the troubled murmurs of autumn. Here sat scowling rabbis of fifty, angry with their wives, children and hometowns. Their wives complained that their wages were inadequate; their children were removed from the Torah; and their towns were divided into warring factions, the more orthodox complaining that the rabbi showed too much lenience to the enlightened, and the more enlightened threatening to bring in a more modern rabbi of their own. Beset by worries, they sat combing out their beards with all ten fingers, as though to comb out the knots, to root out the yellow leaves and tear out the gray threads. And on some of the faces only the ragged,

gnawed remnants of beards remained, glazed by the first frost.

On the stage itself reigned hoary winter, a thick mass of oaks in snowy furs. These were the oldest scholars of Lithuania, rabbis with childlike eyes and wrinkled brows, exhausted by a lifetime of learning. To the right of Aaron of Pinsk sat an old man with a parchment face, a face that seemed ready for the next generation to frame as a symbol of great piety and genius. Beside him sat another elder, his skullcap askew, looking angrily over the rims of the spectacles that perched on the end of his nose. He belonged to the generation of rabbis that threatened excommunication and maintained orthodoxy by wielding a big stick. Scholars are stern men says the Gemorra, and this old man was the proof: he was angry with the trustees, with the young men of his congregation, even with the younger scholars. In his day students of Torah had sat out their days alone on the benches of remote villages, teaching schoolboys for a living, and eating at a different home every night of the week. Today the houses of

study in the small towns lay empty because all the students congregated in the big city yeshivas. Well, the world had yet to see geniuses emerge from these great modern yeshivas.

But as if to demonstrate that scholarship is not necessarily harsh, there sat beside him the cheerful Rabbi of Druzgane. An old man who could no longer concentrate on the more difficult problems of the Talmud, he had gone back to studying the Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary, like a beginner, and he based his sermons on passages of the Psalms. He was so old that even the Lithuanian rabbis, who didn't believe in personal rabbinic benedictions, would come to ask his blessing...

Beside him sat a short young man with nose, mouth and eyes like pinheads, and with the unprepossessing beard of an assistant beadle. Nevertheless the members of the audience didn't take their eyes off him, and even the elders on the stage moved apart to give him more room. He was the greatest of the young scholars. Geniuses trembled before

him, and he knew it. He moved his head in all directions with great assurance, as though scoffing at the graybeards. "The Torah sometimes makes its home with younger men," suggested his every movement and gesture...

The chasidic Rabbi of Slonim sat at the head table as though on a bed of coals. It was too constricted, too hot, too constrained, he could not hum to himself or sing aloud with his chasidic followers. He was actually at home, yet felt himself to be a total stranger. The Rabbi of Slonim was undeniably a Lithuanian, therefore a legitimate member of this assembly; but he was also a Chasid. And so he sat as a stranger among the stony Lithuanian Misnagdim, the traditional foes of chasidism, fidgeting continuously, and his half-dozen followers in the auditorium fidgeted along with him.

The rabbis on the platform sat spread apart, their torsos sprawling over the tabletop, their faces drowned in bearded density. When someone rose to speak, the others would listen, eyes glued to the speaker, ears pricked attentively, and whatever passed

through their minds was revealed by their fingers. Delicate fingers, grown pale and feeble, that wound phylacteries every morning, thumbed through the pages of holy books, caressed the Scrolls of the Torah, dipped into cleansing water countless times each day; soft fingers with puffy tips that extended in greeting, in loving blessing over the heads of grandchildren, or in the stiff reach of the priestly benediction; fingers that handled sacred objects of worship with tender respect, that covered the eyes during the "Hear O Israel" prayer, and broke into a self-castigating fist during the penitential prayers of the Day of Atonement; gnarled fingers that dipped and ascended in exposition of a talmudic problem; fingers that plucked hair from beard when confronted with a difficult section of Gemorra; fingers yellowed from nicotine and snuff -- these fingers moved, tapped the table, debated and argued among themselves... [10]

It is known that Grade did attend such an assembly. A newspaper clipping dated June 22, 1939 from the Yiddish Daily Unzer Tog notes his presence at what was probably the last rabbinical convention ever held in Eastern Europe:

> Rabbi Regensberg, the octogenarian Rav of Zambrow, the grandfather of Grade's wife, speaks, summoning his last strength. His speech reminds one of the times when upon hearing such words, Jews were prepared for the utmost self-sacrifice for the sake of the Holy Name. In the audience was Chaim Grade. [11]

Into the midst of this august gathering blunders the hero, Mende the Calf. After a good deal of confusion, he manages to present his case to the rabbis seated on the podium. To his surprise he is met with overwhelming and cheerful support. "If we rabbis ask the community to support yeshivas, we should ourselves show that we are ready to help the needy," reasons the chairman of the assembly,

Mende is in the midst of "passing the hat" -- actually the skullcap of one of the esteemed sages on

podium -- when he is interrupted by a talmudic conflict taking place on the platform. Vilna's behind-the-scenes organizer of the conference, Yudel Tsafones, has aired an old grudge against the chair of the assembly, Rabbi Aaron of Pinsk. The rabbi is compelled to publicly defend an old halachic decision concerning a ritual slaughterer who was accused of frequenting a brothel. Grade's display of talmudic knowledge and argumentation reveals that despite his own adopted secularism, he had not lost his touch:

> "Maimonides says that if someone is guilty in one respect, his slaughter knife must be inspected. And if his knife hasn't been inspected, then the animals he has slaughtered must be declared non-kosher, even after the fact."
>
> "But the Tur cites an example from Rabenu Asher that says if a shochet is guilty in one respect, his knife needn't be inspected, and the Beth Joseph says the same," the Rabbi of Pinsk hurled over his shoulder at the brilliant young rabbi. "And even according to Maimonides, one suspected of obscenity is not

necessarily suspected of impure slaughter, because we can say that his passions overcame him, as in the decision of the Achronim. This should certainly be the interpretation in the case of the shochet of Lutsk, where there weren't even any proper witnesses, only market women." [12]

The quarrel is brought to a sudden end by the arrival of the assembly's most important personage. Instead of introducing us to his father-in-law, Rabbi Regensburg, Grade pays tribute to another influential sage of the period, the Chofets Chaim.

The rabbis standing in silent anticipation heard a noise outside as of an onrushing flood. They understood that a street crowd had besieged the Chofets Chaim's carriage, and that dozens of Jews were struggling to get a good look at him and to ask his blessing. The noise came closer and closer until it collided with the walls of the building. Gay lilting voices mingled with complaining ones, while the silence in the hall grew deeper and more

respectful. Then steps were heard backstage. The silence fluttered in the air on heavy fiery wings and everyone stood frozen, motionless, as if locked in the most devout prayer. Several students of his yeshiva in Radun carried the over ninety-year-old rabbi in on their arms, placed him in a chair at the head of the table, then immediately stepped back. The audience in the hall swayed as though about to rush forward, but their feet remained riveted to the floor.

The Chofets Chaim sat with his eyes closed, dozing. No one dared speak, cough, or even breathe, lest he wake the old man. But foreheads were furrowed, and heads shook sadly:

"The great light is growing dim."
"Such a tiny man? Why he is just a bag of bones!" thought Mende...He stared at the Chofets Chaim's tiny nose, his neat little white beard and childlike white hands that barely reached out of his sleeves. "Why he's wearing a plain cap, not even a rabbinic fur hat!" Mende almost shouted aloud. The Chofets Chaim opened his eyes, looked around and

smiled sadly, as though asking everyone's pardon for having fallen asleep in his infirmity.

Rabbi Israel Meyer Ha-Cohen of Radun -- as the Chofets Chaim signed his name in his official capacity -- could no longer walk. He had to be carried everywhere and cared for like a child. His family and friends had not wanted him to attend the assembly. But he had insisted. "I would regret not going. Give me my Sabbath coat, and let us be on our way!" he had shouted, and the others had been forced to give in.

The old men on the platform went over to him one after the other, greeted him, and then stood around smiling, delighted that he had recognized them, his friends of the past fifty years. When the Chofets Chaim moved, ten hoary heads bent over him with respect and awe. He mumbled something and immediately ten pairs of hands helped him to his feet..." [13]

Mende departs from the assembly considerably richer, albeit without a blessing for children from the

famous sage. The community is amazed at Mende's success, and since he has already collected most of the money, the courtyard residents throw themselves behind the project. The workmen are summoned, the price determined, and the balance of the cost raised.

Muraviov the beggar learns that a great celebration is planned for the completion of the well, and that Mende's name is to be inscribed on the plaque below that of the maggid who built the well. Since Muraviov had contributed nothing toward the well and had even allowed Mende to make a fool of himself by begging at the Gravediggers' shul, he is not about to enjoy Mende's party. Muraviov intends to have a celebration of his own. With the fortune he has amassed in his years of begging, he has secretly employed Lazar the Scribe to transcribe a Torah scroll. The scribe is pleased to be honored with the assignment; because Lazar is a bachelor and shaves his beard, the orthodox Jews do not trust him to write out holy works, and he generally contents himself with repairing mezuzahs and phylactery cases, and with braiding ritual fringes.

Even a Jew with perfect eyesight must be an expert to proofread a Torah Scroll, and Muraviov, being nearly blind, questions Lazar endlessly to avoid being taken

advantage of. To convince him of his trustworthiness, Lazar the delivers a recitation of the knowledge and laws of scribal art to his customer. In this passage, Grade, too, reveals the breadth of his own knowledge:

> "The parchment must be ruled in straight lines so that the letters do not droop or hang crookedly. The parchment must not be less than six spans long, like the tablets of Moses. There have to be between forty-two and sixty lines on every sheet. Or there could also be seventy-two lines, or ninety-eight, depending upon the size of the Scroll and the size of the script. The margin at the top must be three fingers wide, the one at the bottom, five fingers wide, and there must be a space of two fingers between the columns of writing. A sheet of parchment should contain no fewer than three columns, no more than nine. Each column must be wide enough to hold thirty letters. There should be a space of one line between each pair of lines, a space of one letter between each pair of words, and even between two letters there should be a space of

a hair's breadth. No letter should be broken, nor should any two letters be joined. If a child that is neither simple nor exceptionally gifted cannot read it, then the Scroll is declared unfit." /[14]

Though the plot of The Well is admittedly thin, Grade has crammed into it not only a wealth of Jewish trivia and Talmudic knowledge, but a multitude of themes as well. Grade's story is a hymn to the commoner, to the everyday, hardworking Jew of Vilna's synagogue courtyard. Grade does not romanticize poverty in the novel, but simply describes it in matter-of-fact terms: how Yerochum, the son of the flour merchant, huddles and shivers in his rags; the shabbiness of flat the widow Badane shares with her daughter; the unwashed and unkempt state of Muraviov, the blind beggar. While describing the wretched living conditions of his characters, Grade also praises their collective values: the basic humility of someone like Mende the Porter; the untrammeled faith of a Reb Bunem, who trusts in God even while seeking justification for his childrens' death; the genuine love of the courtyard residents for a Torah scholar like the Chofets Chaim or a simple Rabbi

Sroelov.

