

The people watched him trailing along the empty streets, a thin, pale hulk in large boots, as if they'd been pulled off someone bigger, though it wouldn't be easy to find a person that size anywhere else but a circus wagon, in a coat soiled with the mud of roads unknown. He dragged his left leg over the stones and carried a sack on his back, with one hand tucked behind its drawstring. He walked with a limp, but without hesitation – not once did he turn his head to see if he was going the right way, but evidently knew where he was heading, though instead of walking straight to the specific spot he calmly wandered. He passed the Orthodox church, crossed the main market square, and on reaching the small marketplace he halted outside the synagogue that stood there, outside the qahal house, and then beneath the shamash's cottage, as if he were the ragamuffin from the old joke, who when asked if he knows any important local person boasts that he knows the shamash, and the shamash knows the whole town. He turned a circle and finally came to a stop by the pump, where it was even more plain to see what a wreck he was. To drink the water, he didn't lean forwards or squat like a normal person, but suspended his entire body above the pump, stooped, embraced it stiffly and pressed his large, muddy frame against it. He lapped the water from the palm of his hand, though as some had noticed, first he washed it and moved his lips for a while, perhaps muttering a prayer.

The people stared at him from behind their windows and fences. The talk was of why he'd come and who on earth he was. Probably not an itinerant beggar – he didn't have the air of a beggar, and it didn't look as if he were accustomed to asking for anything. Maybe a jobless ne'er-do-well? No, not that either, because his face, though coarse and sallow, was youthfully innocent; in any case, he hadn't walked across the town like a vagrant, he hadn't peeped about curiously to see who had what in their chamber or farmyard, or on their shop sign – he hadn't look around at all. Nor was he a deserter, because he wasn't trying to hide, he didn't fear the eyes of agents or the tongues of informers. And definitely not a goy, because he was dressed the Jewish way, and even though he had no sidelocks and his beard was short, he had kugel written on his face. Perhaps he had come to see the tzaddik, bringing a note pleading for a prayer to the Almighty to restore someone's health, but who would have set out on such a journey overnight? (...) His body was crooked, his skin was the colour of old canvas, just like his sack, his brow was lined with pain, his eyes clouded with lack of sleep and hunger. Across his cheek ran a scar, perhaps a birthmark, perhaps the trace of stitches sewn by the unskilled hand of a barber who'd spurred himself on with a glass of spirit alcohol. He whom God marks out He does not bless, said Reb Arje Szub, but the saintly tzaddik waved a hand to silence him. Reb, asked Reb Jakow Ber – who was adept at reading his

gestures and carrying out the orders they concealed, with many years of training, handing the saintly man his pipe, cane, glass, book, pen, prayer book, tefillin and tallit, and commanding quiet before prayers; Arje only led the singing, as the chief cantor and master of the Hassidic nigunim – Reb, repeated Reb Jakow, who is this fellow, do you know him? For a time the saintly man said nothing, then he nodded inquiringly in the stranger's direction. Where do you come from? asked Jakow. Are you a Hassid? Are you on your way to your tzaddik? Where is he from, where does he live? In Międzybóž, Czarnobyl, Stepań or Ołyka? At these questions the stranger merely goggled; it was plain to see that he couldn't hear a thing. One of the Hassidim clapped without warning by his ear, but the lad didn't even shudder. Suddenly from somewhere far away, possibly from the pastures by the river, came the fierce barking of a dog. The boy tilted his head and listened intently. He's faking, snapped Jakow, but once again the tzaddik ordered silence. The stranger was mumbling something. His lips were almost motionless, and yet he was muttering indistinctly, and after listening for a while the Hassidim caught some familiar words: Wretched am I and dying of the shivers, I have endured Thy wrath, I am falling, Thy fires have run through me, Thy terrors have broken me.

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