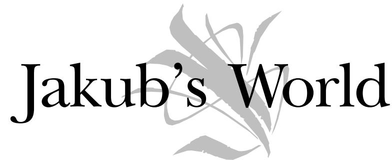

Jakub's World

Five-year-old Jakub Szabmacher sits on the floor in the center of the front row of a group of children posing for a photograph. He wears a Little Lord Fauntleroy velvet suit and lace collar and he looks very sulky.

Jakub's sulkiness is not unusual. He's known to his family as a "little devil," a "rascal," a "scamp." He always wants his own way and when he doesn't get it, he throws tantrums—never in front of his father, even though his mother's long thin hands are the ones that really hurt when he's slapped.

He's given to willful excess. He stands in the pouring rain outside his aunt's house for half an hour because his mother has refused to buy him what he wants. His mother ignores him but his big sister, Dewora, gets soaked trying to coax him back inside. His pride won't let him give in to her too quickly, but he's gratified to see how much she cares.

When his mother takes him with her to visit Mala Kirszt, the midwife who brought him into the world and who is now dying of cancer, he keeps up an even whine: "I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home," and then when his mother, Bluma, doesn't respond, he pokes his finger into an electric light socket—electricity is a luxury in his town—and gets stuck to the lamp. He nearly electrocutes himself.

When he's old enough to know better, he whines and sulks because his mother tells him that she cannot afford to buy him the tin of shoe polish he wants. She knows he's picky about his appearance. Hasn't she marvelled that in

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spring when the unpaved streets of his village turn to ankle-deep mud his boots stay clean?

He beats up bigger boys. Their mothers come to his house to complain. They glance at the skinny little fellow and say his stocky older brother Hiluś has been out there slugging their sons.

He'll probably grow up to be a bandit, his family sighs.

He hates his home town Bełżyce. Hates the unpaved streets, the boring, gossipy people. When he's big enough, he's going to leave. Go to his father's hometown Warsaw, perhaps, like his brother Hiluś and his sister Dewora. His earliest memory is of his father taking him there when he was three and he still remembers the names of the streets: Chłodna, Nowolipki. His father brings chocolate tortes filled with mocha cream and pale plywood boxes filled with golden smoked sardines back with him from Warsaw—you can't buy food like that in Bełżyce!

Or to Kazimierz, his mother's family home where her sister, his aunt, has a bakery and where he spends his vacations. Kazimierz has paved streets, a cobbled market square, beautiful baroque houses—on one of them there's a bas relief of St. Christopher with the Christ child on his shoulder—and the best ice cream in the world. People from all over Poland vacation in Kazimierz, visit the wooden synagogue to see the Esterka's crown, which King Kazimierz Wielki gave to his beautiful Jewish mistress, Esterka. Kazimierz Dolny, on the Vistula River, is "*czyste jak pudelko*," clean as a box, he hears people say. In Kazimierz, he swims in the broad and winding Vistula river, climbs steep grassy slopes to the white castle which looks down on the town. He takes walks with his mother along a road that leads up a hill and they drink in the scent of acacias each spring and he piles up glossy horse chestnuts there in the fall. Yes, Kazimierz, perhaps.

Or . . . "Jakub has told us, 'When I am eighteen years old, I'm going to Palestine,'" his father, Chaim, writes to his sister who is living there.

In the meantime, he has to live in Bełżyce, small, drab Bełżyce—even the bus he takes to Kazimierz doesn't bother

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to exhibit its name—where there's a mill and a forge, a few small shops and businesses catering to the surrounding farms and the town, and a bar where men drink, and where Jakub knows everyone, at least by sight. Mr. Goldstein has a long beard, wears a hat. He trains the little orthodox boys of Bełźyce in the Torah, the alphabet. Jakub goes to the Tarbut school, he doesn't attend the Cheder, but he looks up to Mr. Goldstein. Mr. Goldstein's a teacher, and Jakub knows that a teacher must have his respect. The old lady in black he often sees in the square lifts her skirts, spreads her legs, and pisses in the street. One of the neighbors has a peg leg and hangs a piece of burlap out on the line to dry every day. It is common knowledge to Jakub and his friends that this grown-up wets his bed! Mrs. Chómicka is his mother's friend. Nojech Feld, the watchmaker, is a communist. Srulke Kirszt, the barber who pulls teeth as well as shaves chins, stands outside on his verandah when he's drunk and bellows out arias. Blacksmith Skrajinski's grown-up son, Mietek, is bulky and strong. He got that way, Jakub's mother has told him, from eating up all his scrambled eggs, and his mother should know, they rented rooms in the Skrajinski's house when Hiluś was a baby and they had more money. Most of Bełźyce, Jakub finds, is primitive, small minded, un-nice.

