



KAHN &  
ENGELMANN

A Novel

Hans Eichner

Translated from the German by Jean M. Snook

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BIBLIOASIS

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*To my dearly beloved wife, Kari Grimstad, and  
to Hermann Patsch, friend and much-admired scholar*

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## Sidonie

1.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1938, a Jewish refugee is going for a walk on Carmel Beach. (Is he from Cologne? from Berlin? from Vienna? It doesn't matter.) Twenty metres out from shore, a man is fighting against the waves and yelling for help in Hebrew. The refugee stops to listen, takes his jacket off, folds it neatly (one should never act too hastily); and while taking off his tie and shoes as well, before jumping into the sea to help the yelling man, he exclaims indignantly: "What a fool! *Hebrew* he has learned. *Swimming* he should have learned!"

That's a travelling joke. It was told much the same way in 1789 in Mainz, when the first émigrés arrived there and went for walks along the Rhine in their elegant clothes. But precisely because it is a travelling joke, it is also a Jewish joke; for who has travelled (or, as is mostly the case, has fled) more often than the Jews? From Egypt, from Babylonia, from Canaan, from Spain, from Galicia, from the Third Reich. For me, though, this joke is situated once and for all at the foot of Mount Carmel, because I live a hundred metres above the beach and look out at the sea every morning with ever renewed delight, much as people in Weimar used to be able to look at the Ettersberg before the concentration camp was built there. (To be sure, there are inhabitants of Weimar again now

who can look with delight at the Ettersberg; human memory is short.)

How did I get here, where I bathe poodles during the day so that I can walk along the beach in the evening? I will reconstruct it, although I am actually not very interested in myself. In one of Thomas Mann's early stories he writes that Schiller occasionally needed "only to look at his hand in order to be filled with an enthusiastic tenderness for himself." He could afford to do that. For the likes of us, interest in oneself, to say nothing of tenderness, is usually a sign of immaturity. At any rate, on my way to Haifa (Jews travel), there was one thing or another that may be worth mentioning as typical of the experiences of my generation; and because I am usually too tired in the evenings to undertake anything more sensible (I am getting old!), it may be worth my while to make the attempt.

I'll begin by rummaging through a shoebox full of old photographs that I inherited from my mother, along with a pile of yellowed letters and the princely sum of 15 pounds sterling. The oldest of these photographs – dating from about 1880, but technically quite good – shows a middle-aged woman and a girl of about seventeen years. The woman, with her straight hair combed back, her high forehead and dark eyes, reminds me of my grandmother; but of course she isn't my grandmother, but rather her mother, my great-grandmother. Like her mother, the girl herself – my grandmother – is wearing a heavy black cotton dress that fastens closely around her neck, is belted at the waist and falls below her ankles. On her feet she wears a pair of high-buttoned boots, to which I will return shortly. The only jewellery she is wearing is a cameo brooch, and if you take the difference in their ages into account, her face is astonishingly similar to her mother's.

But what was the story of those boots? In shoe stores when I was sixteen, you tried on the shoe – in my case an inexpensive mass-produced shoe – by putting your foot into an X-ray machine to see if it fit. After the Second World War, these machines were abolished because they might cause cancer; that wasn't a step

backwards, because the X-rayed shoes usually didn't fit anyway. In my grandmother's day, there were still proper shoemakers. Such a shoemaker would sit in his store on a stool, the customer would sit down facing him, put his foot on a piece of brown paper, and the shoemaker would trace the outline, measure the height of the instep with a tape measure, ask about corns and similar troubles, determine the price depending on the design, the type of leather to be used and the ability of the customer to pay, and a week later the shoes were ready.

In Tapolca, a small city that was really hardly more than a large village a few kilometres north of Lake Balaton, there were four shoemakers, three of whom were Christians. The fourth was called József Kahn and even then (but it was, after all, the thirty-second year of Kaiser Franz-Joseph's reign) had the sideburns and shaved chin of the Kaiser. Since my grandmother (the seventeen-year-old in the photograph) needed boots in March 1880, that is, over a hundred years ago, she and her mother rode the few kilometres from her father's estate to Tapolca in a carriage and pair. Their coachman was called Moische, like the coachman of the famous rabbi of Tarnopol. While Moische waited outside with the horses, she entered József's store with her mother and sat down facing him. As József gently touched her ankle with his fingertips to place her foot on the non-carcinogenic paper, she was done for.

It is not known in which pogrom József Kahn's parents had been killed, and I also know little about the orphanage where, on bread and water, but a with a substantial meal on Friday evening, he received a very sketchy education. He was not a talkative man. However, it is known that he learned a trade there, shoemaking; because the Jews who could afford to do a mitzvah and support an orphanage liked to see their own children enter the family business, even if, as was usually the case, they had wanted to become doctors or lawyers; but they preferred to have the orphans learn a trade, because if too many Jews were businessmen, that provoked anti-Semitism. And since at that time there were three Christian shoemakers in Tapolca, but no Jewish one, József, after serving his



apprenticeship, opened a store there. My grandmother's parents, though, were estate owners, and so my grandmother was up against a brick wall.

One imagines – no: one used to imagine the Puszta as being inhabited solely by big estate owners and fiddling Gypsies. That is no longer the case today, because the Germans killed the Gypsies and the Russians killed the estate owners (work shared is work halved). Back then, though, people imagined that the Gypsies played their violins and the estate owners had immense estates where the corn grew that the people in Vienna ate with butter and salt for dessert, but where above all huge herds of cattle grazed – as Goethe put it, “spread out, carefully grouped / Horned cattle climbing up to the sheer edge.” But in reality it wasn't like that even back then, not only because (in contrast to Goethe's Arcadia) there are no sheer edges in the Puszta, which is as flat as a table top, but also because small farmers lived there as well, and since neither the lord of the manor nor the horned cattle took care of themselves, farmhands and maids who neither fiddled nor owned cattle were also needed. Besides, back then there were also Jews on the Puszta, and they were usually neither maids nor farmhands, neither estate owners nor small farmers, because for hundreds of years they had been forbidden to own land, and when that changed after the “Compromise” of 1867, it had become a maxim for most of them that the use of a spade was *goyim naches* (“something the locals do”). So why was my grandmother's father an estate owner? Probably the family tradition I have to rely on for my reconstruction had turned a cattle trader who also owned land into an estate owner who also traded a few cattle as a pastime. In any case, he was prosperous, and that was a problem. My grandmother, you see, the seventeen-year-old, “rash and foolish, typical female! Seized by the moment, acting on a whim,” as Goethe wrote, had hardly felt the shoemaker's fingertips on her ankle when she was done for.