Grade does not exaggerate the goodness of the life and lives he writes about, nor does he eliminate all mention of the evil in their midst. He includes examples of assimilation, greed, and pride: a scribe who shaves his beard; the arrangement of marriages without matchmakers; lack of modesty between the sexes; a beggar who hoards his wealth and seeks to gain honor through his meanly-given gifts.

The Well is a simple story about complicated times. By writing in a sincere manner about ordinary people, Grade found a way to educate the masses about the customs, values and livelihood of the Vilna in which he lived. And Ruth Wisse's translation of The Well has made one of Grade's most accessible works even more accessible.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Chaim Grade, The Well. Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1967. p.15
2. Ibid., p.23.
3. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
4. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
5. Ibid., pp. 105-107.
6. Ibid., pp. 258-259.
7. Ibid., pp. 148-150.
8. Ibid., p. 154.
9. Ibid., pp. 163-164.
10. Ibid., pp. 189-194.
11. Inna Hecker Grade, "Forward" to My Mother's Sabbath Days, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1986. p. vii.
12. Grade, The Well, p. 218.
13. Ibid., pp. 221-222.
14. Ibid., pp. 247-248.

The Yeshiva, Grade's longest work, was first published in two volumes Yiddish in 1967; Curt Leviant's English translation of the novel appeared in 1976. Winner of the Jewish Book Council's award for best novel of 1978, it has been called "one of the greatest thoroughly Jewish novels ever."

The Yeshiva deals not with the interaction between the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, nor with the hostile world which surrounded them; rather, it concerns itself with the internal Jewish world. Grade's novel is a saga about traditional teachers and students of Talmud, a unique panoramic view of Eastern European yeshiva life which stands unparalleled in the realm of fiction.

Grade writes with an insider's insight. Not only does he draw and develop a plethora of believable, life-size characters: teachers, students, townspeople, even members of other Jewish sects. Grade is gentle in his description of the lives of these characters; his view is never distorted by nostalgia, sentiment, or even anger. He informs us of yeshiva recruitment techniques and shows the inner workings of yeshiva politics. He illustrates in great detail Musarist teaching methods, study, and worship. He relates stories with wit and

candor of the idiosyncracies of yeshiva students, the hiding of secular books under the Talmud during school, and the way a community chooses its rabbi. And he takes us into the hearts and minds of his characters, sharing with us their thought processes, their inner dilemmas, their hopes and their disappointments. In his introduction to his translation, Curt Leviant wrote:

> Chaim Grade is able to depict this panorama of Jewish life because he is the only Yiddish writer who is intimate with both Torah learning and secular life...Grade is totally at home in the rabbinic world. He knows the yeshiva, the scholars, the students and teachers; he knows their lives and habits, their garb and quirks, the predictable rhythms of their lives and the unpredictable flashes of exceptional behavior. [1]

The Yeshiva has a multitude of plots. Each character, each community, has its own story. The art of The Yeshiva is in how these stories are woven together. The Yeshiva unfolds in the communities of

Novaredok, Nareva, Amdur, Lomzhe, Vilna, Valkenik, and Dekshne. Tsemakh Atlas, the central character of the novel, is also the agent who takes us from one location to another. Tsemakh, a musar "seeker" and teacher, is a complex character. Though his roles as recruiter and teacher require him to embody faith and discipline, Tsemakh is plagued by disbelief. To fulfill his tasks, he is compelled to bury his doubts in musar texts at the Novaredok yeshiva, the most extreme of musarist institutions.

Tsemakh becomes famous for his dedication in bringing new students to the yeshiva, but comes to be at odds with the yeshiva principal. To minimize the conflict of personalities, the yeshiva sends Tsemakh to establish a satellite school in Amdur. There he becomes engaged to a young woman in hopes of escaping Novaredok and founding his own school. But when he discovers that he has been misled by her father and the townspeople, he breaks off the engagement. Tsemakh flees to his hometown, Lomzhe, where he becomes even more entangled with the secular world, with eros, and with his yetzer hara (evil inclination).

In Lomzhe, Tsemakh meets and marries the attractive sister of a well-to-do shopkeeper, and attempts to assume a role in her family's business. His efforts to

immerse himself in worldly affairs are unsuccessful. A visit from some of his former yeshiva friends helps to convince him that he can never rid himself of the Novaredok musar influence; he is infected with the musarist disease of fault-finding in himself and in everyone around him. When his ways and temperament finally bring him to ruin and ill-favor with his in-laws, he leaves his sensual secular wife and returns to Novaredok.

Tsemakh's doubts about God's existence and the divinity of the Torah prevent him from feeling at home in the yeshiva. He mourns his life's errors, particularly that of abandoning his first fiancee (who dies of a broken heart), and becomes a penitent and a recluse. Nonetheless he continues to be plagued by his lusts. He is pursued first by the lonely wife of a traveling salesman, who is also his landlord's daughter, and then by his own wife, who attempts to draw him back home. Eventually Tsemakh concludes that he is destined to be dissatisfied with his life. He seeks the advice of an older and wiser sage, who instructs him to suppress his disappointment and return to his wife.

The second pivotal character of the book, Atlas' student Chaikl Vilner (modelled on the author himself), is also conflicted. Unlike his teacher, Chaikl is not a

closet atheist. But he does wrestle with the musarist principles that man is inherently evil and must continually strive to better himself, denying worldly pleasures in the process.

Chaikl is troubled by his insufficiencies--his preadolescent sexual awakening in particular and his love for beauty in general. He suffers much guilt and remorse on their account because of his musar instruction. His inner soul, however, teaches him that his "secularist" tendencies are natural and undeniable -- he can no more escape their pull than he can escape the influence of his teachers and peers. Grade's characters seek, each in his own way, for truth. Sadly, none of them really finds what he seeks, but all learn one painful lesson, one which is reiterated in their yeshiva training until it becomes ingrained in their very souls: man is weak and imperfect and continually subjected to temptation.

> Tsemakh Atlas was a young Torah student in Lomzhe when he heard that in the Musar yeshiva in Novaredok, the yetzer hara -- the evil tempter in man --had already been slain. Now there was no need to wait until messianic

> times when God himself, as the Talmud stated, would destroy the yetzer hara in the presence of those who had wrestled with him. So Tsemakh Atlas left his home town for Novaredok, where he struggled to perfect his character. But soon he saw that the yetzer hara hadn't been slain in the Musar school either, for it was much easier to observe dozens of laws and customs than to deny oneself forbidden desire.[2]

The story of Tsemakh Atlas is captured in this first sentence of Grade's novel, and so is Grade's main theme -- a theme never before attempted in Yiddish literature. It is the story of a man's lifelong struggle to overcome his lack of faith and his carnality. The antinomic triangle of religion, doubt, and eros confront Tsemakh Atlas and give him rich and scintillating dimensions.

Tsemakh Atlas is a hero without peer in Jewish fiction. Not only is he a conflicted yeshiva scholar; he is also a follower of the musar movement, whose goal was ethical perfection and whose mode was rigorous self-discipline.

> The Musarniks censored, reigned in, muzzled every wayward trait to make it conform to a predetermined -- perhaps impossible -- ideal. The psychological damage from such merciless curbing of one's natural impulses (especially when begun at the age of eleven or so), and the callousness of toward human feelings that can result when a system supersedes the individual, are documented in Grade's novel.[3]

Beyond being a scholar and a musarnik, Grade's protagonist is from the most extreme of the musar schools, the yeshiva in Novaredok, where Grade himself was a student. The Novaredkers focused on breaking one's will, one's vanity, pride, love of material possessions; they went about sloppily dressed to show their contempt for, and spiritual removal from, the world. While the Hasidim found joy in the service of God, the Novaredkers immersed themselves in a pious angry gloom, reflected in their mournful musar melodies as they poured over their musar books. [4]

Grade states early on that one who has steeped himself in Musar and tries to leave it behind can never escape it. Tsemakh knows this -- Grade puts the idea into his

protagonist's mouth -- but he tries to run from his past anyway. When his yeshiva friends pay him a visit in an effort to bring him back to Novaredok, he tells them:

> I devoted myself heart and soul to the Torah because I believed that the way of Torah believers is a straight and honest one, but I discovered that Torah believers do the same thing as worldly Jews: through subtle quibbling they come up with dispensations to show that their deeds are in accordance with the law. So I left the beth midrash and saw that there are good people even among the nonreligious --even though they never learned Musar. Moreover, if a nonreligious person does something forbidden, he doesn't look for a pious excuse like the Nareva rosh yeshiva...[5]

It takes Tsemakh awhile to discover he cannot leave musar behind. Even in the home of his non-observant in-laws, his scrupulous musar honesty prevails over the bounds of social decency. In his passion to tell the truth, he publicly humiliates the customers at his in-laws' family business by pointing out their hypocrisy. In so doing, Tsemakh Atlas not only provokes his in-

laws; he also violates the Torah principle which forbids a person to shame his fellow man.

On the other hand, when his wife's family is prepared to oust a poor serving-girl made pregnant by a wayward son, Tsemakh's sense of justice also inspires him to defend the orphan. He goes to war with his in-laws, who would just as soon deposit her in a Gentile village and forget about her. Tsemakh insists that an unmarried, pregnant Jewish girl should be allowed to have her child among Jews.

The family finally concedes the point, but Tsemakh does not remain to learn the maid's fate. Tormented by the apparent incompatibility of his secular surroundings and his <u>musar</u> intellect, he packs his bags and sets out to establish his own yeshiva.

> "Even though the Stupel family had no compassion for the orphan, I still don't think they're any worse than other middle-class businessmen. In their world it's no sin to chase away a pregnant maid, and if I hadn't spent years in a yeshiva learning Torah and Musar, perhaps I wouldn't have considered it a great either. That's why I can't stay with these people any longer,

> lest with the passing of time I begin to think and feel like them and take on their worldly outlook. On the other hand, if I stay here but can't think and feel like them, I'll have to fight with them. So the only way out is for me to return to the beth medresh" [house of study]. [6]

Through the character of Tsemakh Atlas, Grade reveals the mysteries of Novaredok. Through Grade's alter ego, Chaikl Vilner, we get another perspective on the mysteries of yeshiva life. We also see the towns of Vilna and Valkenik as Grade saw them -- colorful and teeming with life. Among the most memorable and notorious of the Vilna characters is the tobacco merchant, Vova Barbitoler. Life has not been kind to Vova:

> In town it was said that his troubles drove Vova Barbitoler to drink. His first wife had died when he was still in his thirties, leaving him with a son and a daughter. He remained a widower for ten

> years. When the children had grown up, he finally married a divorcee who was young and pretty but who was also a crude, disreputable woman whose family had connections with the underworld...Even after the wedding, Vova's second wife behaved as if she were a free bird...Even after she had a child she would spend all day and half the night away from home. [7]

Bound by his passion for her and by their son, Vova does not consent to Confrada's demands for divorce. But convinced that she would not desert her child, he finally allows his wife to visit her brother in Argentina. His gamble does not pay off. When she writes requesting a divorce so that she can remarry, Vova refuses. Confrada remarries in Argentina anyway, without the divorce, and bears children by her new husband. For his stubbornness which results in the birth of <u>mamzerim</u> (`illegitimate children'), Vova suffers the curses of the community. To spite them, and to provide a new caretaker for the son she'd left behind, Vova also remarries.

