The Origin of Sorrow

Preview: Chapters 1-3

Full book available in print and as an
http://www.combustoica.com/sorrow.php

Cover created by Rhonda Ward <sprkward@yahoo.com>

Published by **Combustoica**, a prose project of About Comics.
www.COMBUSTOICA.com.
For rights inquiries, contact rights@aboutcomics.com

Combustoica edition published 2011.

Books by Robert Mayer

Fiction

Superfolks

The Execution

Midge and Decker

The Grace of Shortstops

Sweet Salt

The Search

I, JFK

The Ferret's Tale

Danse Macabre

Non-Fiction

The Dreams of Ada

Notes of a Baseball Dreamer
(First published as *Baseball And Men's Lives*)

Praise for the Books of Robert Mayer

"Fascinating." — John Grisham
"Gripping." — Janet Malcolm, The New York Times
"He writes like an angel." — Newsday
"Exemplary." — Village Voice
"Pure, undiluted magic." — Washington Post
"Quiet brilliance." — Atlanta Journal-Constitution
"Strangely moving." — Cleveland Plain Dealer
"Genuinely compelling storytelling." — Chicago Tribune
"Wonderfully human." — Dallas News
"The poet's touch." — Detroit News
"A blend of the funny and the poignant." — St. Louis Post Dispatch
"Absorbing." — Sunday Oklahoman
"Heart-stopping" — Albuquerque Journal
"Ranks with the best." — Santa Fe Reporter
"Topnotch." — People Magazine
"Compelling." — Booklist
"Excellent." — Library Journal
"Wonderful, moving." — Publisher's Weekly

The Origin of Sorrow

Robert Mayer

Combustoica
packaged by About Comics - Camarillo, California

Ann Kelley

Kristin Reidy

Mary Bonney

Karen Chavez

And to the people of the Judengasse

Can you crawl out of asking
the origin of sorrow … ?

—Dana Levin,
Hive

Contents

Book One: Guttle

The confinement, the dirt, the swarm of people, the accents of an unpleasant tongue, all made a disagreeable impression, even when one only looked in when passing outside the gate. It took a long time before I ventured in alone … And yet, they were also human beings, energetic, agreeable, and even their obstinacy in sticking to their own customs, one could not deny it respect. Moreover, their girls were pretty.

— Goethe,
Poetry and Truth

1

In the beginning were the walls. Stone walls ten metres high. Erected on both sides of a dirt lane in Frankfurt-am-Main, in the Christian year 1458, after the Holy Father ordered the Emperor to confine all Jews in the city. Three hundred years later, the walls and their iron gates still were standing. The Jews had begat in number from 110 to 3,000. They now occupied every metre of the lane. They still were locked inside.

On the last Friday in March, in the Christian year 1769, Guttle Schnapper, a dark-haired girl with eyes black as olives — fifteen and a half years pretty she was — bare of foot that morning and wearing a blue cotton shift, came out from a neighbor's house at the northern end of the lane. She carried a small pitcher of milk. Her mind was in turmoil over an unwelcome marriage proposal she had received the night before from Viktor the Cantor, an overweight young man whose operatic voice had a teardrop in it, as the voices of all good cantors must. In the darkness of a cloud-ridden dawn she tripped upon the leg of a dead man. Milk flew from the pitcher, soaked the side of the man's face, his wisp of beard. Guttle stumbled, caught herself. Frightened, she nonetheless peered closer, to see if she knew the man. Her eyes took in his outstretched arm, his wooden hammer, which was clutched in his hand even in death.

"It's the Schul-Klopper!" she cried out.

As she stared, stunned, at the body, she was further upset by the sound of laughter. Three Gentile boys were peering through the bars of the north gate, making fun of the dead man. Guttle ran at them, shouting that they should show respect. The boys pranced away, still laughing. When she spun her head around, her braids tied with white ribbons whipping off her neck, she saw down the lane the men and boys walking towards the synagogue for the morning service, to which the Schul-Klopper's hammer only moments ago had summoned them. She knelt beside him. His face was pale as

parchment. Pale not because he had just fallen dead, but because in all his fifty-nine years, may he rest in peace, the sun had rarely touched his forehead, his long nose, his cheeks that peeked soft as a baby's tush above the whiskers. The faces of everyone in the lane were pale; the sun, when it passed overhead precisely at noon each day, allowed its rays to warm the cobbles for four minutes, perhaps five. Then, as if in a rush to escape this stinking place, the rays climbed the walls of the gray houses and disappeared, leaving the Judengasse, as it was called — the Jews Lane — in the deeper gray of twilight, till the twilight itself disappeared into black of night.

The Schul-Klopper's brown eyes were open. He was staring as if in disbelief that he was dead. Guttle could hardly accept it, either. Only a few minutes before, she had heard his hammer pound on their door. She had heard him knocking on doors morning and evening every day of her consciousness. He was the most familiar figure in the lane, more familiar even than the Chief Rabbi. Now his face was twisted by pain he no longer felt. Guttle knew she needed to find help, even as she knew that Solomon Gruen was beyond all help but God's.

The pitcher still in her hand, she ran to fetch her mother, bare toes flinching like frightened kittens on the cold morning cobbles. Before she reached her house a neighbor boy, Isidor Kracauer, emerged from the adjoining door and grabbed her arm, spilling more of the milk. He was a year younger than she. His short blond hair stood up in front of his dark blue yarmulke like winter wheat.

"Why are you running?" he asked.