When the boots were ready a week later, however, Sidonie Róth – that was my grandmother's name – didn't get to see József;

Moische picked up the boots from the city. But Sidonie declared that they did not fit, and so she drove to Tapolca again, this time without her mother, and went into the shoemaker's workshop while Moische waited with the horses and fell asleep with boredom. A good hour passed, and when Sidonie came home again with the boots, which mysteriously did fit now, she announced to her parents that she would marry József or no one.

At first they took it for a bad joke. József? The shoemaker? Sidonie stood her ground. Her mother wailed and her father roared. "You want to marry József? That *nebbish*, who hasn't learned anything proper and doesn't know where the bread for his breakfast will come from? That nobody who's even too stupid to scrounge? Is that why I gave you an education? Like hell you'll marry József, you'll marry a decent person who amounts to something, that's what you will do!"

Siddi said nothing, and Dezső Róth roared until his voice cracked. "You want to marry József? Is that why I've been slaving away like *meshuga*? Is that why" (and since my great-grandfather, both because of his poor education and for chronological reasons, couldn't quote Kafka's father, then Kafka's father must have quoted my great grandfather) "I've marched through the snow in bare feet and worked my fingers to the bone, for you to marry József? I'll lock you up until you come to your senses, you stupid goose!"

Since his roaring was fruitless, Sidonie was placed under house arrest, and her mother tried persuasion. "You'll worry your father to death, Sidi, and if you are really stupid enough to marry József, he won't give you a penny, I know my husband. What will you live on with József? He sells three pairs of shoes a month, two of them to you and the third on credit. You're used to expensive clothes, good food and good manners, how are you going to live with a scrounger?"

"Don't be cross with me, Mama, but József's manners are just as good as Papa's, and you don't need to worry about what we'll eat, I'll take care of that."

“But why would you want to marry József? In Budapest you can have whomever you want, you’re pretty, you’ll get a good dowry, your Papa knows the best families, and then you can live in the sort of luxury you’re accustomed to, you’re a good catch, so why do you want József? Put that idea out of your mind, I forbid you to marry him!”

“I know that you forbid it, Papa has also forbidden it, but I’ll still marry him.”

Sidonie was as stubborn as her mother, the conversation went in circles and the house arrest continued. It was supposed to give the girl the opportunity to think matters over and arrive at a better conclusion.

She did think it over, but arrived at a different conclusion from what her parents had hoped. After three weeks of careful consideration, she crawled out the window at first light one morning, landed on a hotbed that soiled her dress but broke the fall (when my mother jumped out the window, she fell on hard cobblestones) and set out for Tapolca. She arrived as the sun was rising, slept for two hours under a hedge (there was no point in fussing about her dress anymore), washed herself at a well and walked into József’s store at eight-thirty to – what other business could she possibly have there? – order herself a second pair of boots. Quite apart from the fact that there was no carriage waiting outside, József needed only to cast a glance at the girl’s clothes to realize that something was not right. But he was not the kind of person who asks questions. So he got out a piece of brown paper and drew the outline of her foot (although he of course had the outline he had taken previously; a good shoemaker doesn’t throw that sort of thing away). She stayed for two hours, bought herself a roll and a glass of milk for breakfast, walked all the way home and sneaked back into her room again unnoticed; because except for Moische, who was supposed to be standing guard outside her door, but was once again sleeping like a log, everyone else was in the fields. Three months later, my great-grandmother (she had barely

stopped crying and now had to start again) discovered that her daughter was pregnant.

The bad news (or rather the good news; because my grandmother will have known very well what she was doing) could not be concealed from her father, who roared so much that he got laryngitis and had to go to the doctor. (As a cattle trader, he had more confidence in the veterinarian, but it wouldn't do for an estate owner to have his throat painted by a veterinarian; it was bad enough to have a pregnant daughter in the house.) After he had his throat painted, he continued roaring until he lost his voice completely. But since Sidonie's only answer was: "I will marry József anyway," and as her father could no longer roar, he boxed her ears. That was a mistake, as it didn't have the desired effect, and how was he to go about finding a well-to-do husband in Budapest for a pregnant girl who also had a swollen cheek? Besides, he had put himself in the wrong by doing so, and now her mother was *against* him.

So things took their course. Róth spent a number of sleepless nights, and when his voice had recovered, he started roaring again and displayed a considerable vocabulary. "You're pregnant by József, you goose? By that clumsy oaf, that *ganef*, that silly ass, that fool, that *nebbish*, that *shlemiel*, that swindler, that nobody, that complete idiot? May a dog's tail grow between your legs!" (Hungarian curses are in a class of their own; when it comes right down to it, every second Hungarian janitor is a King Lear). Finally, he recognized that it was all to no avail – there was no wall harder than my grandmother's head – and he resigned himself, albeit grudgingly, to the inevitable. He had a long talk with the rabbi in Tapolca, who happened to be a relative ("Why not," he said, "she will have pretty children, I'm already looking forward to their bar mitzvahs"), and then in a great rush, as if to outstrip the three months, the wedding date was set.

The wedding was quite an event. From all the regional Jewish communities, everyone had been invited who had any standing or reputation – or who didn't: Sidonie had made sure

behind her father's back that all the Kahns would be present as well (József had three older brothers who were all as poor as he was).