For all his drunkenness and his disregard of Jewish

marital law, Vova is not altogether impious. To relieve himself of his troubles, Vova takes refuge in the mitsvah of tsitsit ("ritual fringes" worn under clothing). He provides them for all the students of the Talmud Torah, and for any young urchin on the street as well.

In addition to the likes of Vova Barbitoler, Grade also introduces his readers to his own family. When Tsemakh Atlas appears to recruit Chaikl Vilner for his yeshiva, a battle ensues between Tsemakh Atlas and Vilner's father which sheds light on Grade's own divided loyalties:

> Reb Shlomo-Motte shouted even louder at the rosh yeshiva [principal]: "I don't want my son to grow up to be a religious functionary, a mindless pietist, and an ignorant boor in secular matters. If I were still strong and could earn a living, I'd send my son to a school where they teach both Torah and secular subjects. But since I'm sick and poor, and a broken old man now, my son should become a worker who earns his bread, and not one who eats at strangers' tables. A person who doesn't support himself has to

kowtow to those who give him bread; he has to be a flatterer and a hypocrite, or he becomes embittered and hates the entire world."

Tsemakh had held himself in check because Chaikl was present. Now he sprayed forth a torrent of words: "The greatest rabbis and the most prominent householders were once guests at other people's tables. Did they grow up to be any worse or more submissive than those who didn't eat that way? When a Jew gives a Torah scholar a meal, he offers it wholeheartedly. If by chance you run across a congregant who has no respect for a ben Torah, the boy knows that he has to have absolute contempt for such a lout."

Reb Shlomo-Motte sat down again and shrugged his shoulders. "Having contempt for a man who feeds you --that's the impudence of a beggar. If a person gets used to eating the bread of charity in his youth, he remains a cripple all his life."

"You know who remains a cripple? The person who is taught from his youth to reckon with what this one thinks and that one says...Nowadays Torah and secular learning do

not go hand in hand. Neither do Torah and learning a trade. Nowadays one is either a ben Torah or totally irreligious..." [8]

Because Grade's mother wanted her son to be a scholar, his father allowed his son to accompany the rosh yeshiva to the town of Valkenik. Grade, who was always inspired by beauty, recaptures in his poetic prose the striking impression made on him by the Valkenik house of worship:

Valkenik's wooden shul, on the hillside facing the synagogue courtyard between the beth medresh and the rabbi's house, overlooked all the squat little houses in town. The shul entryway had side doors as well as a main entrance, wooden turrets at both corners of its western wall, and a round window under the long, narrow roof. The shul itself, with its huge square windows, rose from under another roof. A triangular window sidled out of a third roof, and a fourth little roof soared up like a yarmulke on the head of an old man with a mossy

beard and silver eyebrows.

When Chaikl Vilner arrived in the town on Friday afternoon, he entered the shul for the Evening Service and was immediately captivated by its majesty. Large thick pillars supported the ceiling. Worshippers passed finely carved and decorated arches to get to the pulpit. An open staircase led up to a balcony that hung overhead. From the ceiling and in all corners hung bronze lamps, silver menorahs, and copper trays that reflected and enhanced the gaslight. All kinds of prayers, warnings and exhortations, written with gallnut ink in Torah script, were pasted on boards affixed to doors, walls, and pillars. That same Friday evening a Valkenik lad confided to Chaikl Vilner, "You know, there isn't one iron nail in the entire wooden shul and there are parchment amulets hidden in the walls as a charm against a fire in the holy place." [9]

In this passage, Grade not only preserves his own memory of the wooden shul; he records the architectural style of a particular place at a particular time, and

informs the reader of some of the cultural practices and superstitions of the community that prayed there.

Grade's representations of Valkenik and the yeshiva are not so idyllic as to seem ahistorical; nor is Grade bitter about his experiences in these places. He does report, with all frankness, that despite the claims of the Nareva school, the discipline of musar was inadequate to overcome his youthful appetites.

Chaikl Vilner becomes Tsemakh Atlas' pupil in musar, but he is no more able to escape the influence of his yetzer hara than his teacher. He suffers one infatuation after another -- first the daughter of his Sabbath host, then the wife of his teacher. Chaikl immediately seeks the rosh yeshiva's advice on how to control his evil impulses. But Tsemakh, for all his fiery invective, is not very helpful. He himself is troubled by his yetzer hara: he envies the family harmony which he perceives in the home of Reb Lippa-Yosse, his host; and he sins in his thoughts with Reb Lippa-Yosse's young married daughter.

Uprooting the yetzer hara by force, as Tsemakh recommends, proves a difficult and sometimes impossible task. Local politics and other goings-on provide plenty of distractions, however.

Valkenik's hunt for a new rabbi gains intensity. Tsemakh Atlas finds that contrary to his will, he cannot avoid becoming embroiled in Valkenik politics any more than he can avoid passions of the flesh:

> The rabbi from Misagoleh, Reb Aryeh-Leyb Miadovnik, had been in Valkenik the previous summer and appealed greatly to the religious element. The enlightened group too liked his Torah learning and wisdom and his avoidance of Agudah party politics, but he was a bit too old-fashioned and knew no Polish. But when Eltzik Bloch and his faction realized that the religious element wouldn't let them choose a town rabbi who appealed solely to them, both sides agreed to invite the Misagoleh rabbi for the Sabbath when the Song of Moses was read.
>
> Since his downfall with the Miadle rabbi, Eltzik Bloch no longer spared his brother-in-law and loudly spoke his mind for everyone to hear: "Reb Aryeh-Leyb Miadovnik isn't going to skip to Hirshe Gordon's pipe."
>
> The visiting rabbi stayed at the Valkenik inn and Eltzik Bloch danced attendance on him. Friday morning, when Tsemakh Atlas went to see

Slava, Eltzik Bloch met him in the corridor and, face beaming, stretched out his hand.

"A hearty welcome to your guest! When a Talmud scholar has a bright and beautiful wife it's an honor for the Torah. Please come and greet the rabbi from Misagoleh."

Tsemakh realized that he dare not refuse Eltzik Bloch, who had all along been an opponent of the yeshiva and now wanted to make peace. He walked with Eltzik to the rabbi's room.[10]

The day of the rabbi's sermon, Tsemakh is dragged even further into the fray. Grade gives a full account of the sermon and the congregation's reaction, revealing not only his knowledge of human behavior, but of Torah as well:

"Because our Father Abraham split logs for the sacrifice of his only son, the tribes were adjudged worthy of having the Red Sea split for them," the rabbi from Misagoleh said. "But the sea didn't part until the Jews were in water up to their necks, so that they

might learn to have faith in the Almighty. And when the Israelites crossed the sea and sang the Song of Moses, children on their mothers' bosoms sang with them because everyone had seen the Divine Presence. And that prompted the custom of feeding birds on the Sabbath of the Song of Moses, because at that time all God's creatures sang about the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt. Others claim that the custom was begun to remind us that just as the winged creatures find their little seeds everywhere, the Holy One Blessed Be He fed the Jews in the desert."

Heads appeared in the little windows of the women's gallery. They all wore marriage wigs and old-fashioned hats decorated with feathers and resembled a row of birds perched on a fence.

Soon the rabbi ceased chanting and commenced an involved interpretation of Tu Bishvat. "The school of Shammai says that the new year for trees is the first day of the month of Shvat, but the school of Hillel says that it falls on the fifteenth of Shvat, or Tu Bishvat."

When the rabbi quoted Talmudic words and phrases the women were completely lost...[11]

The rabbi's discourse is interrupted by a heckler. The interruptions are more annoying to Tsemakh Atlas than they are to the rabbi, who attempts to continue. Tsemakh's associate rosh yeshiva, Menakhem-Mendl, unsuccessfully tries to hold him back.

Eltzik Bloch ran up to the two rosh yeshivas, thrust Reb Menakhem-Mendl aside, and began pulling Reb Tsemakh's sleeve, urging him to intervene. Tsemakh let himself be drawn to the pulpit steps...

Reb Hirshe Gordon pounded the pulpit desk with both hands until silence reigned for a moment. Then he bent over the pulpit railing and pointed a finger at Tsemakh. "Nowadays one can't be a rabbi or a rosh yeshiva and stay on the sidelines. Whoever doesn't speak out against the sinners of Israel helps them. The rabbi from Misagoleh is neutral in the holy war that the pious wage against the freethinkers.

> And you, a Navaredker Musarnik and a rosh yeshiva, also have your reasons for not publicly opposing those heretics." [12]

Tsemakh learns that if one cannot control his human passions, then he certainly cannot escape worldly quarrels, no matter how much he attempts to avoid them. Because of his lack of faith, even assuming the life of a recluse does not save him from temptation. Through the character of Tsemakh Atlas, Grade explores territory unfamiliar in Yiddish literature -- the realm of doubt among believers.

> Yes, he was a recluse -- but unwillingly and without joy. He thought of Reb Israel Salanter, the founder of the Musar movement. Reb Israel's big, innocent, melancholy eyes had seen hell, and he wanted to save Jews from its torments. Hence he wrote in his Musar Epistle: "Man will be whipped in hell. He will have to give an account of his deeds in the next world." Contemporary Musarniks, too, as well as every faithful ben Torah, believed in reward and punishment, even though they said little or

nothing about the concept.