"It's the Schul-Klopper!"

"I know, I heard him knock, I'll hurry."

"Not schul! He's over there. He's dead."

She set the empty pitcher on the ground, took his hand, led him to the body. Isidor blushed at her touch, as only a fair-skinned boy of fourteen can blush. They'd been raised like cousins; Guttle had yet to notice the stress her curving body had begun to induce in him.

The Schul-Klopper, though wearing his usual long black coat, frayed at the wrists, was repellant in his twisted silence. Neither wanted to touch him. They'd seen dead bodies before, there was plenty of death in the lane, but usually in a bed, under covers. Isidor quickly invented an excuse to keep away; it was for good reason the boys at the yeshiva called him Izzy the Wise. "Don't touch him, he might have disease," the boy warned. "I'm going for the Doctor." He leaped across the sewage ditch, nearly a metre wide, which bisected the lane like a stinking brown snake, and stumbled off to the hospital.

"It's not the Doctor he needs," Guttle murmured, looking again at the Schul-Klopper. With his hand still clutching his curved hammer, he seemed to be knocking with patience on the door of Heaven.

Guttle hurried to the synagogue, half way down the lane. When she returned with the Chief Rabbi, the Doctor, Lev Berkov, was kneeling beside the body, holding Herr Gruen's wrist, touching fingers to Herr Gruen's throat. Izzy in his wisdom watched from several feet away, then ran off towards the schul. The Doctor glanced up at the Rabbi, and murmured, "He's dead."

Tears formed in Guttle's eyes. She did not know why — she already knew he was dead.

Rabbi Avram Eleazar folded her slim hand into his stubby one, and lifted her chin with a finger. "It's all right to cry, child," he said. "But also remember, death is the will of Elohim. Perhaps Solomon died so that another might live."

Hungry for comfort, Guttle asked, "He died so that who might live?"

The handsome young Doctor hid a smile with his fist. Lifting his eyebrows at the question, the Chief Rabbi shrugged, rotated the palms of his stubby hands skyward. Quickly he turned from her, so she would not see his own eyes watering at the passing of his dearest friend.

As she walked home carrying the empty pitcher, a darkness crossed Guttle's face, like the shadow of a large bird — but there were no birds in the Judengasse. The death of the Schul-Klopper, the shadow seemed to warn, would one day cast a dark mark on her own life. She shuddered. That was nonsense, just her unruly imagination, for which she was not yet known.

The Judengasse curved like a limp sausage for half a kilometre, sliding in a gentle slope toward the river Main. At each end of the lane were the gates of iron. Men were permitted to leave only for business, and were to be back inside each day by five on the clock. Women could only go to the nearby market. At night, and on Sundays, the gates were locked to everyone.

Why had the Jews put up with this for three hundred years? Because the Constables outside the gates had pistols. And muskets. And swords. And cold, hard eyes.

Along both sides of the lane, narrow houses of gray wood stood quietly, shoulder touching shoulder, like skinny men whispering Kaddish. Behind the front houses a second row had been wedged against the outer walls down through the centuries, to house the expanding number of families. The Schnapper home fronted the lane, in sight of the north gate.

"Where's the baby's milk?"

Her mother's question stung Guttle like a slap as she entered the kitchen and set down the empty pitcher. "I send you across the lane for milk, you let Bea Metzenbaum talk your ear off, you forget what you went for. You would forget your head if it wasn't attached."

"Mama, listen! The Schul-Klopper is dead."

She recited what had happened in the lane.

"You never watch where you're going!" her mother said. "You're always too busy thinking!" Then Emmie Schnapper dropped herself onto a chair like a load of wash. "The Schul-Klopper? That's terrible." She looked at Guttle, took her hand, rubbed it. "Are you all right, bubbelah?"

"I'm fine," Guttle said, though she had begun to tremble.

"Avra, watch little Benjy. I'm going to Ida's next door to borrow milk."

Emmie's heavy footsteps faded down the stairs. Avra, who was thirteen, two years younger than Guttle, thin as a spatula, said, "Was it disgusting? Were his insides hanging out? I'll bet you'll have nightmares tonight."

Guttle accommodated her, if that is the proper word. "His insides were bleeding onto the cobbles. His throat was slashed. His fingernails were long as claws. He said he'd come get me in my sleep tonight, and klop my head to pieces with his hammer. He forced me to tell him my name. I said I was Avra Schnapper."

"You didn't! I'm telling Mama you're scaring me!" She bolted down the stairs before Guttle could remind her she was supposed to be watching the baby. "I'm so awful, Benjy," Guttle said. "How could I say such things?"

"What things?" Benjy, still in his white nightshirt, was looking up at her with a sleepy face and slept-on hair. He was not yet three years old.

"Nothing, Benj. I'm just upset."

"At me?"

"Not you, sweetie." She sat on a chair by the kitchen table, pulled her only living brother onto her lap. "I'm mad at Herr Gruen for being dead."

"What's dead?"

She ignored his question. "And I'm angry at Viktor Marcus for wanting to marry me."

"What's marry?"

She tousled his silky hair. "Married is the same as dead, only you're not alone."

She set her brother down and dropped tea leaves into a glass and poured hot water over them from a kettle on the woodstove. Holding the glass with one hand and Benjy's fingers with the other, she led him upstairs to the small front bedroom she and Avra shared, and she set her tea on the windowsill. She needed to rid herself of the dead Schul-Klopper's image,

needed to purge herself of her stupid joke. How do you apologize to the dead?

