

Zvi Preigerzon. SHADDAY [Note: One of the names of God]

[1]

On that brusque and bitter day Gershon Moisevich Luria closed himself up in the bedroom. We see him sitting at the window that looks out on the garden. The white world is reflected in the window. It is a chilly, snow-filled morning. The month of Kislev steps through the garden on the soft soles of its feet, covering everything nicked and naked with its scarf of white. A mixed rabble of crumbling snowflakes comes down silently, filling the void between heaven and earth.

In another two hours Gershon Luria, his wife, his daughter, and his little granddaughter must gather outside police headquarters along with all the other Jews in town. From there they will be transferred to the neighboring city, to the Jewish ghetto.

Anyone who violates this edict – will be put to death. This was the warning issued the day before by the local Polizei. The speaker had been some none-too-young man who spoke as though somewhat amazed and embarrassed, seemingly saying that he could make neither head nor tails of the order. The sole responsibility for the edict rested with them – the Germans and the Buergermeister – whereas he, as a member of the Polizei, was completely innocent.

Luria understands the order quite well. It is nothing but a sleight of hand. The Jews are not going to be transferred to the ghetto – to the slaughter, they will be led to the slaughter. The same way things went in Pryluky, in Romny, in Poltava, in Konotop. According to the reports of the survivors, they did things there in secret as well, deceived everyone will all sorts of tricks and stratagems, refusing to reveal the murderous secret until the last possible moment.

The day before passed with them packing up their things. Who knows what road lies ahead? So long as you are not yet standing at the very edge of the abyss, all hope is not lost. Now their things are packed, a sleepless night passed too, and this gloomy morning has arrived. Luria says with the shadow of a laugh: "I'm going to sit for a bit in the bedroom." "Nu, go ahead!" Basya allows. Even now, in these final moments, she is busy with housework. The Russian stove has been lit in the kitchen, and various dishes are boiling away in two or three different pots.

The housewife! In the dining room their daughter Mira is sitting over a volume of Turgenev. Since the Germans came to town she has been sunk in this reading of hers. All suspect books have been banished from the house, all that is left are the classics. And there Mira sits in the dining room, reading Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*. For the past three days she has remained frozen over that volume. She does not turn the pages, the book is always open to the story 'Singers'. What an odd choice! It would seem that the latest thoughts occupying Mira's mind are of a rather heavy sort.

Mira arrived in town from Kiev with her daughter Ninochka at the beginning of the summer. Her husband, a construction engineer, stayed behind in the city, and she intended to spend the summer days here in town. After the war broke out she went back and forth for a short while, wondering whether she ought to return to Kiev. But before they had had a chance to finish their epistolary exchange her husband had been drafted into the Red Army. So she decided to remain in the town. The Germans were approaching, and the Luria family was on the verge of heading east. But just when they were ready to evacuate the news came that the enemy had sealed off the one road leading out of town.

So there Mira Grigorievna sits in the dining room, seemingly reading her Turgenev.

A deathly silence surrounds Gershon Moisevich. Ninochka spends her time playing at the home of Natalya Gavrilovna, the landlady. This none-too-young woman has no children of her own. Her husband was killed in the First World War, now twenty-five years ago already. The four year-old Ninochka somehow found her way into the heart of this arid, aging woman. In actuality this woman had no more in life than her house and her garden, along with the church house on Sundays and holidays. Yet here this talkative little girl managed to find her way into the woman's heart.

It has been over twenty years that the Luria family has been living in Natalya Gavrilovna's home and both sides have been satisfied with the arrangement. If any difficulties arose it was a sign that Ivan Gavrilovich had a hand in things. Ivan Gavrilovich, the landlady's brother, had something of a penchant for the bottle. When he was in his cups he never shied away from fistfights and scuffles. From time to time he would make his way over from his house in the neighboring street and cause all sorts of scandals. Since the Germans had arrived things had gotten worse. Many of the Christian residents in town had begun ignoring their Jewish acquaintances.

"Gershon!" old Basya's voice called out, "Lunchtime!"

It was the same old voice, her everyday voice. Luria taps his forehead with his palm. He just recalled something that had left him restless throughout the day. The night before his departed father had appeared to him, Rav Moshe Ben-Aryeh Luria. Starry sparks of light swirled in the darkness. His father's white beard and eyes were filled with sadness. They had a rather strange conversation. "My son!" the old Rabbi had said, "The time has come for you to go." – "Where to?" The Rabbi pointed up into the distant heavens. "But I'm a battered vessel, a bag of broken bones, and these women are being dragged along behind me, thinking I am the staff that they can lean on." – "Remember the amulet!" Rav Moshe Luria said, and disappeared.

Remember the amulet! That was the final task that he had been given just before the end came down. From generation to generation, from one jubilee to the next, this amulet had been passed down in the Luria family as an inheritance. According to tradition the amulet had been written by the head of the family, Rav Isaac Luria, the Holy Ari. He had created it after days and nights of deprivations and fasting, after many long months of abstinence and focus, with the help of various *tikkunim*, [Note: Kabbalistic term meaning to fix, adjust, or set right things that are wrong in the world] secret names and letters, abbreviations and

gematrias [Note: Interpretative or symbolic system in which each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a corresponding numerical equivalent]. Through all these means the Holy Ari had managed to insert a holy spark of Heaven in the amulet, a bit of holy light.

Luria got up from the stool and opened the bottom drawer of their dresser. All of Luria's Judaica was bundled up in that drawer: his *tallis* [Note: prayer shawl], his *tefillin* [Note: phylacteries], his *siddur* [Note: prayer book], *machzorim* [Note: special prayer books] for all the major festivals, and a bible bound in black. Among these sacred items the amulet had also managed to find its place.