They discussed fear of heaven and fear of sin because these were loftier than the fear of punishment. But he, Tsemakh Atlas, had never given a thought to that otherworldly punishment, as if hell were a fantasy. He believed in the perfect man, and he himself wanted to become a heavenly man -- but his heaven was empty, without a God, like a Holy Ark without Torahs. Even if he had agreed with the philosophers who, via logic, proved the existence of God, he still wouldn't have been a true believer. The true believer felt God in his heart and in all his senses and went to sleep and awoke knowing that there was a Creator. But if he, Tsemakh, wasn't sure of the First Principle, he was not only a hypocrite masquerading in beard and earlocks, he was also a thoroughgoing fool, a blithering idiot. Why should he torment himself by being a recluse when he still possessed all his strength? [13]

All the tumult and controversy which swirls through The Yeshiva is balanced by a single character, whom

Grade introduces in the second volume. Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, renowned author of The Vision of Abraham, is not a musarnik. Yet he possesses the tranquility of soul which the musarniks seek and are unable to achieve. His humility and reticence prevent him from signing his name to his books. Though shy and unassuming, he is much sought after for his wisdom and scholarship. He fears involvement in quarrels and refuses requests for his intervention in Valkenik political matters. But he does not hesitate to take on the case of a poor Jew:

> One cloudy Thursday morning a butcher came running to Reb Avraham-Shaye. "I slaughtered an ox," he said, "and found an adhesion in the intestines. Would that make the meat unkosher? The Valkenik rabbi is leaning toward saying it's kosher, but he's afraid to say so on his own unless you agree, too."
>
> Reb Avraham-Shaye saw that the butcher was panting breathlessly from running and that his hands and feet were trembling because of the financial loss he might suffer. So he replied at once, "I'm coming." But before he

had put on his coat and found his walking stick, it had begun to rain.

"Perhaps we should wait until the rain ends?" the butcher asked.

"We'll walk under the trees," the rabbi answered, "and we won't get wet. It's only a drizzle and it'll soon stop." The two men walked awhile without saying a word. When the rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun, Reb Avraham-Shaye told the anxious butcher, "You see, a man must have faith. The sun is shining already, and by the time we come to town our clothes will have dried too."

The Valkenik rabbi was incredulous when he saw Reb Avraham-Shaye coming, and on foot too. With his chin resting on the handle of his cane, Reb Avraham-Shaye sat in silence for a few minutes and heard the rabbi's discourse on the animal's adhesion.

"Kosher," he whispered as though answering amen to someone's benediction. Reb Yaakov Hacohen Lev had assumed that Reb Avraham-Shaye would delve into holy texts with him, immerse himself in involved analyses pertaining to the problem, and search for a way out --

and here he was delivering his decision crisply and bluntly without any hesitation.

"A Jew's money is precious to me too, especially a poor man's, but you still haven't heard all my doubts. I don't want to feed unkosher meat to an entire community," the old Valkenik rabbi flared.

Reb Avraham-Shaye stood up and replied serenely. His voice, however, was somewhat louder than usual, as though he were afraid that the venerable rabbi didn't hear very well. "You can surely rely on your own opinion even in more difficult cases. But since you said you had doubts, accept my concurrence in your decision that the animal is absolutely kosher." [14]

Out of gratitude, the butcher offers to hire a cart to take Reb Avraham-Shaye back to his summer house in the forest. Reb Avraham-Shaye's polite decline gives the reader further insight as to his personality, and also reveals some more of Grade's own learning:

"What I'm doing now isn't because of saintliness or pride. We must learn from our patriarchs and prophets how to conduct ourselves. The prophet Samuel made the Jews swear and bear testimony: 'Whose ox have I taken and whose donkey have I taken?' -- meaning that he had taken neither ox nor donkey from anyone in Israel. Do you think the prophet Samuel wanted people to sing his praises for not breaking into a barn at night and stealing an ox or a donkey?" Reb Avraham-Shaye's gay laugh resounded. "The answer is that the prophet Samuel probably had to decide questions concerning adhesions quite frequently, but after one of his adjudications he didn't let anyone harness a donkey and give him a ride back home." [15]

Grade modeled the character of Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover on the world renowned scholar, the Hazon Ish. This saintly gaon had a profound influence on Grade. Reb Avraham-Shaye says things with which Chaikl strongly agrees. Chaikl is aware that his efforts to purge his evil inclination through musar have been unsuccessful.

Reb Avraham-Shaye is able to tell him why. He verbalizes the fallacies which Chaikl could only sense in Tsemakh's musar rhetoric:

> "You told me before that your rosh yeshiva is always talking about people's flaws. But constantly looking for flaws in others can occasionally bring the faults to the surface. The bad traits lie within us, at times knotted up and dormant. If you touch them, you provoke them, and they stick their heads out and begin biting like angry little beasts. Sometimes you can influence a man to improve by considering him a better man. But if a sensual or irascible man notices that you see through him, and especially if you provoke him, he no longer strives to overcome his flaws and makes to effort to appear to be a better person. And frequently a person can persuade himself to improve by seeking virtues, not faults, in himself. Every man is a village of good and bad Jews, and of many bad and good inclinations. So we first have to weigh when it is proper to start a quarrel with oneself

and when not. Sometimes the greatest fault is --looking for faults in yourself." [16]

The moral of The Yeshiva, as Reb Avraham-Shaye puts it, is the idea that "every man is a village of good and bad Jews."

Grade expresses this sentiment constantly in his loving portrayal of each of the personalities in The Yeshiva, and particularly in his descriptions of the poor and honest folk. Throughout the novel, Grade praises the humble people and criticizes the mighty. The Yeshiva is more than a "Mitchner-esque" account of Jewish life in Eastern Europe between the world wars. It is an ode to the Jewish people. Every one of Grade's characters (except perhaps the sainted Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover) is something of a Vova Barbitoler. No one is perfect, and they who seek perfection are least perfect of all.

The most ordinary of Jews -- the ones who scarcely close their shops before the Sabbath begins; the shopkeepers who gossip and slander their neighbors; even the local fence who entertains Sabbath-breakers in his home -- even these cannot be discounted. Even these Jews, according to Grade, are People of the Book:

"I was at the rabbi's house when the old Valkenik rabbi went to the Land of Israel, and then I joined the rest of the town in escorting him to the train station. The old gray-haired congregants never stopped crying. Recalling this, I still feel my limbs trembling. I thought then, and still think now, that there is a secret in the weeping of old people that a man discovers only when he's older. Even though I don't know the nature of the secret, I know there's a secret there. That's why I don't like our rosh yeshiva always talking about great men of the spirit and scorning the everyday world." [17]

"...Since I'm much older than you, I'll reveal that secret...The congregants cried out of great love for the Torah and out of sadness that the rabbi who had studied Torah with them was leaving. Surely you've seen Jews bathed in tears at a funeral, or at a eulogy for a Torah scholar, even though they never knew him and even though he died at a

venerable old age, eighty or more, sometimes even ninety or more. The Jews cry out of love for Torah. Jews love a Torah scholar, a man pure of heart who always sits and studies..." [18]

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Chaim Grade, The Yeshiva. Menorah Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1976. p. x.
2. Ibid., p. 3.
3. Ibid., p. viii.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
6. Ibid., p. 115.
7. Ibid., pp. 120-121.
8. Ibid., pp. 146-147.
9. Ibid., p. 181.
10. Ibid., pp. 254-255.
11. Ibid., p. 263.
12. Ibid., p. 264.
13. Ibid., p. 308.
14. Ibid., pp. 322-323.
15. Ibid., pp. 323-324.
16. Ibid., pp. 349-350.
17. Ibid., p. 348.
18. Ibid., p. 353.

"My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" was first published in Yiddish in an expanded holiday issue of the Labor Zionist weekly, Der Yidisher Kemfer. Milton Himmelfarb's abridged translation was published in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's anthology, A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, in 1954. Himmelfarb's translation was also printed in Commentary magazine prior to the appearance of Howe and Greenberg's volume. Later, the story was included in the volume The Seven Little Lanes as an epilogue to the concluding chapters of My Mother's Sabbath Days.

Motivated by the power of Grade's writing and the feeling that "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" deserved to appear in its totality, Dr. Herbert Paper, of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, composed a complete, unabridged translation of the story, independent of but based on Himmelfarb's somewhat abbreviated version. Dr. Paper's interpretation, as yet unpublished, was utilized for this analysis of Grade's work.

"My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" is a first-person, fictional account of Grade's encounters with a former yeshiva classmate, somewhat his senior in age. The conversation between the two characters is stretched over several years -- from 1937 to 1948. It begins as a debate concerning about

the relative merits of a life of piety (embodied by the former yeshiva classmate) versus a secular lifestyle (as practiced by the author). But as the years and the war go by, the events of history color the conversation. The discussion broadens to include a critique of the Enlightenment and its ideals and the question of faith after the Holocaust.

The argument begins in Bialystok in 1937, where the two old friends meet on the street. Chaim Vilner (Grade employs this appellation for himself, because within yeshiva circles, students were generally identified with the town of their origin), now a well-known writer, has come to Bialystok to deliver a lecture. When he finds his long-lost companion, he attempts to be friendly. But Hersh Rasseyner has only contempt for his former classmate's new heathen way of life, and especially for the vanities Vilner pursues as a famous poet. In this passage Grade reveals his own doubts as to the lasting value of his success, and, as in <u>The Yeshiva</u>, notes that one can never escape the influence of a <u>musar</u> education.

> "Do you think that just because you fled the yeshiva you have saved yourself? You surely know our saying: whoever has once

studied Mussar will never more enjoy his life. You will remain a cripple, Chaim Vilner. You will be deformed for the rest of your life. You write heresy in rhyme and they pinch your cheeks for it as if you were a schoolboy. So that the profanation of God's name should be even greater, you came to speak in the very city where you once studied. Meanwhile they stuff you with honors the way they stuff a goose...But later you will understand when you complete your studies with them, those unclean louts. Oh, will they whip you! Is there one of you who does not suffer because of a review? Who among you is so strong that he does not beg for approval for his work? The most important thing is that the name should appear at the very front. Right on top! You have exchanged your piece of mind for lusts that you will never satisfy, for doubts that you will never be able to resolve no matter how much you suffer...[1]

Finding himself so rebuffed, Chaim Vilner attacks his friend's way of life in kind. Musar was once Vilner's way -

of life too. Peppering his speech with biblical metaphor, he uses the argumentation tactics he learned in the yeshiva to find fault with Rasseyner's pietism:

> You take pride in the fact that you are not bothered that people laugh at you because your tsitsis hang down to your shoes. You have convinced yourself that your linen prayer-vest is a fiery partition between you and the world. You hang on to your tsitsis like a drowning man who clings to a rope -- only it does not help you swim against the current. You despise yourself because you are afraid that the world, like Potiphar's wife, will find you pleasing; but you will not be able to tear yourself away like the righteous Joseph in the Bible. Therefore, you flee from temptation and believe that the world will run after you. But when you see that the world really does not run after you, you get angry and cry out: `No one enjoys his life.' You would like to console yourself with that notion. And so you run off to your solitude in a garret because you would refuse

everything rather than accept the small bit that the world throws you. That's your modesty. But it is really just pride -- and not self-denial at all. [2]

Two years pass before Vilner and Rasseyner meet again. The war between Germany and Poland had broken out; the Red Army occupies the western Ukraine and western White Russia. After only a few weeks in Vilna, the Russians restore the city to the Lithuanians. The refugees who do not want to remain under the Soviet regime return to Vilna.