From her father's chair in the sitting room she fetched the newspaper he'd brought home the evening before, the Sachsen-Meiningen *Zeitung.* With editions of this newspaper, with her father's help, she had taught herself to read and write Hochdeutch, in addition to her Hebrew and the Judendeutch that was the language of the lane. Benjy climbed beside her onto the bed as she looked at the newspaper. Hardly a week went by when her father's name did not appear in it. Almost always it was the same sentence. "The profits of the Prince will be invested, to replenish the municipal treasury, by the Court Jew, Wolf Salomon Schnapper."

She tried to read, couldn't concentrate. But a small notice near the bottom caught her attention. It was headed, "Madame Antoine to Marry." It said: *"According to a dispatch from Vienna, Empress Maria Teresa has authorized negotiations to marry her youngest daughter, Archduchess Antoine, to the Dauphin of France. Such a match would create a rare alliance between the two leading powers of Europe. The lovely Madame Antoine is thirteen and one-half years of age, the French Dauphin is fifteen. He is heir to the throne of his grandfather, King Louis XV. The report caused much joy in Vienna, although no formal announcement has been made."*

Guttle sipped her tea while Benjy babbled, pretending to read. Madame Antoine might be going off to live in a grand palace, she mused, but they still had something in common, she and the Princess: neither one could choose whom they would marry. Although, she admitted to herself, marrying a Prince might not be altogether bad.

Her father had been looking at her in a new way of late, and Guttle knew why. He was measuring her for a husband. It would not be a boy, like the Dauphin, it would be a man of twenty-five years at least; that was the law shackled on Jewish men by the Frankfurt Council, who wanted to reduce the number of Jewish babies. Her marriage would not be for a political merger, like Madame Antoine's, but for a financial one; her father would decide whose family was wealthy enough, with enough useful acquaintances, to suit him.

In the street below, her mother and sister were arguing. The sister with the sharp nose and the sharper tongue. Avra was not so ugly, but the slight extra grinding of her nose, the thinness of her lips, a tightness to the skin of her face, a narrowness between the eyes — as if there had been a shortage of Schnapper flesh when she'd been born — gave her a sour appearance. No surprise that she was developing a personality to match.

Guttle carried Benjy down to the kitchen. "Ida already knew about Herr Gruen," her mother, Emmie, said as she climbed the last step ahead of Avra.

"Where's the milk?"

Her mother looked at her empty hands. "Oy, I got so caught up in talk. Guttle Schnapper, don't you say a word!"

"I'm not saying a thing, Mama." She tried to swallow a smile. Like a raw egg, it wouldn't go down.

"Avra, go borrow milk," Emmie said. "Try Frau Schlicter. She doesn't talk so much."

"And Avra," Guttle said.

"What? I'm not talking to you!"

"Don't spill it."

Avra stuck her tongue out at Guttle before stomping down the stairs.

"Do you feel all right from the Schul-Klopper?" Emmie asked.

Guttle wanted to curl up in bed and weep in her pillow. Tripping over a dead man should happen only in one of Viktor's operas, on a dimly lighted stage, while the audience gasped.

"You look upset. Maybe you shouldn't go to the bakery."

"I need to go," Guttle said. "At least there I can focus on the beetles."

A few minutes later she was at the north gate, waiting impatiently with her mother and two other bakery women; it was their turn to meet the flour wagon. Avra was home with the little ones; almost everywhere in the Judengasse there were little ones. Guttle heard the slow clopping of hoofs on the cobbles before the gray head of the old horse came into view around the ghetto wall. As the wooden wagon came closer, an escort of flies announced its approach, dipping and circling. The flour merchant pulled the horse to a stop. The small wagon could have been driven through the open gate and transported the flour sacks to the bakery, but the tradesman, tall, thin, emaciated, had made clear long ago that, like most Gentiles, he would never enter the Judengasse. As if the Jews carried germs. Instead, the women had to lift heavy sacks from the cart and place them in the two wheelbarrows they'd brought along.

To the left of the gate a young Constable stood erect as a pole in gray breeches and a dark blue coat with silver buttons. His musket was propped against the wall. He seemed uninterested in the flour transaction — though his gaze did flick to Guttle from time to time — as Frau Schnapper, the bakery treasurer, pulled a purse from the pocket of her apron. "The usual price?" she asked.

"The usual," the merchant said, brushing a fly from his drooping gray mustache.

Frau Schnapper reached up and handed him several coins. He examined them closely, as if counterfeiting might be a burgeoning art in the Judengasse, before shoving them into his trouser pocket. Guttle pulled her dark braids prettily around her chin. "And how much for the beetles?"

The merchant did not smile. Reaching for his tattered whip, he said, "For you, Mädchen, the beetles are free."

It was an old joke. What humor it may once have contained had long since faded. But the handsome young Constable, who was new at his post, turned his face to hide his grin. Perhaps it was for his benefit that Guttle had revived the joke.

The merchant flicked his whip and the swaybacked horse began to move slowly along the cobbles, accepting without protest the weight of the wagon and the nuisance of the flies, as if it had been pulling this same cart over these same stones for three hundred years. Perhaps it had. The other two women wrapped thick fingers around the wheelbarrow handles and pushed the flour through the gate. It would fill the bellies of the Judengasse for a week.

Guttle smiled at the clean-shaven guard. "Imagine," she said. "Free beetles. Perhaps a new day is dawning."