He opened the drawer and found the amulet wrapped up in a bit of cloth. A strip of yellowish parchment fit into a gold-plated medallion, hung from a rather thin-linked chain. There was but one word written on the parchment, a single word accompanied by a few choice letters. The word was *Shadd-ay*, and the letters were: *yud, heh, vav, heh* [Note: The Hebrew letters that compose the Tetragrammaton, 'Yahweh', traditionally the most sacred of God's names]. Each letter was crowned with myriad crowns, strewn with nearly invisible ornamental flourishes and meaningful adornments. It was the work of the master Kabbalist, the great Ari, immersed in this strip of parchment, where a single point of fire burned at the center, that sole spark of holy, heavenly light.

Gershon Moisevich stood bent over the drawer of Judaica and stared at the amulet. He was not a religious man. He had never refrained from eating *trayf* [Note: non-Kosher food], worked at the office (he was the treasurer at the Cooperative) even on Jewish Holidays, never fasted on Yom Kippur, to say nothing of the other fast days throughout the year; in all his days – even on the Holy Sabbath – his pipe had never ceased to emit its smoke.

And here that age-old amulet lay before him, with its strip of parchment. In ordinary times, during the days of the Soviet regime, Luria had never given a thought to this amulet, and for years it had just sat there in that drawer along with all the old *Selichos* [Note: Special prayers of atonement and penitence recited in the period leading up to the High Holidays]. But now the killing days were upon them, and the amulet had reappeared once more. As long as tears continued to stream from the eyes of the condemned, so long as justice was being perverted, and there was murder, pillage, and death all around – perhaps this amulet still had some right to exist.

Once more he heard Basya's voice.

"Nu, Gershon, come to the table!"

He steps into the dining room and seats himself at the head of the table, in his usual place. The family has gathered for a final meal. As ever, Basya is tending to a host of pots and bowls. This time the meal is a festive one: there is fish, soup, meat, fruit. "Let's drink some vodka!" says Luria, and fills three shot glasses. "Me too!" shouts little Ninochka. They all drink, even Mira Grigorievna. But the liquor has no effect on her. She sits there with her head bowed, with one eye wide open and the other blinking away. She is wearing a winter coat, blue with a black fur collar. Her neck is wrapped in a light blue woolen kerchief.

Gershon Moisevich fills the glasses once more. He wants to pick up the crestfallen spirits, but the three of them simply drink in silence. Ninochka is swinging her legs back and forth. Mira Grigorievna is sunk in her thoughts and barely notices her daughter. But there the little girl goes spilling a spoonful of soup on her dress. "Nina!" the young mother screams in a terrifying voice. "What kind of way is that to behave?" Luria gets up from his chair with a slight groan. He once more closes himself up in the bedroom and begins to cry a bit in the face of that white world lying there in the window.

"Gershon!" his wife Basya calls to him. "Come eat!"

He returns to the dining room and seats himself once more at the head of the table. This time he has to eat a bit of roasted meat. As he chews the seemingly tasteless roast he notices that Natalya Gavrilovna, the landlady, has entered the room. He fills his glass to the brim and drinks it off in one shot. Natalya Gavrilovna says that she is sorry they have to leave here, but she is pretty sure that it will all pass, there is no reason to give up hope.

"We're not giving up hope, but things are not looking too good for us right now in the world," Basya says. She has still managed to retain her equilibrium. She clears the table.

"The German will not be in power forever," Natalya Gavrilovna offers as comfort, comfort offered in a whisper. "We still have God in Heaven. I will wait for you."

Mira says: "We are headed down a path of no return."

To which Natalya Gavrilovna replies: "Don't give in to sinful thoughts, my daughter, do not tempt the devil. At any rate, leave Ninochka with me."

"What?"

"Yes. Leave the girl with me. She will be like my own daughter. The two of us will wait for you."

The little girl does not understand what is being done. She sits there swinging her legs and living in a world all her own. The adults begin to discuss the matter. "It's time to go!" Luria says, as he eyes his watch, a Moser. He smokes a *papirosa*. Old Basya serves some apples for dessert. There she is, old and bent herself – the mother of the house, the wrinkled comrade. She serves apples to the landlady as well, and Gershon Moisevich fills the glasses once more. They continue discussing the girl's fate. Nobody touches the apples, other than little Nina. Mira Grigorievna's one eye begins to blink once more. "Yes!" she says, "it would be better if I left you now, my child!" She lifts the girl up in her arms and clutches her to her heart with the tremor of a mother bereft. At this point the child senses that something is up. She bursts into tears. "The girl must remain with Natalya Gavrilovna", Luria decides "perhaps God will grant her a reprieve and she will survive." These were the words of the head of the family, and as though against his own will, he included the name of God this time. "Yes, it would be better if she stayed behind," Basya says as well, and the matter has thus been settled. The Moser appears once more in Gershon Moisevich's hands. "We must go!" The sound of his voice echoes in the room. He goes over to say goodbye to Natalya Gavrilovna. A large, yellow Antonovka apple sits before the landlady. She gets up from the

table and kisses Gershon Moisevich's cheeks – three times, as is the Russian custom, kissing him in a gesture of farewell. "Nu!" she says, "Be strong, and don't think ill of us, *Ne pominaï lihom* [Note: Russian for 'Don't think ill of us']." Their things have been packed for some time now. The old people put on their coats. They pick up their things – a suitcase and a knapsack, one suitcase and knapsack per person. "Wait a moment!" says Luria and steps into the bedroom for a second. He is in a hurry now. The time has come for them to leave, they are already five or ten minutes late. Luria returns to the dining room with the Holy Ari's amulet in his hand. He puts the medallion around Ninochka's neck. "Here you are, Natalya Gavrilovna, I am handing my granddaughter over to you. Let her always have this medallion around her neck, it will protect her. This sacred medallion was handed down to me by my forefathers." A bitter smile flutters across his face. Once more the room is filled with the sounds of farewell kisses and sighs. This time Basya, the mother, cries as well. She was crying over the greatest devastation there is in the world.