The Novaredok Yeshiva also moves from Bialystok to Vilna. Vilna is ravaged by hunger, and a cloud of fear rests over the city: NKVD agents carry out nightly arrests. Standing in a breadline, Vilner notices a familiar face. The conversation is brief. Rasseyner blames Vilner --and others of his ilk -- for the military occupation, because unlike Rasseyner, Chaim Vilner tolerates and participates in the outside world.

"Well, Chaim," Hersh said quietly, "are you satisfied now? Is this what you wanted?"

I tried to smile and replied just as

quietly. "Hersh, what is treyf for you is still not kosher for them."

But I recognized the weakness of my metaphor in the cold hard expression on his face. So I moved a bit closer to him and said, "Hersh, I bear no responsibility for this, just as you bear none -- for me."

The Rasseyner shook himself and uttered each word loud, sharp, and biting, as if he had forgotten his caution. "You're wrong, Chaim. I do have responsibility for you."

He retreated a few steps, motioned sternly with his eyes at the Red Army men near the tanks, as if to say: And you bear responsibility for them. [3]

The friends' final encounter takes place after the War, and after Grade's wanderings as a refugee in the Soviet Union. The Vilner finds Rasseyner riding on the Paris subway; the latter has apparently survived the concentration camps. Their continuing debate takes a new turn. Hersh Rasseyner asks the Vilner: How can you continue to believe in this world, after all we have been through? The Vilner counters: And how can you maintain your piety, your trust in

God, after all that has happened to us?

> "...do you still believe in particular Providence? You hold that the Holy One has not become an orphan. But we have all become orphans. A miracle happened to you, Reb Hersh, and you were saved. But how about the rest? And you still believe?"
>
> "Of course I believe," said the Rasseyner separating his hands in innocent wonder. "One can actually feel particular Providence. Do you imagine the kind of believer who has faith in the Almighty is found only where there are forests and orange-groves, but He is not to be found, God forbid, in the desert and wasteland?" [4]

Rasseyner argues that it is possible to sense God's presence in catastrophe as well as in salvation. But Chaim Vilner cannot perceive divine justice in this particular catastrophe. How can the murder of six million Jews -- among them, a million innocent children -- be justified?

As Hersh Rasseyner and Chaim Vilner wander past statues surrounding the old Paris city hall, Vilner is moved to extol the virtues of the commemorative statues and the accomplishments of the men they represent. In his speech, he extols the ideals of the Enlightenment.

> "...when you see a man cast in bronze, you see the species of man, the eternal idea of mankind, so to speak...That one there, for example, is a world renowned poet. This great writer...broadens our understanding and awakens us to pity for all men. He shows us the nature of the man who cannot overcome his desires. So you do not even judge the wicked man for his actual deeds, but rather for the pain he suffers in the war he wages within himself and with the whole world because of his passions. You do not justify what he does, but understand that he cannot do otherwise..." [5]

But the Vilner's poesy angers the Rasseyner; it sounds

to him as though the Vilner were making excuses for the brutality of the Nazis.

"...Is your heart so dulled that you weep in admiration, as you put it, when you stare at these painted and plastered dummies -- at the same moment that all that is left of the Vilna Gaon's synagogue are charred walls? ...These artists of yours...did these masters...ever bother to think that their patron, the king, could massacre a whole city, including women and children, and steal everything they had, in order to buy off these same artists with gold? ...The writer shows that the wicked man is a victim of evil qualities, does he? Isn't that what you said? It is really a pity for the arrogant rebel who destroys others and is himself destroyed in the process. A terrible pity! You are not going to convince me that to be good and to do good is easier than being an adulterer. Still you are more interested in writing about the debauched man. You know him better, because there is something of him in you and

> in your artists. If you can make excuses for the man who is evil, then as far as I'm concerned all your scribbling is an abomination to be avoided. Condemn the wicked man! Condemn the glutton and the drunkard! You say he can't help himself. He has to help himself! [6]

The Vilner protests. The ideals of the Enlightenment may not have come to pass, but at least the vision of the idealists is broader than the vision of Rasseyner's faith. Man must be slave to his desires -- else how to explain the inability of the camp experience to effect a change in human nature?

> "You really think you have a monopoly on mercy and truth. You are starting where we left off eleven years ago...There you indulged in isolation and you convinced yourself that thoughts and feelings can grow on a man like hair. They can be shorn off so that only beard and sidecurls are left -- holy thoughts

and pious deeds. You've thought up an imaginary world and then you deny it. You've invented a human being and you command him to stand on his head: Be different! But even the camps did not change men. The wicked became even more evil. They might have lived out their lives and not have known their own natures; but in the crisis men saw themselves and others -- naked. And when we were all freed -- even the better ones among us were not freed of the poison we had to drink behind the barbed wire. Now, if the concentration camps camp did not change men from top to bottom, how can you expect to change them with your pious deeds and antics?" [7]

Reb Hersh responds that suffering as such does not necessarily make one a better person; one must be oriented toward elevating himself to begin with. "You claim that the models for the statues around the Paris city hall were great men," says Rasseyner, "but the Germans claimed that they alone produced the greatest of men." Were the philosophers of Germany able to influence their own nation to become

better? Were the philosophers themselves good men? After the war, Rasseyner confesses, he himself looked into the philosophers' books. He wanted to believe in their desire to be good. But he, Rasseyner, discovered that the philosophers were not capable of being good, because they were consumed with a longing to enjoy life. Their passion came into conflict with their ideals and resulted in the ultimate hypocrisy.

> "And because the pleasures of life do not crawl back into the cage of their own accord, murder rose among them -- the pleasure of murder. Us they hate a priori because we came to the world and pronounced the first 'Thou shalt not', thou shalt not murder, so they became our enemies. And since they themselves took over the concept of the sixth commandment, it had its effect on some individuals, but the remainder hated us all the more. That is why they talk such fine talk, because they want to fool themselves into doing fine deeds. Only it doesn't help. They are just content with rhetoric. And that

satisfies them, since what they chiefly care about is having a system. The nations of the world inherited from the Greeks the desire for order and for very decorative systems.

"First of all, they do their deeds in public. They have no pleasure from their lusts if they cannot sin openly, publicly, so that the whole world will know. Just like drunkards who are not able to drink alone, only in the company of others. In a sense, they give themselves a permit for their sins. They say we are not hypocrites, we do what we want to -- openly. But they love to wage war not only with others but with themselves as well...even to suffer and repent. And when they do repent, the whole world knows about that too. It is a kind of repentance that pairs with a wild pleasure to list all of their sins, because their self-love is so extreme it becomes an illness. They even love their victims, because their victims provide them with the enjoyment of sinning and the sweet pain of repentance." [8]

Reason is a great God-given gift, Reb Hersh says. But reason alone is not enough to guide us in the right paths. Faith must accompany reason and rule over the vanities of human intellect.

> "A man may be amazed at his own wisdom and be proud of his knowledge, but as soon as a little desire stirs in him, he forgets all of his nice theories...His senses are stronger than his reason...A man can justify whatever he wants to do...Reason can tell him that it pays to be good...But if a man must be good because it is worthwhile to do so, today it is worthwhile and tomorrow -- it isn't. And if it is worth being good even tomorrow, you can't force him to be logical about it. He can say that he wants to be good. But better to enjoy life for one year than to struggle and suffer for many years. If a man recognizes no Master of the World, then why should he obey the philosopher who tells him to be good?"
>
> "The only way out is this: A man should choose between good and evil only as the Torah

chooses for him. The Torah desires his happiness and knows better what is good for him. The Torah is the only reality in life. Everything else in the world is a dream... Even when a man understands rationally what he should do, he must never forget that the main point is that he is doing it because the Torah so commands him. That's how he can guard against the time when his reason will have no power to command him. [9]

But even Torah alone is not enough, Rasseyner adds. For God also gave human beings free will. Without intellect, the Torah, too, might lead us astray.

"Wait a moment, I'm not through yet. One can also lose out with the Torah. A man may tell himself: 'I don't live according to reason but according to the Torah.' And he is certain that when temptation comes, he'll look into the appropriate book to see how he

should behave, and he'll fulfill the instruction. He convinces himself that he is free. But in actuality his freedom of choice goes no further than his own will...Even a man who has a Torah won't be able to withstand a temptation unless he struggles with himself day and night. The One who knows all secrets knew that our father Abraham would stand ready to sacrifice Isaac. Nevertheless, it was only after the Binding that the Angel said to Abraham, `Now I know.' This is a lesson to all generations: Until a person does what he is supposed to do, the Torah doesn't trust him...Without deeds all debates and discussions are empty words. [10]

The reason that the wise men of the gentiles could not be good -- even those who wanted to be -- was that they had no Torah, Rasseyner explains. Their ethics were elaborated with the mind. But reason alone was too slippery a road for them to walk without the aid of a Torah.

"You glorify the Enlightenment -- yet how can we make peace with the Enlightenment when its embodiment, its product, is the German?" Rasseyner challenges.

You Enlighteners used to sing this verse in rhyme: `hevey yehudi be`oholexo ve´ish betseysexo.´ `Be a Jew at home and a man in public.´ So you took off your traditional coat and shaved off your beard and sidecurls. But when you went out into the street, the Jew in you pursued you in your language, your gestures, in every part of you. So you tried to exorcise this evil infection. The result was that the Jew left you, just as an old father whose children don´t treat him with respect goes first to the synagogue and then, because he has no choice, to a home for the aged. Now that you have seen -- Oh, what has happened to us! You say the opposite: `Be a man at home and a Jew in public.´ You can´t be pious at home because you lack faith. Out of anger against the gentile and nostalgia for the father who is dead, you want to show your Jewishness in public. Only the man you try to be at home -- so to speak -- runs after you...

You cried in the public square: `The nations of the world hate us because we are different. Let us be like them!´ And you became like them. Even more: You stood at the

forefront of their civilization. Wherever there was a famous scientist, a thinker, a writer -- there you found a Jew. On this account and precisely because of this their hate became all the stronger. They simply don't want us to be like them. In the Middle Ages, the priests wanted to baptize us in order to strengthen their power. The kings and the masses were angry with us, because we, the most persecuted of people, had the obstinacy not to want to be like them. They used to delight in the torments of a Jew who had tried to separate himself from the Jewish community -- with his family mourning him as though he were dead and the entire community lamenting as on the fast of the Ninth of Av. In our day, though, when they saw how easy it had become for a Jew to leap over into their camp, they stationed themselves at the fences with axes in their hands, as though to fend off wild beasts. But you were hungry and blind, and you jumped -- onto their axes. [11]

Secularism is not the answer! Assimilation will not save

you! The Rasseyner pleads with Chaim Vilner. After all that has happened, how can you continue to believe in the dream of the Enlightenment?