He lives at 9 Ulica Krótka, Short Street, at the edge of the center of town. The neighborhood is mixed: Jews and non-Jews live harmoniously together. The family occupies one large room of a small wooden house with carved corner posts, an open front porch with a little peak-roofed attic above it, and an outhouse at the back. There is a well across the street by the forge and they wash in the cold water from that well even in winter. It helps to keep him healthy, his mother says. A large bed stands against one wall in their room and opposite it an armoire, a pot bellied stove, and a wooden linen chest. When relatives come to stay, they set a board and a mattress on four chairs for them to sleep on.

A lilac tree grows right outside their front window and when they open it lilacs pour in. In spring, he stands by the window carefully picking through the sprays for three- and

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five-petalled flowers, then sucks the drop of sap at their base. Jakub likes that tree, its taste and its smell, and he likes the sour cherry tree that stands to the right of the house and whose branches he climbs to pick the delicious tart fruit; the raspberries, currants, and gooseberries that grow at the side; the wild blueberries he picks in the woods; and the fresh yellow tomatoes farmers give him when he goes to nearby villages, hamlets, and farms with his father's relatives the Kirszts, who fit glass into windows.

When he's very young, he sits on his great-grandfather's lap and sucks sugar cubes that the 102-year-old man dunks in vodka for him. When he's bigger, he chases hoops; plays *Pietnaście Kroków* (I reached you in fifteen paces—you're out!); collects big black beetles after it has rained from the ground by a shed in the market square, traps them in matchboxes, holds them to his ear and listens to them scratch; gouges birch twigs into whistles; makes skates in the winter by taking a triangular piece of wood, heating up a wire and burning it into the edges of the wood, then nailing straps onto the wide part. Most of the time they don't work too well but it keeps him busy and it's fun. He plays cards with Uszer Weisbrot, Moiszele Friedman, and Herszel Zancberg, the fuel merchant's son. They are older than he is, but he always wins.

Jakub is afraid of the dead. When someone in his neighborhood has died, he imagines the corpse will reach out and grab him, so he runs past that house as fast as he can, holding his breath.

He can't wait to grow up and do the things his older brother does—go to school, wear long trousers, play chess with his father. His father is a middle man supplying goods to local shops, he goes away frequently to Warsaw and when he comes back Jakub meets him at the bus stop and kisses his hand. None of the other children greet their fathers like that! None of his friends call *their* parents *Tatunia, Mamunia,* or address them politely using the formal third person.

Jakub notices that Chaim reads *Der Hajnt,* a Zionist daily, that Bluma subscribes to a Polish language Jewish

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weekly, *Opinja*, that *Opinja* comes from Warsaw. Jakub is too little to know that the same cooperative publishes both, that they are both Zionist publications loyal to the Polish government, openly patriotic even, that *Opinja* is written in Polish because its editors wish "to raise a curtain and reveal to the Polish community, with whom we share the same piece of earth, a mirror in which it can see a faithful image of the Jewish community," and that "its chief aim is to acquaint the Jewish inteligentsia which reads Polish with the broad field of Jewish knowledge, with the deeds of the Jewish nation, with the pearls of Hebrew and Yiddish literary creation."

He's proud of his father. "My father can run fast, faster even than the fireman on his way to a fire! That's how fast he ran chasing those gentile kids across the meadow when they threw stones at us last Saturday!" Jakub brags to his friends. Firemen often run through Bełżyce. The houses there are always catching on fire. The last great fire took out half the town and some of the old people when asked when they were born say, "in the year of the last great fire."

"My father is a good mother!" he says the time his mother goes to Warsaw for a week, to see a doctor about headaches which blind her with rings of light, and someone wonders aloud in front of him what kind of time the family's having now that their mother is gone.