They stepped into the yard and set out along the tautly packed path of snow for the front gate, with their belongings in their hands. The sound of Ninochka crying came to them from the house, along with Natalya Gavrilovna's attempts to placate the girl. "I'll be right back!" Mira says, as she leaves her things in the trampled swath of snow and heads back to the house. The crying stopped, the mother left her little girl behind.

Mira reappears in the yard. Her one eye is awful, her temples are red, the pale blue kerchief still wrapped around her neck. Without saying a word she picks up her things from the snow. The three of them step out of the yard, close the little gate behind them and begin to make their way down the street where they live, Kotsiubynsky Street. They are joined by other Jews, laden with their own belongings, dragging their way down Kotsiubynsky Street.

All the Jews of the town are walking through the snow-filled streets. The sky is overcast. A thick gloom blankets the ground, the heavens, and all of existence. Man is left all alone, with but his burden and his bare skin's soul.

[2]

Natalya Gavrilovna allotted an isolated spot to Ninochka in the larger of her two rooms. She divided the room into two separate spaces. In one of them, behind the screen, in a corner of the room hidden from view, the little Jewish girl was hidden. Natalya Gavrilovna had discussed it with her. "You must hide very, very well, Ninochka. You must stay very quiet, so that the evil uncles won't hear your voice."

Ninochka asks: "When will Mommy Mira be back?"

"She certainly won't be back in the next few days."

"Then did they go and stuff her in their sack?" the girl asks in a whisper.

Yes, they went and stuffed her in their sack, those evil uncles – the voice of Natalya Gavrilovna, that good, somewhat aged woman, fills the room with a slow, languid pace. The

foul uncles bundled Mommy Mira up in a sack, they took her off to some faraway island in the middle of the sea, and dropped her on one of the rocks there. Mommy is surrounded by a stormy sea. Huge waves threaten to wash over the rock and drown Mommy Mira in the watery depths. It is the hand of Satan! The evil hand of that dark lord who is responsible for all the foul deeds ever perpetrated under the sun. But Jesus Christ, Christ our Savior, He too is looking on from His holy sanctuary. He shall send his white angel in.

Eyes wide in fear, Ninochka listens to the measured, terrifying fairy tale. There is a knock at the front door. "I am going to go open the door," Natalya Gavrilovna whispers, "and you keep still, Ninochka. Play dead."

"Maybe I should go hide under the bed, Auntie?"

At that moment there was once more a loud series of knocks at the door, accompanied by a shout in an unintelligible language. The foul uncles had come. "Yes, go hide under the bed, Ninochka. But, for God's sake, don't make a sound." The woman crosses herself three times and gets ready to open the front door. Ninochka jumps up from her place and goes to hide underneath the wide wooden bed. She squeezes herself into the darkest corner she can find. The little palms of her hands press against her beating heart, so that the murderers should not hear her. She was a lost little lamb, hounded by wolves. Little by little her eyes began to make out the small space underneath the bed. Night had not yet fallen, it was only three or four o'clock in the afternoon. A grey light filtered through one of the double windowpanes in the direction of the little girl's hiding place. It was a miniscule shaft of light, miniscule and murky, but the girl's eyes could make out an old, cracked shoe beneath the bed. There was a small clump of dirt. She squashed the clump of dirt between her fingers and began getting used to that narrow little world of hers. The ruckus moved loudly through the remaining rooms of the house. The wolves were on the move there slapping the floor with the soles of their rough boots.

They were three German soldiers from an S.S. platoon and one local Polizei – the same one who had notified the Luria family of the transfer order. They entered the Lurias' locked apartment in the other half of the house. The closets and drawers were all opened and they began tending to the clothing, dishes, forks, and spoons. Wide sheets were spread on the floor and all the housewares and clothes were tossed in. One of the S.S. soldiers found a bottle of vodka and some glasses in the cupboard. With a joyful shout the four men sat down at the table to get absentmindedly drunk on the liquor they had stumbled upon. Natalya Gavrilovna stood off to the side, pursed her lips and remained silent. One of the S.S. soldiers turned to her in his native tongue. The Polizei translated what he had said. "Bring something for dessert. He says you're hiding Jews and Partisans in your house." The German nodded his head in agreement. He banged the table with his fist and let out an unintelligible shout. Natalya Gavrilovna went out to the yard and entered her half of the house. She moved silently over to where Ninochka was hidden, knelt down to get a look under the bed and asked in a whisper: "Nina, are you asleep?" There was only silence. *Mabut* [Note: Ukrainian – 'Maybe'] she fell asleep? Evening approached through the windows. The snow seemed to turn even whiter in the garden. It slept in even rows, along the branches of the sleepy trees, in silence. At that hour it directed its white heart up to the

darkening heavens. "Auntie, did the devils leave already?" a soft voice called from underneath the bed. No, the little girl had not fallen asleep, she had just pressed herself into the darkened corner, with only her eyes open there, eyes that overflowed with the fear of a murdered childhood. "Ninotchka, my dear, they have not left yet. You must be very careful. If they find you they are going to stuff you in a sack." – "Okay, I'll hide with all my might." There are tears in the eyes of Natalya Gavrilovna. She gathers apples and tomatoes into a bowl and carries them over to the Germans, who have meanwhile found another bottle of liquor – Gershon Moisevich was not averse to the booze himself. Two of them sat on the bundles of booty and the other two sat at the table. They stuffed themselves and shouted their joyful shouts in that choppy language of theirs.

One by one they go out to the yard and stand there relieving themselves. One of them is stumbling a bit, and the eyes of the other seem made of hollow glass. Next they move into Natalya Gavrilovna's half of the house.

Their heavy boots slap the floor. They rifle through the cupboard and the closet. "Give us the money, old lady!" She hands them a few bills. The darkness thickens through the rooms. Evening has come. *Hospody, pomilu* [Note: Russian - Kyrie eleison!] God, have mercy on us and save us!