"But you, Chaim, how can you eat and sleep and dress so elegantly? Don't you have to make your reckoning too? How can you push yourself into the world when you know that it consorts with the murderers of our family? And you thought the world was becoming better! Your world has collapsed, hasn't it! Did you learn something from this, or not? You must ask me the same question: What did <u>you</u> learn? And I answer you: I have even more faith than ever! If I had only the same degree of faith as before, it would be an offense against our holy martyrs. My answer is: More and more self-sacrifice for the Master of the World; to cry out until the spirit is exhausted 'For thy sake we are killed all the day'; to go about, until the soul departs, with a broken heart and hands raised to heaven: 'Father, Father, only You are left to us!' But where have <u>you</u> gone -- forward or backward? What has changed

with you, Chaim?" [12]

The Vilner responds to the challenges of his friend as though the Rasseyner were his own conscience. And indeed, it is to his own conscience that Grade answers. The achievement of "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" is that the character of Rasseyner is false -- but the quarrel is real. Grade's doubts about his life and the choices he made after the Holocaust are the true subject of this "story." Grade shares with his readers his innermost turmoil, the wrestlings of his very soul.

> "Reb Hersh," I finally said, "I've been listening to you and I sometimes had the feeling that I was listening to myself. And since it's harder to lie to yourself than to someone else, I will answer you as though you were my own conscience, not just to get by with a reply or to win a debate. I'm also not required to be able to have an answer for everything. I don't even consider it a special virtue for a person not to have doubts at all. In my view, just as the greatness of

the faithful consists in their innocence and wholeness, so the heroism of secular thinkers consists in their ability to tolerate doubt and live with it. You didn't discover your truth; you received it ready-made. If someone should ask you about something in your practice whose meaning you yourself do not know, you answer: `The work of my father is in my hands.' A man is usually a rebel in his youth; when he's older he seeks tranquility. You had tranquility in your youth, while I don't have it even now, as you once predicted it would be with me. But is your tranquility of soul a proof that the truth is with you?...[13]

"We secularists," says the Vilner, "did not `throw over the Torah' because the burden was too heavy for us, as you charge. On the contrary -- we took on a heavier load: the double burden of Judaism and secularism. We seek wholeness and harmony, not compromise. The goal is to find the essences of Judaism and of secularism that can live together.

"As for what you say that until we came

along the principle among Jews was always the community...To that my answer is: Quite right. Our worldliness intended to liberate the individual. You say that a man should tear his 'I' out of himself like a weed. But for hundreds of years men have suffered torture and death so that the state shall consist of free and happy individuals. It's too dark now for me to show you the monuments of those whose heads were chopped off because they wanted liberty, equality, and fraternity for all men. But why do I have to search for heroes among other peoples and in other centuries? I could begin to read to you right now and finish day after tomorrow a scroll with the names of our own boys and girls who spent their youth in black dungeons because they would not be deterred from trying to make the world better. You yourself know about Jewish workers who waged war in our own day and in days gone by against all oppressors and tyrants. You just can't admit that freethinkers too can sacrifice themselves -- so you cry that they left Jewish tradition only to enjoy forbidden pleasures. That is

totally false. In my own neighborhood I knew as many 'searchers for sin' as there were in the yeshiva in Novaredok -- perhaps more. Because you, Reb Hersh, denied the world, you withdrew into a garret. But these young people who dearly loved life sacrificed themselves -- in order to better the world...

"But why do I have to apologize to you? You put me on the same bench together with the murderers and demand of me a reckoning for the world. I can be no less harsh an accuser than you...<u>You</u> are guilty if we went too far away from Jewish tradition! You closed every door and gate shut, and did not allow anyone to go out into the open. If anyone did put his head out and you couldn't drag him in by his feet, you kicked him all the way out and locked the door behind him with a curse. Since he had no place to go back to, he went even farther than he himself had wanted to. From generation to generation you became more intolerant and more fanatical...[14]

"We did not separate from you so much as you separated

from us," the Vilner accuses. "You say that we have no right no be included in the 'Chosen People'. You say the Germans erred in considering us to be Jews. But as the enemies of Israel know we're all the same, so does the God of Israel. If anyone who does not observe your kind of Judaism is not a whole Jew, Reb Hersh, then the number of Jews who perished in the Holocaust does not equal the number of bodies that burned. You make us a thousand times fewer than we already are."

> And what of the ordinary Jews? Not the yeshiva bochers and the secularists, but the others? The Jews who labored in poverty to make an honest living for their families, who didn't say the blessing over their black bread, the Jews who labored into the Sabbath and didn't observe the letter of the Law -- are they admitted into Paradise? And where will they sit? At the East Wall with the Mussarists, or at the door with their feet outside? If the simple man is considered saintly and pure because he perished as a Jew -- are the ones who survived wicked and evil for not following the path of the Orthodox?

> And what, finally, is the fate of the righteous gentiles -- the ones who defied the evil that was all around them for the sake of saving Jewish lives? What of the righteous gentiles who saved Jews, not out of pity alone, but for their own sakes? Is there room in Paradise for them, too? [15]

Grade asks these questions not only of himself and of his yeshiva past, but of all Jews. He is a former yeshiva student -- although he has become a secularist, he has maintained his faith in God. Still, he cannot accept that the events of the Holocaust -- the deliberate extermination of the Eastern European Jewish community -- is justifiable on any level. Grade's personal optimism, his belief in the basic goodness of humanity, and his Enlightenment idealism do not allow for the possibility of such an evil. Nor does Grade's faith in the God of Israel -- the God of All Israel -- provide him with the answers to his many questions.

> "But you ask me: What has really changed for you after such a destruction? And what has changed for <u>you</u>, Reb Hersh? You answer

that your faith has been even more strengthened. I say openly and to your face: Your answer is a paltry and whiny answer. I don't accept it at all. The eternal question about the righteous man who fares ill and the evil man who fares well -- multiplied by a million murdered children -- is a question you must put to God. The fact that you know in advance that no answer will come from heaven doesn't relieve you of the obligation to ask the question. If your faith is as strong as Job's, then you must have as much courage as he to cry out to Heaven: 'Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him; but I will argue my ways before Him!' If a man hasn't sinned, he isn't allowed to declare himself guilty. As for us, even if we were devils, we couldn't have sinned so greatly that our punishment should have been -- a million murdered children. That's why your answer that your faith has been even more strengthened -- is no answer at all, as long as you don't demand an accounting of Heaven. [16]

Grade provides no resolution to the debate. Although the Vilner character is meant to represent the author himself, Grade presents each side -- Rasseyner's and Vilner's -- with equal intensity and fervor, so that it is virtually impossible to declare the winner. In "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," Grade voices his frustration with the outcome of history. His appeal to Rasseyner to demand an accounting of heaven is an appeal to all Jews, and a challenge to God.

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Chaim Grade, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner." Translation of the complete story by Herbert H. Paper, February 1982. Pp. 5-6.
2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
4. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
5. Ibid., p. 21.
6. Ibid., pp. 21-23.
7. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
8. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
9. Ibid., pp. 33-36.
10. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
11. Ibid., pp. 51-53.
12. Ibid., p. 66.
13. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
14. Ibid., pp. 71-73.
15. Ibid., pp.75-76.
16. Ibid., pp. 80-81.

> Of Musar it can be said that everyone seems to know something about it but no one seems to have presented the whole story. [1]

Given that there is some truth to Rabbi Rosen's observation above, it follows that the way to learn about musar is to study more than one source. Neither Chaim Grade's The Yeshiva nor "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" is traditionally listed in the bibliographies of books about musar. Nonetheless, both of these works are rich in examples of musar learning as practiced in the Novaredok yeshiva in which Grade was a student.

The word musar derives from the Hebrew root yasar 'to bind, instruct, or admonish'. In the book of Proverbs, musar usually means 'instruction.' In post-Talmudic literature the term came to mean something stronger, and conveyed the sense of 'discipline,' particularly with reference to ethics and morals.

The meaning of musar in the yeshiva world is closely related to the term's post-Talmudic meaning. The theoretical basis of musar is that the first step toward knowing God is knowing one's self. One cannot lead a life of true service

to God until one knows one's self well enough to conquer one's passions. The way to this self-knowledge and the mastery of one's passions is through the study of musar.

Within the yeshiva, the word musar connoted ethics, discipline, introspection, piety, exhortation, reproof, instruction, repentance, and punishment. Hillel Goldberg lists some of the characteristics of the musar lifestyle:

> Selfless devotion to humanity, self-perfection, character training in specific character traits, intense emotion, and T-group-like confrontation are but a few of the characteristics...[2]

The founder of the musar movement was Rabbi Israel Salanter, who organized his movement upon the ideas expressed in the large body of ethical-religious literature which had grown since the 11th century. This literature was aimed at exhorting Man to lead a life of ethical purity and godliness. Musar literature, as it came to be called, comprised some of the classical works of Jewish religious thought and was well-known to the Jewish public.

The first outstanding work of this genre is widely

considered to be Bahya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda's Duties of the Heart. Grade refers to this book several times in both The Yeshiva, and in "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner." Duties of the Heart was originally written in Judeo-Arabic in or about the year 1040 C.E. It was translated into Hebrew sometime between 1161 and 1180 by Judah ibn Tibbon, who also translated the Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed. Ibn Pakuda was disturbed by his observation that though sages had systematized the customs and rituals of Judaism, they seemed to ignore the importance of intention. Ibn Pakuda addressed himself to the problem by presenting Judaism as a system of life which necessitates a pure heart and the possession of ethical principles. The goal, he wrote, was not the perfection of individual virtues, but the perfection of the individual soul.

Another well-known and widely-studied musar work is Sefer Ha-Yashar 'The Book of the Righteous.' This work has been erroneously ascribed to Rabbenu Tam the Tosaphist; its author is most probably Zerahya ha-Yevani of the 14th century. Zerahya's writing shows that he was influenced by ibn Pakuda's views and manner of presentation. Sefer Ha-Yashar incorporates philosophical speculation and teaches that the basis of an ethical life is the recognition of God's greatness and goodness. Zerahya advises his readers regarding the obstacles to true worship of God; he also

devotes a chapter to the topic of self-analysis. Although Bahya ibn Pakuda was a product of 11th century Spanish Jewry and Zerahya lived in 14th century Greece, it is likely that both men were affected by the philosophic and scientific literature of their age.[3]

The majority of musar literature was produced in Franco-German Jewish communities. The emphasis in this literature was on piety; little room was left for scientific and philosophic speculation. The ethical works produced in and colored by this environment focused on practical advice.

A foremost example of the Franco-German school of ethical writings is Sefer Hasidim 'Book of the Pious,' which is generally accredited to Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg (c. 1200 C.E.). This book appears to be a composite of many others with the same name, written at approximately the same time. Sefer Hasidim is nearly exhaustive in its coverage of Jewish life. It deals with the laws of worship, penitence, Sabbath observance, kindness to animals, business methods, relations between Jews and non-Jews, marital life, and the treatment of servants.