The Constable was not accustomed to speaking with Jews. He did not know how to respond. Guttle winked at him. Then she hurried back through the gate, raising her ankle length shift two inches so it would clear the churned-up mud. This new guard certainly seemed nicer than Leutnant Gruber, who wielded his sword as if were a fly swatter and the Jews an irritant buzzing around his head. Was it really possible, a kindhearted guard at the gate?

Above them, in the third-story front room of the first house inside the gate, Hiram Liebmann, the deaf mute, was noting on a sheet of paper what he had observed: that the flour wagon had arrived eleven minutes late, that the purchase of flour had taken three minutes. Lacking language, he made his notations with small drawings, like entries in an odd ledger: a cart for the horse and wagon, a sack of flour for the sale. When he was through, he would wind his pocket watch, as he did many times each day; it marked his passage though life, as a crutch serves a one-legged man.

Guttle's mother was waiting for her a few houses down, in front of the rag dealer's stall. Used coats, dresses and remnants of cloth hung from nails

and were piled on a table. "What are you, meshuganah?" her mother said. "Talking to a guard holding a musket?"

"He wasn't holding it."

"Don't get smart with me. I heard what you said. 'Perhaps a new day is dawning.' What kind of talk is that? You want another Fettmilch riot? I would smack your face, if I didn't think finding the Schul-Klopper maybe affected your brain. And 'free beetles?' Enough with your jokes. Today is not a day for them."

Frau Schnapper led her towards the bakery. Guttle said nothing as they walked down the lane, in which merely breathing the humid, stagnant air was difficult. *Dishwater air,* the poet laureate of the Judengasse, Nahum Baum, had called it in a poem more than a century earlier. The air had not improved since.

"Just wait," Emmie said. "A new day, indeed! We'll see what your father has to say."

The aroma of browning challah and the putrid stink of the ditch battled for the air like warring armies. Half a dozen women in white aprons were baking with flour that remained from the previous week. Guttle went to her Friday work place, already cleared for her. The new sacks of flour were stacked beside a flat stone shelf.

The air in the bakery was warmer than the morning air outside, although that, too, was unusually mild. This was a time of renewal, the first week of spring, the Chief Rabbi had intoned in his Sabbath sermon, and the congregation had buzzed like a hive. Except for the men who went into the city on business, and passed the city parks, the Jews had few hints of the changing seasons. Not a tree, not a bush, not a flower, not a blade of grass grew in the Judengasse; there wasn't any room; there wasn't enough sun. Only in the cemetery did wildflowers bloom, in late summer mostly, and then wilted quickly, imitating the dead.

With knowing fingers Guttle wound her braids atop her head to keep them clear of the flour and the ovens. Slitting stitches on the top canvas sack, she dumped a pile of coarse brown flour onto the flat stone. The flour was speckled, as always, with red dots. Flour beetles. Sinking to her knees to see them better, she began to pick the beetles out, using a pair of tweezers donated long ago by a Doctor at the hospital. Each insect she removed she dropped into a pot of heated oil that smoked near the edge of the stone. The beetles, living creatures, sizzled as they touched the oil. Then they turned black. The work of cleaning the flour was tedious, was always assigned to one of the younger women, who still had strong knees and strong eyes, knees not

yet burning from dozens of years of scrubbing floors, eyes not yet dimmed from reading the Books of Moses by oil lamp or candle light. Even young eyes, however, were not strong enough to spot all the beetle eggs in the flour. This was a secret made harmless by the heat of the ovens, a secret the world of women kept from the world of men. There was a saying every woman knew: in baking bread, you can't have too many eggs.

While Guttle searched for beetles and dropped them in the oil, other women added water and yeast to the already cleaned flour, molded it into braided loaves, and gossiped. The subject this day, of course, was the death of the Schul-Klopper.

"Who can replace him?" one of them asked. "It's hard to imagine anyone else knocking."

They agreed that at least Solomon Gruen had led a full life. A learned man, a Greek scholar, with all those shelves of books he loved. They wondered why he never had married — well, maybe his life had not been so full. But he'd been a good shammus — a good sexton — at the schul, they agreed, making sure everything was in good repair, that there was always enough oil for the lamps, helping the Rabbis teach the young boys the Talmud in the three *heders.* And he'd been a good influence, they agreed, on that wild Hersch Liebmann, a boy from the poorest family in the Judengasse, whom he'd given a job as janitor at the schul so he could take home a few kreuzer each week to his elderly parents. Life was unpredictable, the women agreed; who wanted to die in the street instead of in bed? But at least the Schul-Klopper had died doing what he most enjoyed: summoning the pious to services. And death had been quick, with little suffering. His heart, no doubt.

The chatter of the women stopped as the whining sound of a saw biting into board sliced through the air from the shop of the coffin maker across the lane. Yussel Kahn called himself a cabinet maker, which he was, but only the wealthiest in the Judengasse thought of him that way. To the rest he was the coffin maker. The women paused in their work, maintaining a respectful silence. They could guess what the coffin maker was doing. He was fashioning the plain spruce box in which Solomon Gruen would be buried before sundown. And when, a short time later, they heard him hammering nails they knew they were right. When he was making furniture, Yussel Kahn, who took pride in his craft, used only glue and dowels.

Except for the painful screaming of the saw, an unusual quiet had settled over the lane. News of the death of the Schul-Klopper had passed from house to house as if through the ether, even before it was passed by word of mouth. Saddened families kept noisy children indoors out of respect.