Laden down with their bundles the Germans finally disappeared. Natalya Gavrilovna locked the door behind them and the silence returned as before. Ninotchka came out from her hiding place. The windows were sealed quite well and the lamp was lit. They sit down at the table to eat dinner: borscht, potatoes, and an apple. Natalya Gavrilovna places a jar of honey on the table as well. Ninotchka eats her bread spread with honey, but she doesn't touch the borscht or the potatoes.

While chewing away lazily Ninotchka tends a bit to her toys. She has two dolls – Marusia and Katya. Marusia is the older of the two, the elder sister. Ninotchka also has a two-wheeled carriage and a harmonica. But Natalya Gavrilovna has forbidden her to make any noise, so toys like that were taken away from the girl. Little Ninotchka must sit there quietly, in absolute silence. Awful uncles walk the world with those sacks in their hands. Be afraid, Ninotchka!

There is once more a knock at the front door. Natalya Gavrilovna moves over to the door from inside the house. "Who's there?" – "Open up, Nataalka!" a coarse, male voice replies. It is Ivan Gavrilovich, the landlady's brother. "Right away!" says the woman. She makes a sign to Ninotchka to rush over to her hiding place, there underneath the bed. "I'll take the bread with me!" the girl whispers. She is very serious about this life in the dark that has enveloped her. She takes her slice of bread spread with honey and walks on tiptoe over behind the screen. In the meantime the darkness has invaded the room. The windows are sealed, and beyond them the world is silent, as a wind steals across the face of the earth, smacking the thin branches of the trees, and caressing the fields and roofs. But here, underneath the bed, a heavy darkness hides. The little girl shoves herself into the dark and chews her sweet slice of bread. She does it very, very silently, so as not to make a sound. Then she falls asleep.

She falls asleep, and behind the curtains the lamp burns on as a conversation flows between the brother and sister. Ivan Gavrilovich was not a very welcome guest at his sister's house, even though their homes were not too far from one another. They were not very fond of each other. Ivan liked to have himself a glass of liquor, didn't shy away from the occasional fistfight, or a busty member of the opposite sex – when the opportunity presented itself. He loved life in all its coarseness and was not too particular about the means. On the other hand, his sister Natalya was a modest homebody. "Were the Germans here?" Ivan asks. "They were." She serves her brother a bowl of borscht, fried potatoes, and a glass of vodka. He goes on and asks: "And what did they do? Did they look for *Zhids*?" He drinks off half a glass of vodka. It was a faceted table glass.

She says: "What did the Jews ever do to you? Did they ever hurt you, ever?" Ivan drinks the other half glass of vodka and groans from the very depths of his belly: Oh-ah!

At that moment Ninochka's voice could be heard from underneath the bed. "Be careful!" the girl screams, "I'm falling, falling!" Her lips make a sucking sound in her sleep. "Who's that screaming in there?" Ivan Gavrilovich asks. "Nobody's screaming." They are both in shock. The little girl can be heard babbling away once more. Ivan Gavrilovich lifts the lamp from the table and gets up from his chair. His terrible shadow is stretched across the wall. They move along, he and his shadow, and the girl's mumbled words guide him down the right path.

He calls out in an exultant, slightly drunken voice: "Ha-ha! You're hiding the little *zhidovka* [Note: a pejorative name for a Jewish girl]. Idiot! You're playing with your life. You better hand the girl over to the *Hermantsim*!" The lamp is standing on the floor and lights up little Ninochka's face. She sank beneath the bed into a deep sleep. The brother and daughter stare into the girl's face. "It's none of your business, Ivan!" says Natalya Gavrilovna.

"Oh no, it is my business. We must wipe out their seed."

She begins to tremble. "This child is not guilty of anything." She lifts the lamp from the floor and goes back over to the other room. With a rough, heavy gait Ivan Gavrilovich trails after her. They sit down at the table. Ivan finishes off the potatoes and then cleans the plate. "Ay, Natalka!" He gets up to go, "You're risking your life, you foolish woman!" She repeats what she said: "The child is not guilty." – "Ach!" says Ivan, "you're bringing down a real holocaust on your own head." He steps out into the yard and walks along the snowy path; his boots creaking away. Natalya Gavrilovna locks the door from inside, makes her bed and pulls the sleeping girl out from under it. First she takes off the girl's shoes, then her little dress, undershirt, and stockings. The stockings and undershirt were fastened together. Ninochka's eyes are closed, she is sunk in a deep sleep. The chain of the amulet stretches across the length of her neck and delicate chest. It is the amulet of that old Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, may his memory be blessed with life everlasting. Will this Hebrew amulet manage to protect this little girl's life when the black hour comes? Natalya Gavrilovna remains standing there for a few long minutes by the side of the bed. Her right hand makes the sign of the cross a few times over the sleeping girl. "Our Savior, take pity on her and save her!" The brief prayer was directed to Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. Perhaps the Holy Ari too stood at the head of the bed by the little girl, slowly nodding his sad head.

[3]

It is Sunday. Natalya Gavrilovna locks the door to her place from the outside and walks to the church house. Along the way she is sunk deep in thought and deliberation.

Ninotchka must be transferred without delay to the village of Moyatin, to the house of Agrippina Semionovna, a relative of hers on her husband's side. She is a good-hearted woman. Natalya Gavrilovna is sure that this relative of hers, along with her husband Grigory Filimonovich, will agree to her request and let the girl stay with them for some time.

Yes, she must take care of this immediately, at once. If she delays moving the girl out it will cost her her life. When he's drunk Ivan can't tell the difference between right and left. Even when he is sober he may well be all too dangerous.