Ethical teachings were also communicated by way of poetry. Musar poems were composed by well-known thinkers such as ibn Gabirol, ibn Pakuda, and Luzzato. The most famous musar poem, Birchi Nafshi, is mentioned by Grade in "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner."

"My soul, be not senseless, like a beast deeply sunk,
Be not drowsy, with passion drunk.
Hewn from reason's mine thou art;
From wisdom's well thy waters start,
From the Lord's heavenly realm!
My soul, let not the body's wanton pleasures capture thee,
It's showy treasures not enrapture thee.
They melt away like the dew before the day
They avail not when they begin,
and their aim is shame and sin...
Soon thou wilt come to thy eternal home
Where thou must show thy work and receive thy wages
On rightful scales and gauges...
"Therefore get thee up and to thy Master pray by night and day":
Bow down before Him, be meek.
And let thy tears bedew thy cheek.
Seek the Lord with all thy might
Walk in meekness, pursue the right
So that with His mercy screen, the Master
Hide thee in the day of disaster...."[4]

An 18th century musar work closely identified with Salanter's movement is Heshbon Ha-Nefesh 'Self-Examination.' It was written by Menahem Mendel Lefin, who was born in Satanov, Podilia, in 1749. Salanter was personally responsible for the publication of an edition of this work in 1875, and he referred to it in one of his own essays.

Lefin's work offers an analysis of Man's evil virtues, explaining their source and recommending ways in which the evil might be overcome. Lefin suggests rigorous and constant self-examination. The student who is desirous of eliminating his bad qualities, says Lefin, should always carry a notebook in which he may record qualities which need correction. Lefin further prescribes that this list be studied every night, and counsels the student to focus on eradicating one fault each week.[5]

The quantity of literature already at his disposal limited Salanter's need to print his own thoughts on ethical and moral instruction. A slim volume of his letters and essays, Or Yisrael, and the well-known Iggeret Ha-Musar are the only works he left to his followers. His students and admirers also collected and published some of Salanter's sermons and discourses.

Six outstanding disciples of Israel Salanter are credited with the dissemination of his teachings, and three

of this number are remembered as the founders of the major musar yeshivot. Rabbi Simkhah Zisl Ziv Braude (1829-1898) was known as "Der Alter" (the old man) of the yeshiva at Kelm. Rabbi Nathan (Note) Zevi Hirsh (1849-1928) established the yeshiva at Slobodka. And Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz (1848-1919) was the founder of the Novaredok school. Each of these men evolved his own interpretation of their master's teachings, and each of them implemented his theory in his own yeshiva.

Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz was born in Plungien, Lithuania, in 1850. Though he showed early promise as a scholar, circumstances compelled him to pursue business instead. Hurwitz became successful as a merchant. But a meeting with Salanter and his disciples in 1875 persuaded him that he should devote more time to Torah study. The advice was seriously taken; Hurwitz gave up his business altogether, left his family to fend for itself, and dedicated himself entirely to the subjects of Talmud and musar.

Hurwitz was a man of strong convictions and an iron will. He was also, as the story of his decision to separate from his family indicates, a compulsive individual given to extreme behaviors and asceticism. Hurwitz's yeshiva and the various branches which he and his disciples founded were dominated by his ascetic spirit.

In The Yeshiva, Chaim Grade writes of his experience as a student at the Novaredok yeshiva in the town of Valkenik, some miles outside of Vilna. He records many of the teachings and legends of Novaredok and its founder, and also captures -- as no other Yiddish author has -- the methods and intensity of the Novaredok school. In Grade's philosophical story, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," a former Novaredok pupil-become-secularist debates the meaning of the Holocaust with a former classmate-turned-yeshiva principal. Here too, Grade recalls the lessons and legends of yeshiva life and makes reference to several of the classic musar texts which he studied in that environment.

The Novaredok school in which Chaim Grade studied emphasized, among other things, the separation of religion from secular knowledge. The chief protagonist of Grade's novel The Yeshiva, Tsemakh Atlas, articulates this point clearly and succinctly:

> Nowadays Torah and secular learning do not go hand in hand. Neither do Torah and learning a trade. Nowadays one is either a ben Torah or totally irreligious.[6]

This lesson was taught by "Der Alter", Reb Yosef Yoizl himself, who learned it during one of his most intense

periods of solitude. As a student in Salanter's school, Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz began the practice of studying in isolation for periods of time. He continued this custom throughout his life and incorporated it into his personal philosophy of musar study. In addition, he made certain that every yeshiva founded in his name had a musar room nearby to which he and his students could retreat for intervals of privacy.

> They used to call "the old one", Reb Yosef Yoizl -- the founder of Novaredok -- "the master of the holes," because he was supposed to have lived isolated for many years in a forest hut with two holes in the wall. Through one opening he would be given dairy foods, and through the other -- meat foods. When he returned to the world and ended his withdrawal, his philosophy was: Either milk or meat, one or the other, but not an in-between neutral Judaism.[7]

The yeshiva in Valkenik was equipped with its own musar room. Grade's rosh yeshiva (principal) spends considerable

time there trying to conquer, or at least escape from, his evil inclination.

> The Musar room, accessible by a long, winding outside staircase, was like a high, narrow tower facing the broad, square, tin-roofed beth medresh...Tsemakh had been successful in persuading the community to set up the attic as a Musar room, but during the winter the room wasn't heated and the students didn't go up there to study. The straw mattress had been removed to the guest house, leaving the wooden bed bare. Next to the only window stood a table and chair. A kerosene lamp hung from the ceiling. On a bench by the entrance were a clay pitcher and a bowl for washing.
>
> Tsemakh went up after evening prayers, lit the kerosene lamp, and said, "Here is your grave." He would stay all night even if he froze...He had dreamed of running a large beth medresh and delivering profound Musar talks. But his only accomplishment was a little yeshiva, hardly a cheder -- and he,

it's principal, was being tempted by a married woman.[9]

Isolation, according to Reb Yosef Yoizl, was not an end in and of itself; but in combination with self-denial it was effective training for future ethical and social involvement. Self-denial in Novaredok terminology meant shevirat ha-middot, 'the uprooting of all worldly desires.' According to Reb Yosef Yoizl's theory, the observance of Torah was the sole means of conquering one's passions. But Novaredok practice, as dictated by "the old one," entailed numerous exercises designed to achieve the same ends. To uproot greed, for example, Hurwitz insisted that his students renounce private ownership. Most students lived in self-imposed poverty. Cloaks and shoes were to be shared, and the contents of any packages received by students were to be distributed among their classmates.

The rosh yeshiva's wife stood there, handing Melechke a large paper bag.

"I've brought you and our friends some carob and fruits for Tu Bishvat."

Later Melechke had to defend his behavior

> in response to the entire group's criticism. For he forgot all courtesy and grabbed the proferred bag with both hands...
>
> Realizing he might be suspected of being a glutton, Melechke began explaining the reason for his behavior. "The truth is I was very cross because my family didn't send me a Tu Bishvat food package. So it was sent down to me from heaven. Providence sent the rosh yeshiva's wife to give me carob to teach me that, as Reb Menakhem-Mendl says, one never loses out by being a pious ben Torah, and the true path of life is the way of Novaredok. Pure and simple faith. Faith without lifting a finger.[8]

Similarly, the sin of gluttony was quenched by fasting, and the sin of vanity, by disregard of one's appearance. Hurwitz also developed other actions to render his students impervious to the opinions of others so that they might freely pursue their personal and communal responsibilities without being diverted by criticism. These exercises involved the purposeful display of inappropriate behavior, such as asking for cheese in a hardware store, or

interrupting a gathering and making irrelevant comments. Hurwitz felt that if a student could withstand the negative comments he earned through such behavior, then he could withstand any adverse criticism in any situation life could thrust upon him.[10]

> On Tuesday night women wearing heavy jackets with aprons over them streamed to the trustee's grocery -- and there they encountered an amazed crowd staring at a strange sight.
>
> Every few minutes the front door would open and Zushe Sulkes would tumble a yeshiva boy out into the freshly fallen snow. Each boy picked himself up and stood at the store doorway, mumbling, his face as ecstatic as if he were immersed in the Silent Devotion and dared not break off. Soon the door opened once more and another bundle flew out -- a youth with curly earlocks. That instant the first boy tore into the grocery again, and as the shopkeeper sought to block his path, the second boy slipped in.
>
> "Jews, help! I've been invaded by

locusts!" Sulkes shouted.

The crowd outside pushed its way in and saw half a dozen youngsters scattered in the corners, swaying in prayer. A burly onlooker grabbed two of the yeshiva boys by their collars and shook them. "What kind of crazy antics are you up to? You'll soon be flying like pancakes!"

The students said not a word in reply...[11]

Before one could obliterate one's passions, of course, one had to be able to identify them. Isolation was one means toward that end in that it allowed the student ample time for self-examination and introspection. The study of musar literature was another method of identifying one's flaws. Within the Novaredok yeshivot, musar study was seldom a passive business.

Musar literature was studied in a state of rapture -- with lips aflame, in a mournful chant -- in order to stir the spirit to its innermost depths.[12]

It was only when he swayed while studying the Duties of the Heart that one could hear the pain and depression in his voice. There were those who said that he had broken all of the reading stands in the Study House while he studied musar zealously.[13]

When one entered the yeshiva...he would witness a scene which shook his entire being. In one corner, a boy stands facing a wall, shouting, "How did I become like an animal, succumb to my evil impulse like a horse...and depart from the rational path? What good is life?" In another corner, a boy sits, shaking all the limbs of his body, pounding on a pillar and crying bitterly, "Jealousy, envy and glory drive one out of the world." On another side, a young boy paces back and forth, humming a grievous tune...Another young boy lays his head on a table and breaks out crying...So it is, each student according to the nature and amount of his emotions.[14]

And when he studied Musar, Tsemakh would stalk back and forth alongside the other

> students in the beth medresh like a powerful beast that paces in a cage with other animals but still walks alone. His melancholy chant transported everyone in the house of study, and even at midday it could wrench out of the soul's depths a Yom Kippur night.[15]

Another primary educational technique was called the havura `small group'. A typical Novaredok yeshiva was divided into a number of these groups, each headed by one of the better students. The notion of havurot was common to all musar yeshivot, and probably stemmed from Salanter's musar shtibl `musar house'. Hurwitz learned of the havura from Salanter's disciple, Rabbi Simkhah Zisl, but he modified it in accord with his own ideas.