Rag pickers and moneylenders did not cry out to passersby; there were none. But now it was noon, the body of Solomon Gruen was resting in the hospital under a sheet, where it would remain until the funeral that evening, and Guttle could hear the Judengasse returning to life. The boys in the heders were out and about for their midday exercise. Young children innocent of death darted through the lane shouting as they played made up games, watched over by older sisters — the girls did not go to heder — or by no one at all. Groups of women, talking quietly, moved past the bakery toward the north gate, where they would pass the new Constable, then walk two by two in the direction of the market. The women could go to the stalls to buy fresh fruits and vegetables only after noon, after the Gentile women had taken their pick. Unlike the Gentiles, they were not allowed to touch the produce.

Guttle picked beetles out of the last pile of flour and dropped them into the oil. She packed the cleaned flour in ceramic canisters with tight-fitting lids. With a slatted spoon she lifted clumps of the dead beetles from the surface of the oil onto a rag. By the time the oil was clean — the same oil was used week after week — a knob of crisp beetles sat dripping on the cloth, waiting, like the body of Solomon Gruen, to be carried to its final resting place.

Perched on the edge of the stone, closing her tired eyes, Guttle found herself burrowing past the morning's sadness to the previous evening's absurdity. Viktor the Cantor proposing marriage to her, instead of first asking her father! Outrageous! He'd been shocked when she put him off, saying she was too young to marry. But he said he might ask her father tonight. Now she relived his proposal — in the cemetery! — as melodrama, as opera, which was Viktor's favorite subject; he'd studied it while away at school, talked about it incessantly. Beneath her breath, amid the baking bread, with the other women chattering outside, she softly sang an aria, which she invented as she sang. A creative person was Guttle Schnapper, and in the Judengasse this could be a curse, because what could you do with it? Guttle often painted dark moods into song .

He wants to marry me
Though I am just fifteen;
He wants to carry me
Where I have never been;
His voice, though very large,
Does not exceed his paunch;
I might be crushed to death
Before we ever launch
The dozen babes he seeks

("Just six of each!")
Without a loving breeze
The eager Cantor can't
Prepare to sail my boat
However high his C's.
When Viktor seeks my hand,
Perhaps this very night,
Papa I beg of you:
My troth don't plight!
Now love's bare plot's afloat,
The naked scene is set;
How will fair Guttle fare?
I don't know yet!

She rubbed her eyes with her fists. She didn't know whether, in the half light of the lane, the libretto of her life would be comedy or tragedy.

Soon after the women returned to check the ovens, their talking broke off. There was an intaking of breath, several women at once began to say, "Shalom, shalom Doctor." Guttle turned to look. Doctor Lev Berkov, the tall, lean director of the hospital, had entered the bakery. To many of the women, Doctor Berkov was the catch of the Judengasse. Though he'd grown up in a poor family, he had managed to leave the Judengasse to go to medical school. Then he'd come back. He was thirty years old, and not yet married. And so nice, so dedicated. He had a full head of brown hair, and the way he wore his beard, trimmed very short in a dark triangle, the bakery women found (in their matronly euphemism) scintillating.

Doctor Berkov greeted the women with smiles and friendly nods even as he looked about. Spotting Guttle in the far corner, he approached her, asked if she would step outside for a moment. The whispers began as soon as she followed him into the lane: Was that his choice? Would Guttle Schnapper wed the handsome Doctor? But what would that do to poor Viktor Marcus, with whom she'd been seen keeping company? It was not the Doctor's place to choose, of course, nor the Cantor's. Guttle's father would arrange her marriage. But if the good Doctor hinted that he was interested, would any father say no? Guttle would be sixteen in the autumn, it was time she was spoken for.

Thus did the women speculate as the Doctor led her out of earshot. He asked her how she was feeling since finding the Schul-Klopper. She'd been shaky at first, she admitted, but felt fine now. She told him she was grateful he'd come to ask.

The Doctor replied that there was also something else he wanted to know. It was she who had spilled the milk on the deceased, was that correct?

"I didn't mean to… I stumbled over him."

"Where did you get the milk?"

"I borrowed it from Frau Metzenbaum. We had none left for my baby brother."

"And was Herr Gruen — the Schul-Klopper — already dead when this happened? As far as you could tell."

Guttle began to feel uneasy. She did not understand the point of the questions. "He was lying on muddy cobbles, that's why I stumbled. He wasn't making a sound. He wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. I was afraid to touch him. That's why, when Isidor ran to get you at the hospital, I knew it was too late. I ran for the Rabbi instead."

"Was his mouth open at the time?"

"It was closed."

"When you left Herr Gruen lying there, was anyone else in the lane?"

"Nobody. The men were already off to schul." Her irritation grew. "Why are you asking these questions? Did we do something wrong?"

She began to feel nervous in her stomach. The Doctor saw her agitation, placed his hand on her shoulder. "That's all the questions. You and Izzy didn't do anything wrong. You did exactly the right thing, getting help. It's just that, when someone dies, we doctors are supposed to find out the cause."

Guttle looked at the Doctor's face. His searching eyes flicked away. There was, she knew, something he was not telling her.

A few minutes later, as the sun reached its apex, clean light sharp as a butcher's knife fell into the lane from overhead, brightening the cobbles. Guttle and the other women of the bakery — indeed, hundreds of women the length of the Judengasse — and some men, too — poured out into the lane, as they did at this time each sunny day, and turned their faces skyward, to feel the warm rays on their pale cheeks, their foreheads, the soft lids of their eyes. Motionless and silent, they stood that way, faces toward the blue sliver of sky, absorbing the sun's warmth like so many hungry flowers. Until, in four minutes, maybe five, the golden light climbed the east-side walls and disappeared, and the lane was in shadow again.