His father is highly thought of: people respect him, trust his judgement, consult him, ask his advice. He knows his father is an expert at packing. When a family moves to Palestine they come to ask for his help.

After Hiluś has left home and is living in Warsaw, his father sits and reads the Bible to Jakub on Friday nights, teaches him to read. Jakub reads the story of Joseph and cries over the part where his brothers put the young boy in the well.

He wants to excel at reading, like Hiluś. He's heard his mother boast that Hiluś was reading *Pan Tadeusz* by Mickiewicz and knew parts of it by heart! He's jealous. He fears his mother loves his brother the best.

He's deeply attached to his mother. He looks like Bluma, people say, the same brows, blue eyes, high cheekbones, the

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same shy smile. He has trouble falling asleep unless she lies down by his side. He rests his arm across her chest and is comforted by her warmth, by the texture of her skin. Once, walking down the street with his sister Miriam, he looks back and sees her standing on the porch in her blue dress patterned with forget-me-nots watching them go. He recognizes her look, it's her loving look. He averts his face and walks on, secure in her love.

He likes to spend time with her, watch her go about her work, hear her hum strains of Dvořák and Schubert (he doesn't know those names), sit on the linen chest by the stove as she cooks. The chest is taller than he is, he scrambles on to it carelessly one day and wounds his wrist on a knife. The scar never does go away.

His mother is powerful. She, too, commands respect. Once when he and his mother were out taking their usual walk down that hill in Kazimierz, a gentile boy threw a stone at him and missed, and, then, Jakub threw a stone back and bloodied the kid's face. Grown-ups came at them with pitchforks, yelling "Lousy Jews!" until one of the men recognised his mother, remembered her from school, and the pitchforks came down, the group dispersed.

Jakub has a vague sense that his family is poor partly because some of the shopkeepers don't pay his father what they owe for the wares he supplies and his father is unwilling to press them hard for their debts. But what can young Jakub know of the economic distress in the village, of the backbiting and gossip, of the neighbor who worries out loud to Chaim that soon he may be out of work; of the man who emigrates to Palestine taking three thousand *zloty* from the till at the bank, and whose wife maligns Chaim by telling someone that he will be to blame if Palestine sends him back? What does the child know of his own parents' lives, of his father's failed attempts to move them all to Palestine, of the everyday worries and concerns which Chaim spells out in letters to his sister Bracha in Palestine, such as the one he sent her in 1936?

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> Forgive me for not writing sooner. . . . I forwarded your letter to Warsaw. Now, I am back there fetching Miriam because she was there on vacation and now must go back to theTarbut. . . . I have no news. Nothing is any better. . . .
>
> I already went to Betar [to try to get a visa to Palestine], but couldn't find Zaiczyk, and it's a waste of time to talk to anyone else. It's all over. As hard as it is, we must forget it. . . .
>
> As for the family in Bełżyce, there's no news. Things are as they were. I had to send the children to the Tarbut and must pay tuition. I don't know where I'll get it, but what can you do?
>
> My Hiluś is going into the sixth grade. He's a good student, and Jakub speaks only of you. *He'll* go to Palestine.
>
> Itzak wrote me that he works hard and earns £16 a month. He can be sure that in Poland, he wouldn't even earn £1 a month.
>
> Tell Yechiel Persik that I and Yosele are happy that he's already in Palestine because he suffered enough.
>
> Things are no better with Mala [who has cancer]. It should only happen to Hitler!

Jakub knows only that when the family is together, there is nowhere he would rather be. He likes the family dinnertimes when his mother puts out bowls of sweet, waxy potatoes and sour milk, or a bowl of barley and mushroom soup, and his parents and he and Hiluś and Dewora and Miriam sit down together at the table and eat and talk and giggle over each other's warm and silly banter. Should Jakub's name be spelled Jakub or Jakób? Should Dewora be referred to as Szabmache*równa*? No! Not Szabmacher*ówna*, that rhymes with "gówna" (shit)! "Hello, Herszel, is it still snowing outside?" Chaim always asks when the neighbors' boy comes into the house on warm summer days.