It will come as no surprise that Róth didn't pass up the opportunity to display his wealth, but it also goes without saying that the ceremony followed the old rite that had hardly changed in hundreds of years. The wedding took place on a Tuesday, because on a Tuesday and only on that day, the Lord had said twice while creating the world that it was good. While the guests partook of the cold buffet prepared by a cook and two assistants Mother Róth had brought in from Budapest, József and Sidonie, who, as was customary, were fasting, admired the golden illuminations on the *ketubah*, the marriage contract, which, to be sure, stated only what was self-evident. Róth had had the document written by a calligrapher in Brno. After the *ketubah* had been signed by two witnesses, József pulled the veil Sidonie was wearing down over her face, because Rebecca had been wearing a veil when she saw Isaac for the first time, and the rabbi blessed Sidonie as the sons of Bethuel had blessed Rebecca: "You, our sister, grow to many thousand times a thousand."

In front of the *baldachin* that was standing outside, decorated with two beautiful old *talleisim*, József put on the white coat that he normally only wore on Yom Kippur, and Sidonie, who looked so delightful in her wedding dress with the long train that Mother Róth burst into tears, walked solemnly around him seven times, because it says seven times in the Torah: "and when a man takes a wife." The rabbi spoke the blessing over the bride and groom, they sipped wine from a silver cup, József put the ring on Sidonie's finger and repeated the old wording after the rabbi: "*Harei at m'kudäscht*" (with this ring, be sacred to me according to the law of Moses and Israel). Then the rabbi read the text of the *ketubah*, and the seven guests of honour said the *sheva berachos*, the seven blessings spoken over a bride and groom. Finally – that was the end of the ceremony – the cantor placed a glass wrapped in a napkin on the floor under the *baldachin*, and

József crushed it underfoot; because just as he now crushed the glass, so the temple had been destroyed, and the time of exile had begun. . . .

Then, notwithstanding the buffet, a banquet was served, for which the Budapest cook had prepared seven courses. Father Róth proposed a toast, and no sooner was he finished than the director of the orphanage, who was there at Sidonie's instigation, got up and to her dismay made a speech in which, although he of course spoke Hungarian, he quoted Schiller's "Song of the Bell" in the original German. "Take up your wanderer's staff with joy," he exclaimed, although it wasn't clear who was supposed to wander where, and he went pale with pride when he also managed to work the "herds of well-fed, broad-browed cattle" into his address, with reference to the land Róth owned. Fortunately, he didn't quote the lines about the "bridal bouquet" and the "church bells" in the poem. (When I was sixteen and quoted Schiller in the presence of my Uncle Jenő, who was an educated man and could speak good High German when he wanted to, he would say: "Don't quote that crazy stuff, that is *goyim naches*.") Champagne, Bordeaux and Tokay flowed in abundance, and when the guests at last went home, no one had dared to ask why the invitations had only been sent out at the last minute.

But the wedding was the last thing Dezső Róth did for his daughter, and so my great-grandmother, when she wanted to dissuade Sidonie from marrying the shoemaker, had been partly right with her warnings. To be sure, her husband didn't go to his grave for sorrow, but he also really never helped his daughter with a single cent. Even when he died, she got nothing: he had a son as well, and the inheritance went to him undivided (it wasn't very much, since Róth with advancing age had made some bad business decisions). Incidentally, I don't have much to tell about the son. I only know that he had the misfortune of growing old, so that, when the Germans occupied Hungary, he was still alive and died an agonizing death.

2.

“A *shlemiel* lets everything fall, a *nebbish* picks everything up,” is the proverbial definition. Dezsö Róth had done his future son-in-law an injustice – but it really is time that I call him my grandfather! My grandfather was neither a *shlemiel* nor a *nebbish*, but a simple, serious, decent man who knew he played only a modest role in the world, but didn’t lose face. I remember him as an elderly gentleman whose hair had got a little thin, but whose Kaiser Franz-Joseph sideburns were just as blond in 1938 as they had been in 1880, when my grandmother found them (the beard and the entire József) so irresistible. In the evenings, the old man liked to drink a glass of caraway brandy while smoking his cigars, and since for some obscure reason he had got the idea that someone was stealing his brandy, he would make a thick pencil line on the label after he had filled his schnapps glass, so that he could check the next day to see if any was missing. But since he sometimes forgot to make the line (after all, he was over eighty), the brandy the next evening would be half a finger’s width below the line, and so he had the proof in his hand. He never did discover that while I didn’t steal his brandy, I now and then stole a cigar to bribe my friend Giddi May to play Beethoven instead of Scarlatti on our piano. When he died, he left a large supply of cigars in pretty wooden boxes. He had the good luck of dying peacefully in his bed two weeks before the Germans, to the cheers of the people, marched into Vienna.

That was almost sixty years later. In 1880, he could afford neither brandy nor cigars, and when my grandmother threw herself at him (to put it as it was), he fully understood that Dezsö Róth did not want a shoemaker for his son-in-law, and that there would be an argument – quite aside from the fact that there are serious punishments in the Talmud for what had happened in the small room behind the store during her two-hour visit. But very few men could refuse a seventeen-year-old as pretty as my grandmother then was, and when my grandmother wanted something, it was a

good idea to obey her. By the way, he bit with bliss into the sweet apple, although he did ask himself what they were supposed to live on. Mother Róth had made it clear to him that his father-in-law would not help out, and his shoemaking barely brought in enough for a bachelor. He did have a kitchen and two rooms behind the store, one with his bed and the other with his leather supplies; but the kitchen was small and the rooms were tiny. However, when the rabbi had said the final blessing and Sidonie moved in with József, his worries proved to have been unnecessary. She had left her fine clothes at her parents' house, sewed curtains from material that her mother had had lying in some drawer for years, and for lunch, instead of baked carp, she and József ate potatoes with butter and milk that tasted better to her than any carp ever had. In spite of the crazy stuff I was not allowed to quote in Uncle Jenő's presence, "sensual pleasure and spiritual peace" got along together splendidly in József's house.

Since there was no room for a cradle in the tiny bedroom, and there was no money, let alone extra space, Sidonie halved my grandfather's store with an imaginary line and confiscated one half. There she set up the cradle in a corner, had József build her a table of cheap wood that could stand outside in front of the store in good weather and began selling vegetables. At first she knew nothing at all about such a business, but she learned very quickly to buy from the local farmers at low prices, and on the table she constructed real works of art out of tomatoes, green peppers, corn, potatoes and cauliflower. When winter came (it was high time: Sidonie was in the ninth month), her vegetable sales had already brought in enough for the young couple to rent two rooms on the top floor; that wasn't expensive then in Tapolca.