The basis of all functions of the Novaredok havura was its character as a catalyst of emotional arousal, called hitpa'alut or hispayles. Hurwitz compared the havura to a fire:

> If you heat up several pieces of wood at once, the fire will catch and heat the oven. But if you burn only one piece, the flame will

> not be sufficient to heat the oven. So it is with the emotions of a single, isolated individual. They are not as vibrant and agile as those of a havura whose members work together toward one end, with great unity, so that each one's emotions join with those of the other to form a huge flame. Such a flame burns rapidly, with scorching heat, and thus makes it easy for each member to fight with his nature until the proper will emerges.[16]

Tsemakh Atlas promotes Reb Yosef Yoizl's teaching when he attempts to persuade his wayward pupil, Chaikl Vilner, not to leave the yeshiva:

> "For now you don't need a gaon as a teacher. You need an environment of good and pious friends in a yeshiva."[17]

Reb Yosef Yoizl's emphasis of hitpa'alut (communally-induced emotional arousal) was in conflict with the teachings of his colleagues in the other yeshivot. The Slobodka school

of musar taught that man could improve himself through rationality (sekhel), whereas the Kelm school held that the best means to self-improvement was by slow and gradual progress. But Yosef Yoizl felt that if one could not instantly eliminate psychological obstacles to the performance of a required action, then he would never succeed in eliminating them. Yosef Yoizl's approach was known as "storming the soul."

The havura was more than a vehicle for hitpa'alut; it served several other functions as well. The havurah provided an appropriate atmosphere for individual musar study, determined each member's desirable and undesirable traits, and prescribed the musar exercises necessary to eliminate the undesirable traits. The havurah and its subgroup, the "bourse," which consisted of two students, were considered supplements to individual introspection. Both structures also served as useful forums for the initiation of new students.

It is likely that Grade and his antagonist in "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" might have formed a "study pair" in their yeshiva days. The closeness of their relationship is indicated by Grade's description, and the nature of their entire conversation consists of mutual constructive criticism and attempted persuasion.

One especially did I look for all the time that I was there, but I did not meet him -- my old friend, Hersh Rasseyner.[18]

...I have to talk to you. I talked to you during all those years when I was in the ghetto and in the camps. Don't wonder at it, because you were always dear to me from the time you were a student in Bialystok.[19]

I believe there is a great deal of Jewish warmth in you. It's just that your opinions are crippled, that's why I'm discussing all of this with you.[20]

Hersh, now you listen to me. Who knows better than I how torn you are. You take pride in the fact that you are not bothered that people laugh at you because your tsitsis hang down to you shoes. You are convinced that your linen prayer-vest is a fiery partition between you and the world...[21]

The final crucial ingredient in the process of shevirat

ha-middot was the musar lecture, which was delivered on a regular basis by the principal or primary instructor in the Novaredok yeshiva. The entire exchange between the characters in "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" contains elements of the musar lecture style. In The Yeshiva, the lectures are readily identified, and they are numerous as well.

> "A sensualist cries out of self-pity. A sensualist is a good sort by nature; and if he gets what he his heart longs for, he begrudges no one else any pleasures. But if he doesn't get what he wants, the good-natured sensualist becomes ruthless. He becomes blind -- deaf and blind to the entire world. Yet for his own desire he has a thousand ears to hear and a thousand eyes to see, and he weeps only for his own failure. A stranger who doesn't know why the sensualist is crying might even think that the man is shedding bitter tears over the Jews and the Divine Presence being in exile, or that his eyes are brimming with hot tears over the destruction of the Holy Temple or the suffering in this world. Who would imagine

that this weeper was a glutton and a drunkard? And because the Divine Providence doesn't submit to him, he submits to himself and wails. He eulogizes his own unfulfilled desires as if they were a baby that died in the cradle, God forbid. In a fury he weeps, he grates his teeth, he stamps his feet, he actually melts with tears and wailing over his failure. Basically, this sensualist's feelings stopped at the child's stage, so he remains at once a child and a wild beast. Even if the Creator himself were to come to him and say, "My son, my child, don't cry. The earth has more skulls and bones in it than people walking on it. And all these dead men once burned with lusts. But life taught them forbearance, and death spread earth on all their plans. Believe me. my child,' God would say to him, `believe me, the one who knows the impulses of all creatures, that one can stay alive without the pleasure you lust for. Wipe your tears. Within a day, you yourself will see that there are many other pleasures on this earth, and I shall give them all to you. All of them except that pleasure which

you now want. That pleasure I cannot grant you.' If Divine Providence were to speak thus to the promiscuous pleasure seeker and pathetic sensualist, the latter would whine and wail and rant, 'Grant me now the pleasure that I want. I don't want any other pleasure. Only this one. Just this one!' Since he didn't learn Musar and made no attempt to break his own will, he doesn't know that one can deny oneself; he hasn't got the slightest conception that it can be done...But he who has studied Musar knows that one can deny oneself desires real and imagined!"[22]

These quotations indicate that much of Grade's writing about his yeshiva days supports what scholars and historians have learned about the Novaredok school of musar. But there is also much in Grade's stories that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. The habits and behavior of many of the characters in The Yeshiva contradict the teachings of Novaredok's founder, Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz. Grade writes of a student who is both independently wealthy and stingy with his money. Another yeshiva student, born and raised in the most wretched poverty, is meticulously clean and

seemingly overly-concerned about his appearance. The yeshiva principal himself battles alternately with his lust for women and his disbelief in God.

Given that Grade's writing is based on actual personal experience, it is important to remember that The Yeshiva -- and also "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" -- are works of fiction. But it is possible that some of Grade's quirkier characters really did exist, if not exactly in their literary forms. The human frailties and flaws of his characters do not in any way detract from the authenticity of the environments he describes. On the contrary, it may be argued that the portrait of yeshiva life Grade offers is even more accurate than that of the various scholars, who have come to their own understandings through the reading of books and interviews with former and present Novaredok students.

Notes to Chapter Six

1. Rabbi Kopul Rosen, Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement, p.5.
2. Hillel Goldberg, Musar Anthology, p.3.
3. Rosen, Rabbi Salanter and the Musar Movement, pp.35-36.
4. Ibid., pp. 38-39 (excerpt of translation by M. Jastrow).
5. Ibid., p.49.
6. Grade, The Yeshiva, p.148.
7. Ibid., "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," pp.69-70.
8. Ibid., The Yeshiva, pp.283, 285
9. Ibid., pp.204-205.
10. Goldberg, Musar Anthology, p.30.
11. Grade, The Yeshiva (Book II), p.234.
12. Goldberg, Musar Anthology, p.3.
13. Grade, "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," p.4.
14. Goldberg, Musar Anthology, p.33.
15. Grade, The Yeshiva, p.7.
16. Goldberg, Musar Anthology, p.32.
17. Grade, The Yeshiva, p.377.

Notes to Chapter Six continued

18. Ibid., "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner," p.4.

19. Ibid., p.49.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., p.7.

22. Grade, The Yeshiva, pp.366-367.

If there were no other historical record of life in Vilna between World War I and World War II, no documentation of the life of Jewish war refugees in the eastern provinces of Russia, and no research as to what life might have been like in a Novaredok yeshiva during that period in history -- except for the literary record left by the Yiddish author Chaim Grade -- how much could we learn from Chaim Grade alone?

The answer is -- quite a lot.

We would learn that life for Jews in Vilna in the years prior to the Second World War was tolerable, but difficult. We would discover that aside from the occasional confrontation, life under the Poles meant that the Jews mostly kept to themselves, and the Poles mostly kept to themselves. Poverty was widespread, but it was possible to make a living, and even the simpletons and the town tightwads in the Jewish community could be counted on to contribute something for the benefit of others worse off than themselves.

We would learn that despite their depressed economic state, the Jews in Vilna lived fully. They had romance and weddings and adventures. Some of them dreamed of utopias, and some of them acted on their dreams -- even when doing so involved high risk. Some Jews attempted to better their lot

by escaping their conditions, fleeing to the Soviet Union or to Palestine. A few of them reached their destinations; others were captured, imprisoned, and even murdered.

We would ascertain that Jewish Vilna was a cosmopolitan city. It had newspapers and journals, a great variety of political views and modern problems. Jewish Vilna had its own generation gap: young men and women would take Sabbath strolls together on the banks of the Wilja while their pious elders shook their heads in disapproval. Children raised in the most pious of homes would shrug off their religious heritage and leave their parents to wonder where they went wrong. Jewish Vilna was also very political. Zionist sympathizers and their Orthodox opponents engaged in heated verbal exchanges; modernizers and traditionalists waged war over rabbinic candidates and methods of education.

We would find out that though the rumblings of war shook their homes to their very foundations, the Jews of Vilna maintained their faith in God and humanity. As the Germans advanced, some Jews fled. But even those who had survived pogroms and the First World War, those who had witnessed man's inhumanity to man before, still believed in Divine justice. They left their women and children behind because they could not conceive of the evils that were to befall them.

Grade teaches us that anti-semitism was not deeply

rooted in the hearts of his non-Jewish neighbors; more often than not, it was the result of hard times and government propaganda. Following him on his journey through the Russian interior, we discover that non-Jews were also displaced by the war, and that as refugees, Jews and non-Jews shared a destiny. At the same time, we learn that distrust of other cultures was stronger and more divisive than distrust based on worship or creed.

On the journey across Russia we encounter snippets of foreign cultures, some of them now lost or dying -- the woman railroad peddlers of Chkalov in the steppes of Kazakhstan in Central Asia, trading their butter, lard and eggs for salt; Kazakh women who walk with a coquettish, rhythmic gate and cry out their craving for green tea to passing transport trains.

We can study the survival skills the refugees learned from one another on the road and in foreign marketplaces. We note the multitude of war-wounded invalids in the cities and the deficit of able-bodied men; and we deduce that the latter have been shipped out to the front lines.

We do not see the atrocities carried out by the Germans on those who turned back or remained behind, but we do witness many other sorrowful aspects of World War II from Grade's point-of-view. Legless men hobble along on their arms and crutches; drunken veterans attempt fistfights

without benefit of fists or other limbs. Refugees wander through the muddy streets of winter in Stalinabad (Dushambe) dressed in sodden rags, often without shoes. Hunger is rampant; people are thrown into prison for "speculating" in tobacco and other goods. The cities of Central Asia become havens for the homeless. And sometimes, a wanderer dies alone and friendless in a small kolkhoz (collective settlement) between cities.

Along with Grade we can confront the ghosts of Vilna's ghetto and gain new perspective on the tragedy that occurred there. Through his stories, Grade allows us the opportunity to mourn --not only the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto -- but for all the Jews of Eastern Europe, old and young, and the civilization that perished with them in the Holocaust: the teachers and pupils of the cheders and yeshivot; the men who prayed each day in neighborhood shtibls; the townspeople who bewailed the retirement of their rabbis and argued over their successors; the cemetery cantors, who earned a living weeping over those who had died; and the ordinary Jews, who sweated all week to make enough money to buy a fish for the Sabbath, and who barely managed to close their shops late on Friday before it began.

The civilization that the enlightened minds of Jewish Eastern Europe might have created is gone. But Grade has captured their memory in his writings. The remnants of their

lives, their memories, frustrations and dreams, live on in his books. So even if history had deprived us of any other record, we could still reconstruct what was lost from the prose of Chaim Grade.

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