All this took place in the beginning of winter, in the month of Kislev, towards the end of 1941, in the blessed Ukraine. It was a glorious morning. Clear skies stretched out overhead, and the sun cast its light and splendor over all. Shards of brilliance struck the snow, and the drainpipes along the roofs had just begun to drip. At that moment little Ninotchka sat in the room where she was hidden with her dolls. Marusia placed Katya on her knee, rocked her gently there and sang her a lullaby. "*Bayu, bayu, bye / the beasts have drifted off / the foxes are asleep / the mice are all a-slumber / sweet dreams! Good night!*"

The song was sad and soft, a real lullaby. Ninotchka is now a grown-up little girl, already four years old. She knows that she must not raise her voice, otherwise the evil uncles will hear her and come to take her away; they'll take Marusya and Katya too and stick them all in their sack. Stay small and out of sight! As small as you can, with all your might! Even the light of day is forbidden to her.

Her tight cell was rather narrow. But the window let in some of the light outside in the wide world. At that moment the light was blocked out. Nina looks up and begins to tremble. In the window that looks out on the garden the head of the evil uncle appears. He presses a flattened nose to the glass, his face and his hanging moustache the very image of terror. "There you are, you pretty little thing, eh?" his coarse voice can be heard through the window. "There you are, I've found you. You can't slip through the hands of Ivan Dovgalenko!" He was drunk as could be. Then he disappeared for a little while, and Ninotchka could hear him handling the lock on the front door. He worked the lock for a rather long while until he managed to tear out one of the rings, at which point he threw open the door and entered the house. Ninotchka heard his rough steps moving through the rooms. He was fishing around in the furniture and among the household items, until he found a bottle of vodka and drank his fill. Then the evil uncle entered the Jewish girl's little cell. His voice was rough and lacking any compassion whatsoever. "Nu, *zhidovochka*, let's go!" His awkward hand drew the little girl's palm into its own. They step out into the yard. There the white splendor continues to play the fool. The sky is clear, as an indifferent sun rains down a bucketful of brilliance on the world. Ninotchka is cold. Before stepping out the evil uncle did not bother to put her into her winter coat, he didn't have time for such minor

details. One of the girl's hands is pressed tight into Ivan Gavrilovich's rough hand, and with her other hand she is hugging her doll Marusia. The sacred amulet hangs from her neck, the sum of her worldly possessions and her very life.

She bursts into tears. Ivan Gavrilovich takes care of the lock. With his one free hand he sticks the broken ring back through the opening left there. With his other hand he does not loosen his grip on the tearful little girl's hand for even a moment. However, she is barely making a sound, as the urgency of keeping herself small and out of sight still has a hold of her and she is afraid to cry out loud. Warm tears burst forth from her eyes one by one and roll down her cheeks as they fall away to the ground. She asks: "Uncle, where is your sack?" He tears the doll from her hand and tosses it forcefully into the garden. The two of them watch as the doll sinks halfway beneath the snow. "Nu, *zhidovochka*, let's go!" Ivan Gavrilovich repeats himself. They step out into Kotsiubynsky Street and turn down the path that leads to the town park, where the German Kommandatura is located. The tears continue to roll down Ninochka's cheeks. Although the sun is blindingly strong, the girl is cold. Little by little she begins to cry out loud. "Look, I caught a little *zhidovka*," Ivan Gavrilovich begins telling one of his acquaintances who is a bit late making her way to the church house. The woman asks: "Where are you taking her, Ivan Gavrilovich?" – "To the command center!" he laughs, with a self-righteous look on his face. Despite the fact that he was drunk his fist was like a vise. Some of the local brats begin to follow them. Soon they are joined by a few adults as well. Their entourage swells until it consists of twenty or thirty people. A few fragmented questions can be heard: "What's going on?" – *Shto tut takoe?* [Note: Russian – 'What's going on?'] – "They've caught one of the little Jewish girls!" All eyes are on Ninochka, but there is no hatred in them. Then all goes silent. All that can be heard is the sound of the snow creaking underfoot and the sobs of the little girl who is freezing in the cold. One of the women removes her kerchief and wraps it around Ninochka's head. It is a blue kerchief decorated with red and yellow flowers. "Styopka!" the clear voice of a young boy rings out, "Come here! They caught a *zhidovka*!" The news spreads through the town and reaches the church house. "Dovgalenko found a little Jewish girl, he's dragging her to the Kommandatura." A few of the worshippers stepped out to watch the spectacle. Natalya Gavrilovna rushes out as well. She moves fast, her heart filled with foul foreboding.

In the meantime the whole group enters the town park. Behind the park the yellow building that houses the Kommandatura rears its head. Alongside the building two or three Germans are standing around, along with a single local Polizei. The Polizei notices the crowd that has gathered in the park and heads over in that direction.

At the very same instant the two of them – Natalya Gavrilovna and the Polizei – came upon the crowd. The woman was breathing heavily, as she was not used to walking at such a fast clip. The Polizei, on the other hand, approached the crowd at a rather careless pace, slowly putting one foot in front of the other. He points at Ninochka and asks: "*Zhidovka?*" But Ninochka is not paying any attention to the Polizei. She noticed Natalya Gavrilovna and began to rejoice, her heart bursting with joy at the sight of this ray of light in the wilderness. Natalya Gavrilovna tears the little girl's hand from her brother's grip and lifts her up into her arms. Ninochka's tiny little frozen hands cling tightly to the woman's neck. The people are all standing around the girl in silence.

This tale took place in the town park, at the beginning of winter, on a Sunday. An endless azure sky stretched from one of the world to the other. In that sea of blue the golden queen bathed herself, mother of all living things. The entire world rejoiced at her arrival. The wind did not blow, everything held its breath, as the snow creaked and burned. The trees and roofs were wrapped in funereal shrouds, but went on living their hidden lives.

"A *zhidovka*?" the Polizei asked once more. At that very moment two men grabbed Ivan Gavrilovich by the arms. He was drunk.

"Let's go drink a half liter. What have you got to do with this foolishness Vanya?"