The baby was a girl, and behind her husband's back, Mother Róth smuggled diapers and little shirts into the city. Sidonie – she did ask my grandfather, but he knew to say yes when his wife asked him something – called her Gisa. Even as a baby she is said to have been unusually pretty, like the Róths, with black eyes and curly black hair. Then came two boys. The first was Jenő,



in whose presence I was later not allowed to quote Schiller, and my grandmother called their second son Dezsö after her father, although it was not customary among Jews to call a child after a living ancestor. Old Róth, who must have been an uncommonly stupid and stubborn person, promptly got it into his head that she had given his grandson this name deliberately to make fun of him. He also took it amiss that she – the daughter of the estate owner Dezsö Róth – sold vegetables, and when he drove to Tapolca, Moische had to go a long way around so they wouldn't pass the store. That was all the more absurd since the other Róths – there was an entire army of brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, who knew very well that they themselves had been the children of poor people – had nothing against the Kaiser Franz-Joseph sideburns and thought the vegetable store was very nice. They went a long way around in order to admire the little towers of corn and tomatoes, and without these customers Sidonie wouldn't have been able to rent the two top floor rooms so soon. But no one could talk to Róth about his daughter, and his siblings eventually found that his constantly wounded feelings bordered on persecution mania. Fifty years later, family members would still occasionally remark, when someone complained loud and long: "He's yammering like Dezsö," although old Róth was long since dead and his grandson, my Uncle Dezsö, was full of enthusiasm for life, seldom yammered and liked to laugh loud and long. It was my Uncle Jenö who inherited the tendency toward persecution mania.

### 3.

Even more clearly than any memory of the real Jenö, I remember a postcard-sized photograph in the brown shades that, in the thirties, were unfortunately fashionable not only in photography. There he sits on a camel, the pyramids in the background, and in spite of the desert heat he's wearing a business suit with a white shirt and tie. (Incidentally, in the photographs in the shoebox I inherited from

my mother, Jenö can always be recognized by his strange eyes that always look as if they were opened wide by some unnatural means; his eyes make people afraid.) But so as to be able to travel from Vienna by train, ship and camel to the pyramids, my Uncle Jenö first had to walk from Tapolca to Vienna (just as the rabbi of Tarnopol had to walk from Warsaw to his home town). Like everything in the world, there's a story behind that. (The only thing that doesn't have a story behind it is the word of God: "Let there be light." God then created the heaven and the earth and everything below it, in it and above it in six days, and sometimes I think he shouldn't have been in such a hurry.) But instead of telling the story behind *that*, I first would like to tell a story that is only indirectly related to Jenö's walk to Vienna.

When I was ten, I had finished public school and went to the trade school in the second district of Vienna, on Kleine Sperrgasse. There were two stationery stores nearby, the Christian store owned by the widowed Frau Zwirnknopf, and the Jewish store owned by the Epsteins. Frau Zwirnknopf was a tall, high-bosomed, friendly woman who, with a single exception – the Epsteins – seemed to show endless goodwill to the entire world. In her neat, attractive store, there was a pleasant smell of paper, cleansers and the new wood of the shelves. I occasionally bought some little thing there, perhaps a pencil, and curiously sniffed the smell. But you had to pay for the order and cleanliness, and when I needed more than a pencil I went to the Epsteins. There, the goods were not neatly labelled on new shelves, but were piled in big, disorderly heaps, and since someone had always forgotten to close a door or a window, and a gentle wind wafted through the disarray, there wasn't a smell of anything, or at most of cholent from the neighbouring cholent baker's; but the prices were lower there, and Frau Zwirnknopf knew that and felt threatened, all the more so because the Epsteins had resorted to the dirty trick of closing their store, not on Sunday like all proper people, but on Saturday. So in the end, in March of 1938, without comprehending that along with the competition she would also lose most of her customers, she was

among the thousands at the Heldenplatz, the huge square in front of the Royal Palace, who cheered the Nazis as they marched in. That illustrates a bit of social history, and it may be worthwhile to go a little further back.

Joseph II's Tolerance Edict of March 31, 1783, admitted the Hungarian Jews to all professions, allowed them to lease land and abolished the Jewish identification badge. Soon, though, many restrictions were revived. The Jews were not allowed to buy real estate, to lease land from the aristocracy, to study any subject other than medicine, and so on. They only obtained full equality after the Compromise of 1867, and with that a short golden age began for the Jews in the Hapsburg countries, especially in Hungary, where they could fill a gap, since there was hardly a middle class yet. They founded factories, studied law, suddenly there were Jewish academics, engineers, violinists, world-class composers in Hungary. It's touching to read how the Jews back then in the Hapsburg Empire assessed their situation. "We believe," wrote Gerson Wolf, for example, in his 1883 history of the Jews of Austria, "that the entire period of time under discussion can be divided into two parts. The first, earlier time, reaches from the period when the Jews immigrated to Austria until the last expulsion from Prague in 1744; it is the time of tribulation and suffering. It was followed by the second period, the period of struggle and victory, of the principle of equal rights."

The fact that Wolf in 1883 was so confident of success when looking to the future shows that he did not understand what was going on. When I spent a few days in Vienna in 1950, I looked at the display in a bookstore window and noticed a coloured print, for use in schools, of Christ among the disciples. It showed a demonstratively Aryan, blond, blue-eyed Jesus in the centre of the picture and eleven disciples who hardly differed from those in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. The twelfth, Judas, had black hair, a long nose and was repulsively ugly – a caricature from the *Stürmer*, the Nazi propaganda sheet. That was the old clerical anti-Semitism, dating back to the church fathers: the Jews are the murderers of

Christ, and does it not say in the Bible that his blood shall be upon them for all eternity? At the same time, however, the coloured print shows the new, racial anti-Semitism that became epidemic when the Jews were able to move more freely for the first time in two thousand years.