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Jakub likes rainy summer nights when he and Miriam carry straw mattresses up the steep narrow staircase to the attic above the porch and he lies listening to the rain falling on the tin roof of the house and knowing that his parents are down there in their room.

When Jakub is with his family like this, he is complete in a completeness he has no need to explain.

On the September 1, 1939, Jakub sees planes fly above his village. Lublin is bombed. Hundreds of people are dead. On September 16, German trucks, armored cars, and tanks appear in Bełźyce, men wearing fitted leather caps and goggles sit inside. German soldiers walk into Bełźyce shops, take whatever strikes their eye, especially from the Jews, leave notes in German to fill the gap: *Die Wahre ist mein, der Zettel ist dein, wenn der Krieg zu Ende ist, dann wird alles gut sein.* (The goods are mine, the receipt is thine, when the war has ended, then everything will be fine.) German voices bar Jewish children from attending school after third grade, order Jews to wear a white band with a blue star of David on their arms, impose rationing, levy money from the Jews, send the Jewish men of Bełźyce to clear, to mend roads. Posters appear on the stands and walls of Bełźyce on which red letters form Polish words to mouth the German equation *Źydzi-Wszy-Tyfus Plamisty* (Jews-Lice-Typhus).

Jakub hears the men talk about the German invasion of Poland, reminisce about the First World War, feels the uncertainty in the air, but for the boy the planes, the tanks, the soldiers in the square are action, novelty, excitement.

It is calm in Bełźyce in the fall of 1939. Every day Jewish merchants open those small gray and brown shops which edge the town's vast, muddy square. Every day Jewish tradesmen go on plying their trades. Every day the old woman in black still walks down the street; the barber shaves chins, sings in the bar; the peg-legged young man still hangs out his sheet; Herszel Zancberg can still be seen chopping wood for his father; Bluma Szabmacher still chats with Pani Skrajinska, Pani Chómicka, discusses Goethe with Chaim's

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cousin, Szya Weller, the saddler. Every day the town seems the same.

But something has altered. New details have emerged.

German soldiers are encamped in the town square. Groups of Jewish men with shovels and pickaxes are out working on the roads, singing a song as they work:

Marszałek Śmigly-Rydz
Nie dał nam nic, a nic.
Ale Hitler drogi
Dał nam roboty.

(Marshal Śmigly-Rydz
Gave us nothing, nothing at all,
But dear Hitler
Gave us hard labor.)

Small Jewish boys stand around the square during the day. Chaim Szabmacher no longer travels to Warsaw. He sits at home, he sits with his friends, he reads the papers, he discusses the news.

Jakub hangs around the soldiers, he polishes their boots, he sometimes brings home a loaf of heavy, dark, German army bread. Quite something that loaf of bread! He's in seventh heaven when he brings it home. He hangs around the barber's shop, sweeps the floor, brushes hair from customers' shoulders, lathers chins with suds; he learns to shave. He brings the groszy home. Once, when Miller Woźniak's son, back home on a visit from America, stops by the Barber's, he tips Jakub a whole *zloty*! Jakub's the youngest, he's only nine, but his father's out of work and Hiluś is in Warsaw, so he's the family's breadwinner now. He's filled with pride.

One day, Jakub notices that Mr. Goldstein has shaved his beard, that Mr. Goldstein has removed his hat; hears that Mr. Goldstein, the Cheder teacher, is working with the Germans. This is the boy's first great disillusionment.

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The winter of 1939–40 is the coldest in the living memory of Bełźyce. The Jews are now responsible for providing crews to clear snow from the roads. Jakub hires himself out as a stand-in, the family needs the groszy he earns. Hiluś and Dewora return home bringing with them stories of the bombardment of Warsaw. Rumors start reaching town that the Jews from some of the neighboring towns are being driven out, that ghettos are being formed, that the Germans are beating the Jews, that such things are happening in Lublin, in Pulawy; that Jews in Kazimierz are being rounded up, that there is such panic among them that they are afraid to take in refugees.

Jakub doesn't hear these rumors, but one night Bluma ties a kerchief around her head like the peasant women do and sets out in the darkness to walk thirty-five kilometers across the fields to Kazimierz, carrying a bag of flour to give to her sister there.