"*Zhidovka*?" the Polizei asks once more. He is not angry just yet. He raises his voice ever so slightly. "Who ever mentioned the word *zhidovka*?" replies Natalya Gavrilovna, her voice as steady and reserved as ever. She speaks without a trace of hesitation. She is standing there in the public park busy saving this little Jewish girl from the angels of death. "She is a relative of mine, pure Russian Orthodox from birth!" The Polizei says: "Follow me to the command center, they'll look into things." – "What's to look into? It's all as clear as day." The Polizei removes his gun from its holster. He'd had it up to here with all this foolish talk. To the Kommandatura!

They begin to move. Nobody accompanies them this time. Better to steer clear of the yellow building. It was a two-story building with a basement. It too had been through various reincarnations. Before the Revolution it had been the house of Eliyahu Hefetz, a wealthy local, a big lumber merchant. During the days of the Soviet regime the Regional Council of the Communist Party was headquartered here, and it was full of life for a number of decades. Now the German Kommandatura had taken up residence in the building, along with the Gestapo. The walls of the basement were thick and heavy and the screams inside never made their way out.

All Jewish matters were handled by Deputy Commander Vogel, and Natalya Gavrilovna and Ninochka were brought before his royal highness. He spoke a broken Russian, but managed to make himself understood. He turns to the little girl: "What is your name?" She replies: "Nina." She is not afraid of this uncle. He has glasses like her father in Kiev, glasses that completely cover his eyes. The uncle silences Natalya Gavrilovna with a firm gesture as she was about to cut in. "And what is your family name?" he goes on to ask the little girl. She remains silent. "Come over here!" the Deputy Commander's order resounds in the room. The girl steps over to him somewhat hesitantly and looks up at him from below. Now she is able to make out his eyes behind the glasses. There is something cruel and loathsome reflected there in the eyes. The girl pulls back; her head is still wrapped in that kerchief with the yellow and red flowers. "She is a Jewess, there's no doubt about it. You can see it clearly in her eyes," Vogel thinks to himself. At that moment Natalya Gavrilovna begins spinning her yarn about her sister-in-law's husband Akopian, an Armenian. This little girl, Nina Gazarovna, is the daughter of Akopian, a Russian Orthodox girl of Armenian descent. Vogel notices the chain of the amulet hanging from Ninochka's neck, and he opens up the medallion. There is the ancient yellow parchment, with that illegible script. He yawns. "You want me to believe that she is an Armenian girl?" – "Yes, yes, my good sir, she is Armenian – I swear to God that's the truth." – "We'll soon find out!" He yawns once again and presses

the buzzer on his desk. After a few moments a German soldier enters the room leading a broken man of about forty years old, with a silvery beard and a clearly Jewish nose. The Deputy Commander asks: "Yoffe, can you read Hebrew?" – "Yes." – "In that case, read what's written here!" Yoffe takes the piece of parchment in his hand, and sees the word "*Sha-dd-ay*", with the letters each crowned with myriad little adornments, and the spark of fire at the heart of the word, "Shadday"! He wishes to read it out loud, but he begins to say otherwise. "This is not Hebrew!" his voice suddenly resounds in the room, and it is as though someone else were speaking through his own voice, "the letters are Armenian, I am somewhat familiar with that language."

The Deputy Commander looks into the eyes of the little girl once more. It is an illegible, terrified look, with some hidden flame flickering there in the eyes of a mere baby, wide open in her face. Oh to hell with it, perhaps she really is Armenian. This is also the devil's work, after all, taking little children to the slaughter. He presses the buzzer once more. Here they are wasting his time with this foolishness. Get rid of the woman!

Natalya Gavrilovna walks through the streets of the town, with Ninochka in her arms. The sun continues its slow journey on its royal azure bed, but somewhere off in the distance a candid stand of clouds appears, as the drops continue to drip away from the roofs. "Are you cold, Nina?" the woman asks. Her voice is as dry as ever, but her heart is bubbling over with the compassion of a mother and fellow human being. "Yes!" the child answers softly. She is more tired than frozen. No sooner do they reach the house than Natalya Gavrilovna begins to warm her up, feeds her, and puts little Ninochka to bed. The girl's sleep is sweet, and she slumbers for quite a few hours – straight through the evening until the following morning. During that time Natalya Gavrilovna tends to things around the house. She fixes the broken ring of the lock that was torn off the front door. Then she reserves a sleigh from one of her good friends. Early in the morning she must set out for the village of Moyatin, a distance of some twenty-five kilometers. This time she can no longer put things off.

And indeed, the next morning the gates out in the yard swing open, and a sleigh pulled by two horses slides up into the yard. The horses' teeth are chewing away at that steady equine pace, and columns of steam envelop the horses' nostrils with each breath. Natalya Gavrilovna and Ninochka emerge from the house, both wrapped up well in their winter clothing. The girl's cheeks quickly turn red, and her eyes flicker. She is happy, little four-year old that she is, embracing the winter and the snow, the heavens and the earth. Natalya Gavrilovna throws two well-wrapped bundles into the sleigh – the little girl's worldly possessions. Who knows how long her exile will last in Moyatin?

The gates of the yard are thrown open once more with a cautious creak. The horses lift their legs and haul the sleigh from the yard out into the street. They whinny and throw off steam. Natalya Gavrilovna closes the gates behind her. The house stands there locked and sealed, all the shutters are closed fast. The woman crosses herself three times and sits down in the sleigh with a sigh.

She makes a soft sucking sound with her lips and then cracks the whip. The horses set out on their journey down Kotsiubynsky Street, moving through the streets of the town until they burst into the open spaces of the fields beyond. The light of day grows as it conquers

the waking world. This day you can feel a certain order return to the world, and the woman and child do not feel so abandoned, they have a certain destination and purpose before them, as they head out on the path that disappears off in the distance.