While Gerson Wolf abandoned himself to his dreams, the word “anti-Semitism” had been around for exactly ten years – Wilhelm Marr had coined it in 1873. But there were also the writings of Gobineau and Chamberlain; Dühring’s book had recently appeared, which stated that the “Jewish question” was to be solved “by exterminating them,” and in Vienna the followers of Georg von Schönenerer were singing the pretty little verse: “It matters not whom the Jews are trusting, the fact remains that their race is disgusting.” Then the politicians in Austria and in Hungary discovered that anti-Semitism brought votes, and they helped the clergy incite the farmers and the petit bourgeois. . . . It wasn’t difficult, because now there were more and more Epsteins, not to mention Jewish cattle traders, industrialists, lawyers and doctors, and every Epstein generated his own Frau Zwirnknopf. With the equal rights and the “victory” that Gerson Wolf had so naively celebrated had come envy, and with envy, hatred.

The extent to which you felt the hatred depended on who you were and where you lived. My grandmother had grown up in a well-to-do household, surrounded by maids and servants, spoiled by her mother and their Bohemian cook, protected when she went for rides by the coachman Moische. She had not felt the pressure that weighed so heavily, for example, on a Jewish peddler. In Tapolca, of course, she heard a swearword now and then. She knew that *zsidó* meant not only “Jewish,” but also “miserly,” and what the farmers said when someone haggled persistently: “He haggles like a Gypsy for a horse, and a Jew for cotton.” But she was so in love with her József, so happy in her small family, so proud, too, of her own enterprise – in the summer months her vegetables soon brought in more than József’s workshop – that it didn’t bother her what people said behind her back, and when a bad word was

spoken in her presence, she had a sharp tongue and could stand up for herself. But then it happened – it was in April, 1883, Gisa was just two years old – that a stone flew through the window of the room where the little girl was sleeping. There’s a story behind the stone, too.

On Saturday, the first of April, 1882, in Tiszaeszlár, in the county of Szabolcs, the fourteen-year-old Christian, Esther Solymosi, was sent by her employer, a Jewess by the name of Huri, to the next village to do some shopping and she didn’t return. Incidentally, the small Jewish community in Tiszaeszlár needed a new kosher butcher at that time, but one who could also function as their cantor, so they were looking for someone who could not only butcher, but also sing. Nevertheless, there were three candidates. (As the Yiddish saying goes, “The Lord is just. He gives food to the rich and appetite to the poor.” The German saying, “Hunger is the best cook” is not as witty; but apparently hunger is also the best singing teacher.) So after the evening meal they had a meeting to audition the three candidates, which meant that the light was on unusually late in the synagogue. When there was still no sign of Esther in the next few days, it occurred to her mother to link her disappearance with the light that had been on so late, and soon the rumour made the rounds that the girl had met a terrible end in the Jewish temple: it was almost *Pesach*, the Jewish Feast of the Passover, and didn’t everyone know that Jews need the blood of a Christian child for Passover?

A month later, the rumour arose that the four-year-old son of József Scharf, the Temple sexton, who had recently been seen playing with Christian children, had said he was present when his father, his older brother Móric and the butcher (that is, the one who had in the meantime got the job) had killed Esther. Two weeks later, the district court ordered a preliminary investigation.

The examining magistrate, János Bary, was no less certain than Esther’s mother that the Jews needed Christian blood for their Passover, and so in his eyes the accused were unquestionably

guilty. He therefore saw it as his task not to investigate, but rather to prove this unquestionable guilt. He found villagers who testified that they had heard “screams of distress” from the synagogue. That wasn’t surprising, because hunger is perhaps not the best singing teacher after all, and it’s no miracle that it sounds like a scream of distress when a butcher has to sing. Bary interrogated, among others, the thirteen-year-old Móric Scharf; and since he, as was reported the next morning in the Budapest Catholic daily newspaper *Magyar Allam*, “resorted to denying everything,” Bary took him “into protective custody.” At that time, protective custody wasn’t a death sentence, as it was later under the Nazis, but it was enough for Móric. He was put up in the house of a policeman by the name of Györgi Vay, in whose loving care adults had confessed to things that hadn’t happened, and he soon signed a statement: he, Móric Scharf, had looked through the keyhole of the synagogue door and seen the butcher, assisted by his father, cut Esther’s throat and collect her blood in a pot. From that point on, some of the Hungarian newspapers reported on the “ritual murder in Tiszaeszlár” as if it were a proven fact, and the rabble broke the Jews’ windows in the villages and looted their houses.

The trial soon became a sensation in Europe, with not only the Hungarian, but also the Paris and London newspapers reporting on it. There was a certain element of cruel comedy inherent in the rest of the trial, just as there had been at the beginning. Since Bary feared that Móric might go back on his coerced statement in court, he made sure the boy was subjected to a thorough brainwashing, and the preliminary investigation dragged on. In the middle of June, raftsmen pulled a corpse from the river to which Tiszaeszlár owes its name. The corpse was wearing Esther’s clothes, but there was no sign of a cut on the body. Bary was an imaginative man and explained away this problem by saying that the raftsmen, among whom there were Jews, must indeed have pulled Esther’s corpse out of the Tisza, but then have put Esther’s clothes on another corpse that they substituted for hers. The proceedings went on for months, but the question was never asked how the

raftsmen had managed to procure a second corpse so quickly, even though it was rather pertinent to the investigation. Admittedly, there are junk shops where you can buy almost anything, but there presumably wasn't a shop in the county of Szabolcs with a supply of six-week-old corpses. The raftsmen were arrested, and the policeman Györgi Vay, with whom we are already acquainted, made sure that two of them confirmed Bary's theory. The young Móric also did what he was told and recited to the court exactly what he had been taught.