Meanwhile, Bełźyce stays calm, dreadfully calm.

And then on a bitterly cold and snowy Friday evening in mid-February, one of the coldest in the living memory of Bełźyce, horse-drawn sleds drag 600 Stettin Jews from Lublin to Bełźyce. The short distance has taken them all day and the hands and feet of many people, children among them, are frost-bitten. The sleds stop at the synagogue where the Jews of Bełźyce have been instructed to receive them.

Jakub walks across the frozen town with Chaim to help unload the sleds. The child is bewildered and appalled by what he sees. A mass of people, Jews like him, with children like him among them, stiff from a day's journey on an overcrowded sled, so numb with cold that they can barely move by themselves, some so frost-bitten that they are lying on the ground unable to rise are moaning, crying. Chaim and other men help them off the sleds, carry them into the synagogue, help take those unfortunate people to shelter in other people's houses. Then, saddened and depressed, return home.

They did not expect this, despite the boxed notice in *Opinja* on August 6, 1939, which alerted readers to the situ-

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ation of those Jews who, having been thrown out of Germany in October, 1938, had come to Lwów:

> Citizen. How can you sit yourself down at the table with your family, when you know that your brother from Germany, who maybe yesterday was richer than you, is literally dying of hunger? With what kind of conscience do you plan outings, frequent places of entertainment, send your family, or yourself, to beach resorts, and don't consider for a moment that those most unfortunate of the unfortunate, victims of terror and bestiality, have no roof over their heads? . . . The poor and unhappy Jewish deportees from Germany, who are literally starving, call on their brothers to persuade them to share with them a piece of dry bread.

Despite the questions the same issue of the paper raised about the fate awaiting the children of Poland's German-Jewish refugees: "Why are these likable, nice, talented children suffering? What will become of them, what can become of them? What still awaits them?"

Despite the Germans bivouacked on Bełżyce's muddy square.

Despite the German plunder of Jewish shops.

Despite the doors of schools being barred to Jewish children.

Despite their nine-year-old youngest child, the boy who had so much wanted to learn, spending his days brushing hair off German shoulders and dust off German boots. Despite all of this, the plight of Europe's Jews, and the war, had, until now, seemed almost abstractions to the Szabmachers. Today, they had all seen it. Seen the unwanted Jews of Stettin with yellow Stars of David on their breasts—those *verfluchte Juden*, *Żydzi-Wszy-Tyfus Plamisty*, those polluters of the Reich—old people, young people, rich people, poor people, children, babies in arms, pulled along the

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frozen rutted roads hungry, numb, frost-bitten, half-dead, and unloaded, like refuse, in the center of Bełżyce.

The sight of these people sends Chaim reeling into the darkest reaches of the self, blinds him to the woman and the children seated with him at the table. Jakub sees tears in his father's eyes and hears his forty-four-year-old father say, "I will now consider that I have reached my three score and ten and that my life is at an end." These desolate words on this desolate day marking Chaim's withdrawal into private pain and fear mark for the boy the moment of his father's fading to the periphery of family life.

Bełżyce lies about twenty kilometers southwest of Lublin, some forty kilometers east of the Vistula river, and some hundred kilometers west of the River Bug, on a high limestone plateau where fields of wheat, soy, rye, and hops alternate with dense forests, peat bogs, and meadows that, at certain times of the year, hold water.

The village arose at the point of intersection of a web of roads, one of which in the Middle Ages took people from Kraków to Wilno. Its location on this road made it a halting stage for merchants travelling to the Lublin Fair as well as a rallying point—for the clans of gentry who held musters there in the fifteenth century; for the Polish Brethren who had a school and a meeting house there during the Reformation. The first of the Jews who settled there arrived at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and one of them, a certain Jakób, became famous for his disputations with the antitrinitarians.

For a brief period over the centuries of its existence, Bełżyce acquired the status of town, but by the beginning of the twentieth century it was again no more than a settlement, a large village, whose council had jurisdiction over people who lived in the nearby area.

For centuries the population of Bełżyce farmed, labored, kept small shops, traded, sold their wares and their work to

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the neighboring country people who, in turn, brought their produce to the rectangular marketplace that formed the village's hub—a marketplace so large that it dwarfed the already low, single- and two-story undistinguished shops and houses, some stuccoed, some wooden, on its periphery.