[4]

What we are writing here is the story of an amulet, and the chain of events now brings us to Yoffe, Avraham Ben-Shaul Yoffe, in whose hands that strip of parchment remained. He had slipped the amulet into his pocket. The Deputy Commander presented him with a number of questions and received his answers.

Yoffe is one of the survivors from Pryluky and has been living here in town for about two weeks. On the day of the great massacre, the fifteenth of November, a bullet hit him in the arm, and he fell into the mass grave of his brethren covered in corpses and dirt. In the night, he managed to free himself from the grave and went and knocked at the door of one of the houses, dripping blood. It was the house of Ivanchuk, the teacher. There they cleaned and bandaged his wound and gave him a place to sleep. Three days later Yoffe emerged from his hiding place and headed for the forest. The officers of the Polizei caught him and sent him down into the basement of the Gestapo. There he awaited another appointed massacre.

Deputy Commander Vogel was in charge of the Jews. He sat there in his armchair and smoked a fine cigarette. He was a bony man, with a hard glance that pierced right through his glasses. Something loathsome emanated from his being, perhaps it was all his fascist ideology. He held a braided whip in his hand. The Jew Yoffe stood in his four *amos* [Note: ritual/religious-legal/idiomatic space allotted to or circumscribing a single human being] with his head bowed. There before him in his armchair sat the Nazi behind his glasses, a scion of the superior race, his royal highness. And so, this was what a representative of the master race looked like, with his meager neck and those sparse hairs of his. Vogel asks in his broken Russian: "How do you know Armenian?" – "Years ago I met a young Armenian girl." – "Are you familiar with any expressions in the language?" – "Yes." – "Such as?" – "*Yes qez sirum em* [Note: Armenian – "I love you"]." "And what does that mean?" – "I love you." The good words felt strange as they emerged from Yoffe's mouth, this forty year-old man, with his greying, unkempt beard, bowed head, and Jewish nose – a man already half-murdered. Vogel goes on smoking his fine cigarette. "Do you then have no desire to ease your fate somewhat, *Jude*?" – "Yes. I do, Commander, sir.!" – "If that's the case, why not tell me everything?" – "I'm not hiding anything at all, Commander, sir!" Vogel's look behind his glasses was stiff, a sarcastic, stinging look that foretold evil things. "Where were you on the fifteenth of November?" – "I was there, Commander, sir." Yoffe cannot stomach the wicked look of the Deputy Commander. He bends his neck even lower. "How did you manage to remain alive?" – "I came around in the night. My arm was hit, but I was still alive." – "Who bandaged your wounded arm?" – "I crawled into the forest, and three days went by before they found me and brought me here." – "Who bandaged your wounded arm?" – "I did it myself." The Deputy Commander's braided whip bangs the desk. He shouts, in a thin voice: "Lies!" Yoffe trembles at the sound of his royal highness' altered voice. Vogel is sitting there in his armchair like some cruel monster, opening his mouth wide to swallow Yoffe alive.

There was no hope. The Father had abandoned his children, his fate was sealed. "I am not lying, Commander, sir!" A high wave of feverish anger is ready to break inside Yoffe's soul. The fascist's thin neck is stretched out before him, just a meter and a half away. He'll leap at him and grab him by the throat. But there is an armed soldier standing behind him. No, he'll never manage to strangle the man. He must submit to his fate, and be led out to the slaughter with his brethren a second time. Vogel fixes his harsh eyes on Yoffe. "The partisans bandaged your arm, *Jude!*" – "No, I didn't see any partisans." He hears Vogel's thin voice once more: "Lies!" A limitless anger continues to boil away in Yoffe's soul. His cheeks are pale, and he is breathing hard. Their eyes meet. A glare of ridicule and hatred is fixed in Vogel's eyes, but something hard and stubborn flashed in the eyes of the martyr as well. "I'll tear your soul out piece by piece, *Jude!*" These last words resounded in the room in broken Russian. Then a curt command was issued in German.

They burned his living flesh. Six times the red-hot iron rod was pressed to his flesh, and two triangles sprung from his back. They sit there, a Star of David, till this day. Vogel sat in his chair off to the side, his legs crossed one over the other, smoking his cigarette. "Will you tell me now?" he asked, after the first burn was applied. Yoffe pursed his lips as a deep groan tore through his sealed mouth. The smell of burnt flesh spread through the basement. Yoffe remains silent, fire shooting through his shoulder. "Damn *Jude*, tell me where the partisans are?" the high-pitched shout of his royal highness could be heard once more. "I did not see any partisans!" Yoffe screams. He is screaming from the burning pain, in a flood of anger, completely helpless. He had still to summon a world of strength and spiritual fortitude. Once again the red-hot iron was pressed to his back, and once more a groan of horror burst forth from the very depths of his soul and despair. The smells of roasted flesh and fine cigarettes mingled there in the basement.

He had hid at the home of Ivanchuk, the teacher. Ivanchuk's daughter Tanya had cleaned and bandaged his arm – warm Tanya, that compassionate sister. She comforted him, even picked out the tune of a plaintive Ukrainian Dumka for him once on the piano. These folks had taken him in, he had stayed in their home for three days. Would he then reveal his hiding place to this fascist, would he simply send good people to the gallows?

Six times the flames were pressed to his flesh, and a burning Star of David was seared into his back, as his head sank, his arms fell, and his breath was cut off. When he woke he found himself among those condemned to die, trembling all over from the pain and insult of it all. His belly, his chest, his entire body rose from the ground with every hoarse breath he drew. The terrible flame of the rod burned in his shoulders, across his back, in his mind, down in his very bones.

He was not alone in the basement. Many people, prisoners of the slaughter, living corpses, had been gathered alongside him. In the evening they were all taken out to die – thirty-seven people in all. Little Ninochka, that scion of the House of Luria, was already in Moyatin that evening, at the home of Agrippina Semionovna. She sat on the trunk and tended to her dolls. She even had her harmonica once more. She was now allowed to make as much of a noisome racket as she could manage under the sun.