But now two new problems came to light; first, it turned out that the prayer room in which the "slaughter" was supposed to have taken place could not have been seen through the keyhole of the temple door; and second – this sounds like something from a fairy tale, but is documented – the corpse, after it had been buried and exhumed three times, was positively identified as the corpse of Esther Solymosi by a scar on the big toe of her right foot. Meanwhile, the number of accused had risen to thirteen, and in the courtroom, in addition to the journalists who had hurried there from the whole of Europe and who were driven to despair by Hungarian spelling, there were sometimes as many as 250 spectators who clapped, whistled, howled and placed bets on the outcome of the trial. Györgi Vay challenged one of the defence lawyers to a duel, and although the latter had never had a rapier in his hand, he felt he couldn't bow out with the world press looking on, took some fencing classes on the weekend and inflicted a wound on the policeman's upper arm; so Christian blood really did flow in Tiszaeszlár. By the time the reporter for the *Times* had finally learned to spell the name of the village with two sz's and an accent over the second a – in August 1883 – the trial was over, and the three judges read out an exceedingly muddled document, in whose thirty pages the verdict "not guilty" was not to be found, but rather only the finding that "József Scharf and his co-defendants were accused of murder. The fact that this cannot be proven prevents the assumption that a murder was kept secret." The thirteen defendants were released from jail, and the Jews who had fled from

Tiszaeszlár returned to their looted homes. In the Hungarian parliament, Gyösö Istóczy, who by the way had already pleaded in 1878 for the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine to get rid of them, announced that Christian parents could never be sure “that their child who has suddenly disappeared, will not become a victim a few days later of the fanatical Jews who surpass even the cannibals in their ritualistic madness,” for in spite of the acquittal “everyone was convinced in his innermost heart that the unfortunate Esther Solymosi had met her tragic end in the synagogue of Tiszaeszlár.” The right-wing press complained that “the justice system was controlled by Jews,” and the mob was howling.

Small causes, large effects. If Frau Huri had kept the fourth commandment, according to which you should do no work on the Sabbath, nor your son nor your daughter, nor your man servant nor your maid servant, then she wouldn't have sent Esther Solymosi to Tiszaeszlár to do shopping, the girl wouldn't have drowned in the Tisza, the reporter for the *Times* wouldn't have had to learn the orthography of Hungarian place names, no stone would have flown through the window of my grandmother's room, Uncle Jenő wouldn't have been photographed on a camel, and I wouldn't have been born in Vienna – perhaps not at all – and wouldn't be bathing poodles today in Haifa. But Frau Huri didn't keep the commandment, and the stone flew. There was the sound of breaking glass, the child screamed, and my grandmother, who had jumped out of bed in alarm, saw that the girl's forehead was bleeding.

The damage wasn't great. My grandmother swept up the broken glass, my grandfather made sure the stone disappeared from the house, and a workman put new glass in the window. The small wound on the girl's forehead healed without leaving a scar. In my grandmother's mind, though, there was a wound left that didn't heal. The atmosphere in and around Tapolca had changed. When my grandmother bought cabbage or radishes from the farmers and a dog growled, they had previously said “down” or whatever you say in Hungarian. Now they let the dog growl,



because hadn't they read in the newspaper that Christian children weren't safe as long as there were Jews around? Sidonie had become hypersensitive, she felt their mistrust, she saw the veiled threat in the farmers' eyes, and when she had read a particularly bad inflammatory article in the *Magyar Allam*, she feared for Gisa. She didn't like it anymore in Tapolca. Of course, when she spoke about it with József, he said phlegmatically: "Don't worry, Sidi, it was never any different, it's the same everywhere," and since she loved the kind, handsome man she had won for herself in the battle with her father, she dropped the topic. She also didn't have the time to be moody, because in addition to running the vegetable business, she soon had four children to care for: she gave birth to Jenő in 1884, Dezső in 1885 and her second daughter, Klara, in 1886. But it tormented her to think of her children growing up surrounded by the hatred she saw in the farmers' eyes, and she was worried about the future. What would become of the boys in Tapolca? (She wasn't worried about the girls, they would get married.) What could they learn in this one-horse town? Should they be apprenticed to their father, or to the Jewish glazier? That wasn't good enough. Sometimes now, in the narrow bed that she shared with József, she would lie awake until the early morning hours, thinking of the stone that had come flying through the window, and thinking of the future. But she was happy with her husband and the children, and so years passed before she reached a decision.

#### 4.

If you need advice, you go to a rabbi. Since the rabbi of Tarnopol wasn't available to my grandmother, she went to the Kálmans.

"Sidi!" exclaimed Malke Kálman, who had opened the door. "How nice that you have come to visit us again! Come in and sit by the stove, you look frozen through. Gyula and Sara are here too."

Like my great-grandmother in the photograph, Malke was wearing a black cotton dress that reached down to her ankles. If you had an eye for that sort of thing, you could see that she was observing the rule and was wearing a wig. As Sidonie entered the parlour, the rabbi, who was her second cousin and the successor of the rabbi who had blessed her marriage, got up from his chair to greet her. His appearance reflected the division in the Hungarian Jewish community. He sympathized with the Orthodox Jews and wore a caftan, but he tried to steer a middle course: his full beard was carefully trimmed. Gyula, his brother, a school teacher by profession, was a Reform Jew. He wore an ordinary business suit and was clean shaven.

“Welcome,” said Miklós Kálman with a certain degree of ceremony. “You bring blessing to our house.” Then the women began to talk, about Gisa, who was getting prettier and prettier, about Malke’s Ruben, who was already reading the Talmud, about the younger children, until Miklós interrupted them: “How’s business?”

“The same as ever,” said Sidonie. “József makes shoes, and the goyim don’t pay.”

“The goyim pay no worse than the Jews,” said Gyula, who was a good Hungarian patriot.

“That’s true, but God knows they also don’t pay any better,” said Sidonie.

“Tell us what’s on your mind, Sidonie,” said Miklós. “There is something you want to talk about, you didn’t come through the snow to tell us your Jenö is eating rock candy.”

“You’re right, as always, but I don’t know how to begin. I’m no longer happy in Tapolca. I’m worried about the children, I don’t want them to grow up in a one-horse town where people break my windows.”

“That happened a long time ago,” said Gyula.

“But I can’t forget it,” said my grandmother. “When I go to the farmers, they’re glad to see me, who else buys their eggs, but I see the hatred in their eyes, and my boys fight with the neighbours’ children.”

“There is hatred everywhere,” said Gyula. “That is our fate. But we live in an enlightened country, the day will come. . . .”

“Maybe,” said my grandmother, “but when? You know how the newspapers incite hatred. I don’t want my children to grow up with hatred. And what should become of them here? Should the boys be apprenticed to my husband and mend boots all their lives? I don’t want them to be peddlers.”