The size of the population, which had held fairly steadily at the three-thousand-some mark for more than a hundred years, suddenly increased to 5,664 in the decade between 1921 and 1931. This sharp increase brought with it a housing shortage: whole families occupied single rooms. Half of Bełżyce's residents at that time were Jewish.

The marketplace, the few houses built along the spokes of the many roads crossing the town, a church, a spring, two synagogues, a forge, and a mill were all there was to the village.

On the flat, unprepossessing, isolated land dotted with insignificant villages, hamlets and lone cottages where Bełżyce may be found—land the Germans claimed as theirs, land which ends at the Ribbentrop-Molotov line—the Germans decided to contain the Jews of the Reich.

"This area with its very swampy character could, in the estimation of District Governor Schmidt, serve as a reservation for Jews," the Nuremberg Trials show Seyss Inquart saying at a conference in Lublin on November 20, 1939. "Such a measure," he added, "could possibly bring about a decimation of the Jews."

They created a private park, as it were, a preserve on which and from which they could draw at will, a preserve fenced in, at first, with words instead of wire.

And it was as a result of this decision, that the Jews from German Stettin had been brought to Bełżyce and made the responsibility of the two-thousand-some Jews of that town.

The housing situation in Bełżyce, already difficult before the war, had been rendered worse by the continuous arrival of individuals and families seeking refuge in still peaceful Bełżyce from the maltreatment and the ghettos the Germans were already creating in other towns and villages in the Lublin area. Although some of the refugees still

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had the wherewithal to support themselves, or had families living in Bełżyce who could, and were willing, to support them, others needed help from the larger community and, in Bełżyce, that community, although not yet destitute, was poor.

The correspondence, preserved in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, between Bełżyce and the main offices of the Jewish Social Self-Help Organisation in Kraków reveals the situation in which the Jewish population of the town, the refugees, and the newly arrived transport of Jews from Stettin, found themselves. The Polish Jews wrote on February 6, 1941:

> Already in 1939 our poor small town took in many refugees whose number increased at the beginning of 1940 together with the six hundred evacuees from German Stettin. At the same time the number of poor residents increased, bringing the number of poor to a terrible five hundred as compared to the two thousand people who make up our poor town. We have reached the point that for every two residents there is one evacuee or poor person. Ignoring this, however, we tried to organize help with our own resources: we set up a community kitchen, a collection of clothing, footwear, a sanitary patrol to deal with various illnesses.
>
> Our greatest difficulty was with the matter of accommodations because of the great shortage of housing which has existed here since before the war.

The letter continues:

> We overcame even this difficulty. When the Joint [Distribution Committee] became acquainted with the extent of our action they apportioned a monthly subsidy for us which we received until May 1940. After that, the subsidy from the Joint

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> was reduced to a minimum. As a result the level of our action was significantly lowered and the refugees and the poor are condemned to hunger in cold clay dug-outs whose walls are dripping moisture, this has had an effect on the state of health of our little town where sickness and death have become our frequent guests.

After the Stettin Jews arrive, Jakub still works at the barber's shop, still substitutes on the roads, still brings the few *groszy* he earns home to his mother. The family is still together and, even though they have had no regular income for quite some time, his family manages somehow.

In May, for the first time, the Germans come to Bełżyce demanding men: the *Judenrat* must supply them with three hundred Jews. Hiluś Szabmacher is one of those picked.

Jakub does not see his brother loaded onto a truck and taken to one of the four workcamps opened in spring 1940 in the village of Józefów forty kilometers southwest of Bełżyce on the Vistula River, but he comes home to find Hiluś gone and his mother so distraught that he thinks she's gone mad. She rushes around their room collecting together anything which has the remotest value—the green patterned plush cloth on the family's table, the green patterned plush cover from their bed. She rushes out to sell them. She needs the money to use as a bribe with which to persuade the Germans to restore her first-born child to her. The money is not enough; Bluma fails.