2

Guttle carried the oil-soaked beetles, wrapped in cloth, from the bakery to the sewage ditch. Every twenty metres a board lay across the trench so people could cross it without having to jump. She knelt on the nearest board, let go of two corners of the cloth, slid the black mess into the ditch. The viscous sewage was moving slowly downhill, and the clump of dead beetles moved with it. Children in the street had been waiting for her, as they did each Friday, and now they ran alongside the ball of beetles, shouting and making a game of it, throwing small stones in an attempt to shatter the clump, shouting, "Kill the Emperor," although for years there had been an Empress. The skull of beetles vanished around the curve. Guttle's shift was wet beneath her arms. She was frightened for the kinder. Constables sometimes walked the lane unexpectedly, and children in the Judengasse had been hanged for lesser offenses than shouting angry words. Children had been hanged for stealing a piece of cheese from the Gentile market.

She stood up on the board, but as she stepped onto the uneven cobbles, the words of the youngsters, circling like ravens, made her dizzy. She lost her balance, fell hard on her knees. She didn't want to move. Who had taught the children such a thing? People in the Judengasse did not curse the Gentiles. Life was life. You lived it as it came. You made the best of it. A dozen different sayings had taught her that. What was, was the will of Yahweh. Seeking to change the immutable was the wisdom of fools.

Still, she could not deny the anger within her. She wanted to see the locks on the gates disappear. She wanted to see the ghetto walls crumble. It was not the Gentiles she hated, it was the walls. She wanted to take an axe and hack at them until they cracked, work her fingers into the cracks and pull away chunks of rock. Stone by stone pull the wall apart until there was a hole that every person in the lane could climb through, to stream out into the city,

to promenade in the parks, to smell the flowers and the trees, to play on the grass, to feel the warm sun on their faces. To do all the forbidden things.

It didn't matter that she was fifteen years old, and a girl. It didn't matter that no one had made the walls so much as tremble in three hundred years.

Pressing the back of her hands to her eyes, she thought: Yahweh has put up with the walls for all these centuries. Am I superior to Him? If I oppose His will — and me just a girl — am I mad! Not even a hundred men could tear down the walls.

Her eyes began to sting. The oily rag was clenched in her fist. She had the feeling that someone was watching her, perhaps judging her; she'd had this feeling before. Disregarding it, she knelt by the ditch and saw brown turds float by. Soon they would pass beneath the south gate and down the sluice, into the river laced with sailing vessels, where, in the mild current, Jewish waste would mingle with Gentile waste, and drift together towards the Rhine and the distant sea.

At first she had kept her reaction to the dead Schul-Klopper under control. Now, alone in her room, sprawled on the flowered print spread on the bed, she found the memory of his body making her skin itch, her head throb like the pounding of his hammer. When her mother peered into the room, Guttle blurted, "Why did we run out of milk? If we had milk, I wouldn't have stepped on him!"

"You're right, Guttle, it's my fault. Now come with me to the market."

"I don't want to go. Everyone keeps looking at me. As if it was me who made the Schul-Klopper die."

"No one is blaming you. No one is looking at you. What, are you planning to spend the rest of your life in this room?"

"You know something, Mama? There's not so much exciting happening outside."

"That again? You want a dead horse, maybe? Come, I need you to help me carry. I'll tell you what, bubbelah. Next time we run out of milk, I'll borrow some myself."

"There won't be a dead man to trip over!"

"I certainly hope not," Emmie Schnapper said.

On the third-floor of the first house inside the north gate, Yetta Liebmann, boney and haggard, heard footsteps on the stairs, then a knocking on the door. Emmie Schnapper and her daughter Guttle had returned from marketing, with the food Emmie had offered to bring.

"I got you a nice chicken," Frau Schnapper said, pulling a wrapped bird from one of two string bags. "And four small potatoes. And a little piece of sweet, for a treat."

Hiram Liebmann, the younger son, emerged from the front bedroom, holding his pocket watch and a piece of paper marked 1 + 10, which he showed to Frau Schnapper. It had taken her one hour and ten minutes for her to return, from the time he'd seen her leave through the gate.

Behind him appeared his older brother, Hersch, who scowled when he saw the food on the table. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Frau Schnapper brought it from the market," his mother said. "Wasn't that nice?"

"Give it back. We don't want charity."

"Oh, it's not charity," Frau Schnapper said. "You can pay for it when you have money."

"When do you think that will be? I don't get paid much for sweeping the schul."

"Don't you and your brother have a grave to dig?" his mother asked. "When you get paid for that, we'll have enough. Till then, your father could use a good meal. He's in there under the covers, he's always so cold."

Hersch said no more, but motioned to Hiram and led the way down the stairs. Watching them go, Guttle knew the brothers had seen her as a child, acting as if she were not there.

"I'm sorry," Yetta said to Emmie. "He's angry a lot these days. I don't know what dybbuk has gotten into him."

"This time of year, the spring air warming up, is worst on the young ones," Frau Schnapper said. "Guttle is the same. Sometimes I think their bodies have ancient memories, of trees and fields, of lakes in which to swim — and it makes them a little crazy. They haven't learned yet how to accept the walls."

"It's a hard thing to learn," Yetta said. "Sometimes I think my Hiram is the lucky one. He doesn't expect so much."