“You’re exaggerating,” said Gyula. “Your father grew up in a village and became a rich man.”

“I don’t want the children to turn out like my father,” said Sidonie, “but they should learn to understand the way of the world, I don’t want them to become country bumpkins in this one-horse town.”

“Am I a country bumpkin?” said Gyula. “I’ve been living in Tapolca for twenty years. And Miklós? He is known everywhere as a learned man.”

“Jenő is a bright child,” said Miklós, “if you were good Jews, you and József, I could prepare him for the yeshiva like my Ruben.”

“That’s not so easy,” said Gyula. “If the boy is to have the right education, he has to attend the yeshiva in Pressburg, and where would the money come from for that? Róth doesn’t help, and shoemaking doesn’t bring in enough.”

“Miklós didn’t study in Pressburg either, but he has still become a famous man,” said Malke proudly. “He just recently published another article in *A Magyar Szinagóga*.”

“Your Ruben has his nose in the Talmud all day long,” said my grandmother, “but Jenő doesn’t. And this isn’t just about Jenő.”

“So what are you thinking about?”

“I don’t know,” said my grandmother, a little disingenuously. “I wanted to ask you for advice.”

“If you really don’t like it here anymore,” said Miklós, “go to Vienna.”

Then none of them said anything for a little while, and the complete silence of a winter evening prevailed, the sort of winter

evening they had back then, when there was no sound of a motor on the roads and no humming of a refrigerator in the house. “Go to Vienna!” That was what Sidonie had wanted to hear, and yet that wasn’t it. Of course the children had to grow up in Vienna, that would be best for them. But couldn’t it be Budapest? People spoke Hungarian there, they had relatives and acquaintances there, she had gone there every few months with her parents to shop – but Vienna? Vienna was foreign to her. Suddenly she saw an endless labyrinth of streets and squares in front of her whose bumpy cobbled pavement she had to cross in high-heeled shoes while countless cab drivers kept yelling at her in an incomprehensible dialect.

“My German is so poor,” she said at last. “I don’t know a soul there. What should we live on?”

“God will help you,” said Gyula.

“I know the rabbi of the Schiff Schul in Vienna, Chaim Ledermann,” said Miklós, who was an expert, so he knew that you have to help God a little if you want Him to help. “He’s a *tzaddick*, one of the few still around. If you want, I can write to him.”

“You people are *meshuga*,” said Sara. “You have enough to eat and a fire in the stove, and you go dancing on ice.”

“Have you spoken with József?” asked Miklós.

“No.”

“He won’t want to go,” said Gyula.

“He will understand that it’s best for the children,” said my grandmother. “But you may have to help me a little.”

## 5.

The rabbi of Tarnopol – at some point I do have to tell this story, so why not now? – from time to time, the famous rabbi of Tarnopol went to visit his colleague, the hardly less famous rabbi of Warsaw, to discuss contentious theological issues with him. When he once again travelled to the Polish capital city for this purpose in

the spring of the year 1782, his coachman Moische, as we already know, drove him in a carriage and pair. (Malicious gossip has it that the reason for his trip was to clarify the question of whether the lighting of the recently invented matches was considered work and was therefore forbidden on the Sabbath. Of course that's not true, because at that time it had already long since been determined that every way of making fire counts as work. When I'm visiting good Jews on Friday evening, I'm not allowed to smoke, not because I wouldn't be allowed to smoke a cigarette if it were already lit, but because I'm not allowed to light it. Incidentally, I know from reliable sources – “from the most reliable sources,” my Uncle Jenö used to say – that it was a very important question that led the rabbi to Warsaw.) After the contentious passage in the Talmud had been interpreted in a way satisfactory to both learned men, with the help of a commentary by Moses Maimonides which in its turn needed its own commentary, the rabbi had travelled half the way back home again when he stopped at an inn located on the country road and ate a meal, while the coachman Moische sat outside on the box seat and kept an eye on the horses.

After a while, the rabbi looked out the door, which was standing open because of the early onset of summer weather, and noticed that Moische was asleep.

“Moische, are you asleep?” called the rabbi.

“I'm not asleep, I'm speculating.”

“Moische, what are you speculating?” asked the rabbi.

“I'm speculating, if you drive a stake into the earth, where does the earth go?”

“Moische, don't sleep, so the horses won't be stolen.”

A while later, when the rabbi had just finished eating his borsht, he looked out the door again and saw that the coachman was dozing.

“Moische, are you asleep?”

“I'm not asleep, I'm speculating.”

“Moische, what are you speculating?”

“I’m speculating, if you drive a stake into the earth, where does the earth go?”

“Moische, don’t sleep, so the horses won’t be stolen.”

When the rabbi was finishing up his meal with his coffee, the coachman had already shut his eyes again.

“Moische, are you asleep?”

“I’m not asleep, I’m speculating.”

“Moische, what are you speculating?”

“Rabbi, I’m speculating how we can get to Tarnopol without a horse.” The story doesn’t say if the rabbi of Tarnopol continued on foot, but I have to assume he did. If that was the case, then he was following an old tradition of his people. In the course of the Jews’ long history, a good many things have been forbidden them, many by themselves (for example the lighting of a match on the Sabbath), many by others. In Hungary, for example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Jews were still forbidden to own property outside of the *Judengasse*, the Jewish street, to acquire the master craftsman’s diploma and to stay in the Hungarian mountain cities. As thanks for these favours they were allowed to pay *Leibmaut* or tolerance tax, which, after its abolition in 1782 and its reinstatement in 1792 was called “customs duties.” (“From tolerance tax to customs duties,” my Uncle Jenö could have said, “that’s progress.”) But one thing was never forbidden them: to travel, in fact, in the course of their history travelling just about became the compulsory national sport: from Egypt to Canaan, from Canaan to Babylon and back again to Canaan, to Greece and Italy, over the Alps down the Rhine valley, then from there, when the crusaders practised killing people there as a preliminary exercise to freeing the holy grave, to Poland and Galicia, where they brought their Middle High German, from which Yiddish developed. . . . Even in China there were Jewish settlements whose inhabitants had once travelled there from the Mediterranean along the Silk Road by way of Baghdad, Samarkand and Kashgar, and by the time of Chiang Kai-shek they looked like Chinese, but still strictly observed their ancient ritual.