Jakub has never seen his tall, slender mother as desperate as this; he's always seen her independence, strength, and her pride. He's only just turned ten, and he's not old enough to understand exactly to what kind of place Hiluś has been taken; not old enough to understand that his brother could be killed. He's only old enough to be self-centered, to consider what this event will mean for him,

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and, at this moment, he feels more excluded from his mother's concern than he has ever felt. A saddened Jakub takes her frenzy and fear for Hiluś as irrefutable evidence that she loves his brother more than she loves him.

The demands on the already burdened Jews of Bełźyce continue to increase. Now they must obey a curfew, they must not go out on the streets in the evening; they must not eat white bread; they must not eat meat. At the end of 1940 they are commanded to close their shops and relinquish their wares. Possession of meat, possession of wares are punished with death.

Regularly now gray-uniformed gendarmes come from nearby Niedrzwica, the nearest railway town, to impose German laws on Bełźyce, to take monetary contributions, horses, wagons; to kill.

Regularly now Gestapo man Kurt Engels, district prefect, arrives from Lublin. He is a man of medium height and build, dressed in a civilian suit with a Nazi pin in his lapel, and a pistol in his pocket. He drives into Bełźyce, he steals, he robs. He, too, demands contributions. He, too, kills.

Engels walks into the barber's shop where Jakub is working.

"*Wie heißt du*?"

"Jakub Szabmacher."

"*Wo hast du den deutschen Namen gestohlen*?" (Where did you steal the German name?) he barks at the very frightened boy, then orders him to clean his car.

Jakub knows that Engels is a killer, that a scratch on Engels's car might cost him his life. He goes cold when the newly shaved Engels inspects the job and accuses him of cleaning only one side of the car:

"Rasiert dein Kusine nur eine Seite?" (Does your cousin only shave one side?)

Engels is given to such quips. Jakub hears him say to Eugen Heymann, an older boy from Stettin who is a member of the Jewish Police, *"Du bist ein guter Jude, ich werde dich als letzten erschießen."* (You are a good Jew, I will shoot you last.)

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Engels walks freely into Jewish houses, peers into pots, checks for meat and white bread, and, if he finds them, shoots. He kills the round-faced boy of fourteen or so who is wearing a white open-necked shirt, a gray jacket, and a peaked cap tilted a little to the left at the back of the photograph in which Jakub is sulking. He kills not only that straight-backed boy, Jankiel Silbernadel, but also his brother, Uszer, and his father, Kune Hersz, because the meat being carried in a bag down a road in Bełżyce is traced as having been bought from them.

By the beginning of February 1941, "the number of poor is higher than the number of the averagely placed and we are helpless in this situation," the local *Judenrat* tells Kraków.

> The refugees want a little warm food and a piece of bread but all this is an impossible fantasy. The accommodation situation has worsened because a large number of places have lost the ability to take anyone in, and if the future brings us continuing waves of refugees then fifteen people will have to be housed in rooms 4 x 4 meters in size.
>
> The working of the Joint is limited and in light of that we are turning to the Jewish Social Self-Help in Kraków with an urgent plea. Save a large number of refugees and poor from hunger as fast as possible. Allot us an appropriate subsidy taking into account the deserving nature of our little town which supports the downtrodden with its last groszy and is coming to the limit of its strength. We live in hope of a fast and positive response to our appeal.
>
> *Please note*: the deportees from Stettin are writing separately. . . .

In their letter of the same day, the Stettin deportees wrote:

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> Every day we cater to about 210 people by serving black coffee and dry bread in the mornings and evenings and a warm soup for lunch which contains almost nothing but water. Since we are no longer able to raise money ourselves, we implore the Jewish Social Self Help which basically took over the function of the Joint to support us with money and food. If we do not get help soon, the consequences will be terrible. Most of the people who have died lately, have died of hunger or the extreme cold in unheated quarters.

Chaim, Bluma, Dewora, Miriam, and Jakub are joined in their room on Krótka Street by Chuna Zweig, an older brother-in-law of Chaim's, who has fled Warsaw where he worked on the Jewish newspaper, *Der Hajnt.* He stays with them for a few months, amazing Jakub with his ability to hold a glass of boiling hot tea to his lips. The Szabmachers, like the rest of Bełźyce, feel the strictures of life under German occupation ever more keenly. They rub the bread that now constitutes the main part of their diet with garlic. They have nothing else to put on it, and even if they were allowed the butter Jakub loves, the butter that they used to buy wrapped in moist cabbage leaves, and even if they could afford it, they would have nowhere to buy it. The Germans have ordered crews of Jews to dig the mud, to seed grass and plant trees on the ground where the market used to be held.