Thirty-seven people were taken out to die. They were arranged in single file along the edge of the open grave. It was a ditch that had been dug that morning just outside of town. At first they were forced to remove their shoes and clothes. A steady tremor began to shake their bodies. They were sorry to leave this mean life forever. Yoffe stood there at the edge of the ditch as well. When he removed his clothes he had found the Hebrew amulet in his pocket and had gripped it tight in his fist. The shots rang out, five machine guns fired. Yoffe fell into the open grave. He was the first to fall; maybe he managed to anticipate the shot by a fraction of a second. He was not a novice when it came to the business of being taken out to die. So long as his soul still inhabited his body, he was alive. He fell into the pit, and the other victims fell by his side. At first the shots continued to ring out, then the cries of death could be heard, and in the end, silence fell over the entire scene. All that could be heard now was the near-silent sound of some liquid falling in droplets to the ground – the blood that continued to spill and pool at the bottom of the pit. Yoffe lies in the pit, facedown. His undershirt and neck are stained with blood and dirt, but he is alive, he is breathing, he can hear his heart beating. They were now covering the pit. Clumps of dirt fell on top of him, as they buried him alive. There they were going about this grisly business like some sort of an afterthought. The layer of dirt weighs down upon him, but he is still breathing. In his clenched fist he can feel the sacred amulet.

Silence and darkness blanketed the world, but time marches on without pause despite it all – before death comes and once it has already passed. Certainly the murderers had disappeared by now. He gathers all the strength he has, as he now has to try and make his way out of the pit of death. He doubles his efforts and frees himself from the layer of dirt. In the bloody pit Yoffe stands atop the bodies of his brothers and sisters, with but a t-shirt of blood clinging to his flesh and that amulet in his fist. The Kislev night envelops the ditch in its dark cover.

So long as his soul still inhabits his body, he is alive. And so long as he is alive, there is yet hope for revenge, revenge against the fascists. That is now his sacred purpose.

Let there be revenge! The day will come and the pangs and terrors of death will assail you as well, your hateful royal highness!

There is a world war between us, a war of life and death. With our mother's milk, with the first thoughts we formulate, with that first light on the horizon that shoots through the slits of our eyes, we shall harbor this hope for revenge, you Nazi murderer!

Death! Black death awaits you! It is sharpening its knife in the darkness, it is stirring, it is approaching, in just a little while it will bring down an awful disaster on your very head. That disaster will hunt you down, will grab hold of you, will assail you, will crush your skull. Hunger, rot, vomit, and feces will rule your world.

Let there be no pity! We shall pay them back in kind. We shall eradicate the foolishness of pity from our hearts, that pathetic sense of pity. Strike, smash and destroy, burn it all to the ground! Death to the fascists! Let the damn murderers suffer torture and horrors!

Revenge! Hey, sweet, sacred revenge!

Ho, *Shadday, Shadday!*

The snow began to fall. Huge flakes fell to the ground, lay themselves down, and covered the pit of death. "I swear!" Yoffe whispers, as he raises the amulet to heaven, to the falling snow, to the entire world. It was an oath of revenge. He is groaning quite a bit, crying from the pain, from the suffering, from the bitter insult of it all. He is sobbing among the snow drifts, bowing his very face to the ground, this forty year-old man, shouting his choked-off scream. And his scream was heard down in the very deepest depths of despair, and all who heard it were shaken to their core, and it rose up to the heavens, and brushed the high, lofty throne of the ethereal King, and the King Himself screamed, and all the attendant angels cried, as a layer of snow covered everything in sight.

When they opened the door for him at the house of Ivanchuk, the teacher, he fell down senseless in the doorway. Warm Tanya tended to him once again, with that soft Ukrainian lilt in her voice. She washed him off, spread tannin powder on the Star of David burnt into his back, and dressed him in some clothing borrowed from her father, Roman Nazarovich. The second night the young girl who served as a contact came and led him through a tangle of yards and gardens out into the forests of Veprik. The girl was Glasha – a wild girl, a real forest virgin. The local band of partisans was just being formed up at the time, and there was as yet no contact between their group and the Russian front. However, about two weeks later contact was made and the partisans received a *raziya* [Note: Russian for 'radio transmitter'] from the army, along with weapons, medicine, food, and clothing, along with their first orders.

... Now, four years after all these events, here he is in my room. I am sitting at my desk and Yoffe, Yoffe is there to my right. Two military decorations twinkle on his chest – The Order of the Red Star and the Order of Bogdan Khmel'nitsky. "And what about the amulet, Avram Shaulovich?" He twists the nut that keeps the Order of Khmel'nitsky pinned to the lapel of his jacket, pulls it off and lays it down on my desk. I see a flat little tin box behind the Order. Inside the box the strip of parchment seems to have found its place.

The Holy Ari, Rabbi Isaac Ashkenazi, lived his entire life in Egypt. About two years before his death he came to the city of Safed. It is over four hundred years since he prepared this amulet. The Holy Ari came face to face with the *Shechina* [Note: 'Divine Presence' - one of the names of God], and he glimpsed the end of days and sounded the depths of the human soul. The amulet was written, sealed in its medallion, and passed from generation to generation among the members of the Luria family, until it made its way down to Avraham Ben-Shaul Yoffe, the partisan, and there it found a resting place alongside the Order of Bogdan Khmel'nitsky.

He too, that Cossack warrior, cut down the Nation of Israel right and left and showed no mercy. I am sure that in his day as well, three hundred years ago, there was someone who swore his sacred oath of revenge in one of those ditches of death.

What a strange world it is! A complex, intricate, world of illusions! How can one small man find his way along such crooked paths?

Ho, *Shadday*, *Shadday*!