So my grandmother, when she walked from her father's estate to Tapolca, had followed a long tradition; but that was just the beginning. Now she had the task of convincing my grandfather of the necessity of going to Vienna. But you need only to take a look at the two people to know that she succeeded. Among the photographs I inherited from my mother, there is a studio portrait of my grandparents from the early twenties. My grandfather had dressed up for the picture. He is wearing a dark suit and a vest with a watch chain hanging from its middle buttonhole, a white shirt with a starched collar and a wide tie. Sidonie is wearing, as always, a simple black dress, this time with a silver locket. Her hairstyle shows that she could now afford a good hairdresser. Both of them look very serious: the time had not yet come when photographers asked their customers to smile. But while my grandfather's face is a kind and attractive average face, my grandmother's makes you think – it expresses (and that was not the case with the picture of the seventeen-year-old with which this account began) – it expresses, with its firm chin and with the slightly downturned corners of its mouth, a degree of strength and determination that could intimidate a police officer. Even if you didn't know that József had been a poor orphan and Sidonie the daughter of a wealthy man, you could tell at first glance who held the reins in this marriage. The conversation in which Sidonie communicated her decision to her husband began at nine o'clock in the evening. When she turned out the light two hours later, he had consented.

József had, however, won the concession that their move would not take place in the depths of winter, but at the earliest in mid-April. That gave them time to plan and make preparations, and as my grandparents discussed what to take with them and what to sell and compiled the bills they had to pay, it turned out that what they had earned for themselves in ten years of hard work was less than nothing. Since the vegetable store didn't bring in much in the winter, and it was getting more and more difficult for József to compete with the mass-produced shoes pouring in from Bohemia, while there were four children to feed, there was barely

enough money in the house to pay the rent. No help could be expected from Sidonie's father, and so their move would perhaps not have taken place at all if Mother Róth hadn't diverted fifty florins from the housekeeping money behind his back. So they could pay their bills, and they would have been able to find the money somehow for the train tickets; but when my grandparents made inquiries about the cost of moving their furniture, kitchen utensils, clothes and leather supplies, that was a sum that a Baron Pálffy paid out when he wanted to have a nice day in Budapest, an amount, therefore, that surpassed József's wildest imagination. . . . Sidonie was too proud to borrow the money, for example from the Kálmans, so once again she had to have a bright idea.

She would, she thought, as she lay awake in their narrow bed beside the blissfully slumbering József, need a cart in Vienna on which she could display her vegetables until they could afford a store: it was clear to her that she would have to contribute to the family's keep in Vienna too. So wouldn't the obvious thing be to build the cart here, load the furniture and little Klara on it, harness yourself to it and *walk* to Vienna? Hardly had this idea occurred to her than it became her decision, just as ten years previously she had had the sudden conviction in the shoemaker's store that she would marry József, or no one.

This time she had everyone against her. József was in despair. In the sixty years my grandparents spent together, they only had two arguments – when Sidonie decided to go to Vienna, and when she decided to return to Tapolca. Each time there was a violent argument. The children hid, József roared almost as much as Dezső Róth had; he had a fit of violent temper in which he almost hit his wife and instead, since he changed his mind at the last moment, threw a plate at the wall, but my grandmother looked him in the face with the corners of her mouth turned down and said: “Don't you want the best for your children?” Three days passed before he capitulated and consulted a cart builder, who shook his head like Malke and muttered “*meshuga*,” but then, because he also had four children to feed and the customer is always right, was willing to



help. Boards and cart wheels were bought, the cart builder did the carpentry and József helped. In the evening hours he made comfortable walking shoes for the family, everything that could be sold was got rid of, and by the beginning of May they were ready: the cart was waiting outside their door.

The loading of the cart, accompanied by the hooting and yelling of a dozen street urchins, took them hours: beds and chairs, sole leather and upper leather, tools and toys, clothes, plates and pots. There was a towering load on the cart. "The cart is going to tip on you, guaranteed," said Gyula, who was looking on, shaking his head. In the end, they had to unload everything again and sift through it, most of the furniture had to stay behind. Then they loaded the cart a second time, and when that was done it started to rain. József spread a tarpaulin over the tower they had built, tied it down and looked at his watch: it was late in the afternoon. So the Kahns ate their evening meal at Gyula's and spent the night on makeshift beds. The next morning the sun was shining, Dezső made the dangerous climb up onto the tarpaulin, Klara was lifted up, and now they found out what József had long since suspected: the cart was too heavy. He could pull as hard as he wanted, with Sidonie pushing, and then Gisa and Jenő pushing too, with the street urchins hooting, but the cart didn't budge. After a few minutes they gave up, because if the cart couldn't be moved on level ground, it was pointless to try to pull it over hill and vale to Vienna. So Dezső climbed down again, the street urchins, who had got bored, went away, my grandparents stood in the empty street not knowing what to do, and then – hadn't Gyula predicted that God would help? – a miracle happened: up the street came the well-known Róth carriage, Moische was sitting on the coach box, Mother Róth, who had said her goodbyes the previous day in tears sat beside him, and on a long rope behind the carriage trotted a third horse. Mother Róth – what doesn't one do for four grandchildren and a daughter? – had stolen it from the stall with the help of the coachman.

## About the Author



Hans Eichner was born in Vienna in 1921 and, being Jewish, escaped to England after the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany. He enrolled at the University of London as an extension student in 1943, got a Ph.D. in 1949 and taught German language and literature at Bedford College in London, Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and the University of Toronto from 1948 to 1988. He published books on Thomas Mann and Friedrich Schlegel. His novel *Kahn & Engelmann* was first published in German in 2000 and was reprinted in 2002.

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Jean M. Snook is an Associate Professor of German at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She has translated Else Lasker-Schüler's *Concert*, Luise Rinser's *Abelard's Love*, Evelyn Grill's *Winter Quarters*, and Gert Jonke's *Homage to Czerny: Studies in Virtuoso Technique*.

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