The sense of novelty and pride Jakub once felt about contributing to the family purse, has turned into a sense of desperate necessity. The *groszy* are not enough. He goes to work as a cowherd on a peasant farm in the vicinity of Bełźyce. He will be out of the way of the Germans and he will be fed, the family agrees, and there will be one mouth less to feed at home.

So, just after the wheat and the rye have been reaped, Jakub leaves his home in Bełźyce to live by himself on a

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small peasant farm, one of several such isolated farms, set amid miles of small, unhedged, fields distinguished from each other by the texture and the color of the crop they bear: drab yellow stubble where the grain has been cut, dark green where potatoes and beans still grow. Now one squat tree dots the flatness, now a thin line of them underscores it. Occasionally, a stretch of forest fills the horizon.

He rises at daybreak with the half dozen cows he tends and takes them into a field to pasture. Often, in the heat of those late summer days, a cow, feeling exuberant, arches its tufted tail into the air and takes off into other men's fields at high speed, followed by the rest of the herd. Jakub has to give chase then, run across the stiff stubble which cuts his bare feet like a razor. The chase is painful. It makes the boy cry, but if he doesn't divert the cows back to their rightful pasturing place, the peasants he works for beat him.

The routine of his lonely days is broken by the presence of small, barefooted, local gentile boys who, like him, are minding other men's herds. He bands together with them, they talk, sometimes they roast potatoes over fires of dried cow dung in the fields.

He stays outside with the cows until evening when he returns them to the barn, eats his evening meal outside by himself, then goes back into the barn to sleep. Jakub is still just a young child and when he has trouble, as is normal for him, sinking into sleep, he does not find comfort in the animals breathing and stirring around him. He misses his mother.

Periodically, as payment for his labor, Jakub is given a bag of potatoes or beans, which he carries back to his family.

The visits home intensify Jakub's loneliness. Even though his father sits depressed, his mother anxious about Hiluś and worn with care, their room is clean and inviting, their exchanges are loving and civilized. The peasants he works for are crude, coarse, and indifferent. They fart, they belch, they hit. The food they eat—great pots of cabbage or beans cooked with cubes of pork fat—though plentiful and

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welcome, is different from the food he eats at home. The farm he returns to is dirty; the floor of the barn in which he sleeps is a wet, boggy, mass of cow dung and urine-drenched straw. The land on which it is set, bearing the stamp of centuries of arduous human labor, does not entice Jakub's imagination to run carefree and wild, nor his heart to recognize companionship with it, for all the presence of the other small boys.

After a few weeks there, he breaks under the weight of his sickness for home. No matter that at home food is scarce, no matter that at home he is prey for the Germans, he would prefer, he realizes, to go to his death with his family than live here safely alone. He runs away. Away from the farm, across the fields, back to Chaim, back to his elfin-faced sister and playmate Miriam, back to his beloved, beautiful, motherly Dewora, back to Bluma's love and warmth.

His family welcomes him home.

In August 1941 the Germans establish a concentration camp outside of Lublin in Majdanek; in November, they establish a concentration camp at Belzec. That fall, they set up a workcamp in the forests in Poniatów, a village twenty-one kilometers west of Bełżyce, where thousands of people are put to work sewing garments and repairing roads. As a result, in Bełżyce, at this time, the first large round-ups begin. *Uwaga! Uwaga! Achtung! Achtung!* the loudspeakers summon the Jews to assemble and to file past an SS commander who selects from their midst the ones that he wants. Several hundred are deported to Poniatów. Chaim's brother-in-law, Zweig, and barber, Kirszt, for whom Jakub works are sent in the first large group to Majdanek.

On May 11, 1942, Chaim Szabmacher is taken in another mass deportation. Jakub sees open trucks crammed with men drive north out of town. When he gets home his father is gone.

Refugees from various parts of Poland continue arriving in the village; the Germans continue to bring in large

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