The women indulged themselves in a mutual sigh. Frau Schnapper left soon after, carrying her own purchases, to begin preparing the Sabbath meal. Guttle followed silently, feeling invisible.

Mentioning the grave her sons needed to dig had given Yetta an inspiration. She entered the small bedroom, where Leo peered from beneath covers pulled to his neck. "I have to go out," she said. "I'll be back soon."

She walked down the two flights of stairs slowly, holding tight to the rickety banister. In the lane she stayed close to the houses, ready to grab hold in case an uneven cobble twisted her ankle, or broke her shoe. Soon she reached her destination — the Judengasse hospital. It was a three-story building with examining rooms at street level and space for eight beds upstairs, twelve in an emergency. A Doctor's helper, seated at a table looking bored, asked what she needed. Yetta said she wanted to see the Doctor. When the assistant asked what the trouble was, Yetta told him it was a private matter.

In his office down the hall, Doctor Berkov stood from behind his writing table and helped her to a straight-backed chair. He, too, asked what the trouble was.

"There's no trouble," she replied. "I've come about the coat."

"What coat?"

"The Schul-Klopper's coat. When you bury him, you won't be needing his coat."

"You have a use for it?"

"My husband. You've seen him. He's cold all the time. For him I would like the coat."

The Doctor pondered. The deceased had not been diseased, he was fairly certain of that. "I don't see why not," he said, finally. "It's probably a good idea."

He went to another room, and returned with the worn black coat and handed it to her. At once she noticed a white stain near the collar.

"What's this?" she asked, pointing.

"Spilled milk."

"That I can wash out."

She thanked him, and with the coat folded under her arm she walked home, past the bakery with its warm smells of challah, past a pawn shop and a moneylender, past the rag picker's stall, till she climbed the steep stairs in her house. She found Leo sitting at the table in the kitchen, hoping she would fix a glass of tea.

"Better than tea, look what I got for you. A new coat!"

"A new coat? From where did you get a new coat?"

"It was the Schul-Klopper's. He won't be needing it."

Leo was a small man and seemed of late to be melting into nothing. He looked at the coat, stood, carefully put his arms through the sleeves, shrugged the collar onto his neck. The hem of the coat reached below his ankles. "Look, it fits," he said.

Yetta smiled, or at least one could say the corners of her mouth pulled back out of memory. She had done well. She moved to the kitchen, poured water from an earthen jar into the kettle for tea. She lit a few pieces of kindling in the stove.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making you tea."

"I don't want tea. I'm going for a walk in my new coat."

With no further words Leo was out the door in his brown slippers, shuffling down the stairs, both feet touching each step, the way small children do. Yetta let the water boil for herself. She couldn't remember the last time he'd gone out.

He shuffled only as far as the rag dealer's shop, thinking: the coat of a dead man she wants me to wear! He shrugged off the coat, handed it to the skinny proprietor, Ephraim Hess. With a minimum of haggling they struck a deal. The rag dealer handed Leo a few kreuzer. He was still standing there, placing the coins in his pocket, one by one, when the rag dealer's waif of a wife, Eva, came out from inside the shop, carrying in a small blanket a newborn child. Handing the baby to her husband, she inspected the coat quickly. Just as quickly she pulled a faded dress from a nail at the front of the stall , and hung the coat there, the spot most visible to passersby.

"Eva, you can't put it out so fast," her young husband told her. "That's the Schul-Klopper's coat. He hasn't even been buried yet."

"All the better," his wife said. "Someone can dress nice for the funeral."

The infant started to squall. Eva took the baby, opened her blouse, gave the child a lovely breast on which to suck.

"That's a fine-looking child," Leo said. "What name do you call her?"

"It's a boy," the rag dealer said, the pride of a new father in his voice. "Our first child. Only eight hours old. We named him Solomon, after Israel's greatest king."

"After Israel's greatest poet," the wife said.

Leo offered a nod of understanding. "One Solomon dies, another Solomon is born. It's the way of the world."

He left them looking love into one another's eyes, and shuffled home with a new rhythm in his steps, humming to the music of the coins clinking in his pocket. He was not so old he could not remember young love. When he entered the apartment after a slow climb up the stairs, Yetta, appraising him as if she were a dealer in old men, said, "What did you do with your new coat? You didn't lose it already!"

"I didn't lose it. I sold it to the rag dealer." He jingled his pocket, and shook his elbows as if he were about to dance.

"You sold it? It was supposed to keep you warm."

"Now we have money to buy wood. To keep you warm, too, bubbelah. And to cook the chicken." He eased himself onto a chair. Both the chair and his knees creaked.

"We already have wood to cook the chicken," Yetta said.

"Then it's to buy wood for next week's chicken."

"Wood for next week's chicken? We don't have chicken for next week's chicken. Besides, the coffin maker gives us wood. He gives the boys his odds and ends, pieces too small to use. He doesn't charge for that."

"There you go. In case he starts to charge, we'll have money for wood."

Yetta shook her head, closing her eyes as she did, as she had been doing for thirty-five years. She approached her husband and pressed her lips to the top of his flaking head. He was bald except for a gray fringe that circled the back from ear to ear. "I don't know what to do, Leo. I tried to do something nice for you."

"What you can do nice for me?" He took her wrinkled hand and gently pulled her onto his boney knees, which had almost worn through his breeches. "What you can do nice for me, Yetta darling, is live with me until I die."

"All the way till then?" She tugged lightly at his chin. "That's a lot to ask, you know. That young Doctor has a *schön* tush."

He pushed her off of his lap. "In that case, make me a glass of tea before you run away with him."

Yetta kissed the whorls of his ear, from which small white hairs were growing, and made him a glass of tea. He chopped with a knife at a bowl of honey, and when a small piece broke off placed it between his lips. As he sipped the tea through the crystal honey, Yetta sat across from him and watched, saying nothing.

And if, as he drank his tea, he was thinking what lovely breasts the rag dealer's young wife has, what harm was being done?

Doctor Lev Berkov, wearing the brown breeches, loose-fitting white shirt and leather vest that was the fashion for younger men, caught up with the Chief Rabbi just as he was locking his study, and asked to speak with him. Rabbi Eleazar said he had no time just then, but when the Doctor said his problem was related to the forthcoming funeral, the Rabbi gave him a questioning, annoyed look, then reluctantly unlocked the door and motioned him inside. The Rabbi seated himself behind his desk, but did not put a match to the lamp; the only light in the room filtered in through the single curtained window that faced the lane. The Rabbi was dressed, as always, in black. The Doctor at first had difficulty seeing him.

"It's about Solomon Gruen," Berkov said, seating himself on a wooden chair. He removed his three-cornered hat, making sure with his right hand that the yarmulke he wore underneath had remained in place.

"What about him, may he rest in peace?" the Chief Rabbi said. Avram Eleazar was sixty-two years old, not tall but broad-shouldered, looking more like a sea captain than a man of religion, except for the pallor above his full gray beard. He'd been the Chief Rabbi in the Judengasse for fifteen years, had carried its burdens on his shoulders more than people knew.

"I'm not certain that he died of heart seizure," the Doctor said.

The Rabbi frowned, his expression almost lost within his beard. "Heart seizure, brain seizure, what does it matter? Dead is dead — not to sound harsh. We still have to bury him before the sun sets."

In his four years at the hospital the Doctor had become used to giving bad news. He found what he needed to tell the Rabbi more difficult than he had expected. "The hospital is not set up to do an autopsy, as you know. We need all our space for the living. Most often there's no need, the cause of death usually has been lingering, and is plain to see. I do what little I can to look over the body without defiling it. I look in the nose, the mouth, the ears, as a matter of simple medical procedure. In Herr Gruen's case, there may be a problem."

"What sort of problem?" The powerful voice emanated disembodied from the dark.

"When his glands dried — his salivary glands — I found traces of a white residue on his tongue, and leading down into his throat. I don't know what it is."

The Rabbi pulled a gold pocket watch from his vest. It was a recent gift from a Rabbi from Weimar who had come to join the staff of the yeshiva, which, despite the walls, was known throughout the region for its Talmudic studies. He squinted at the watch, angling it toward the window so he could read the face. He did not return it to his pocket, but set it on his desk. "About this you're bothering me?" he asked, sounding more irritated than he'd intended. "White something that you don't know what it is? Salt is white. Milk is white. Cheese is white. Crystals of honey are white. You're the Doctor, why do you come to me?"

"It's none of those things. I'm afraid it's nothing he would normally ingest, or I wouldn't be here. It's the residue of a fine powder that reminds me of no food."

"Out with it, Doctor. What does it remind you of?"

Berkov hesitated. A carriage passing slowly on the cobbles rattled the window. There was no room for horses or coaches to be kept in the lane, but

frail or wealthy residents sometimes paid a driver to deliver goods to their doors in narrow one-horse carriages. When the noise had faded, the Doctor said, "It reminds me of arsenic."

"Arsenic? Arsenic is a poison. Why would the Schul-Klopper swallow arsenic? Are you saying he killed himself? I don't believe that. Not for a moment!"

"I'm not saying that. I'm not even saying it's arsenic. I don't know what it is. If it is arsenic, I still wouldn't think he killed himself. If he were to do that, for whatever reason, he most likely would have done it in his room. Arsenic works quickly. I don't think he could have ingested it and then walked the length of the lane, pausing to knock on every door, and reached the end alive."

"I knew Solomon Gruen well," the Rabbi said, leaning his elbows on his desk. His words were spoken slowly, as if he were controlling great anger. "There was no indication he was troubled. If he were, he would have come to me. Besides, he was a pious man, and the Talmud forbids self slaughter. He did not kill himself." The Rabbi slapped the flat of his hand on the oak desk top. The pocket watch jumped. "Do you understand?"

Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping his face, the Doctor said, "I agree with you completely. I never meant to suggest that was the case."

"Then what is it you are suggesting?"

"I'm saying that if my guess is correct — and it is only a guess — somebody fed it to him."

"That's absurd," the Rabbi said, standing abruptly. "Who would do such a thing?"

"I have no idea."

"Why would anyone do such a thing?"

"I have no idea about that, either. I'm a physician, not a Constable. I'm only telling you of a possibility. People often gave the Schul-Klopper something to drink when he knocked on their doors, am I right? A glass of tea, a glass of milk. It was considered a mitzvah. The poison could have been mixed into something that he drank shortly before he died."

"Where would someone get arsenic without arousing suspicion? Without being reported to the police?"

"It's in every house in the lane. Ratsbane."

The Rabbi shook his head. "I won't listen to any more of this. A murderer in the Judengasse? I don't believe it. I won't believe it."

"I understand how you feel, Rabbi. But who would have thought that a son of Adam, the creation of Yahweh himself, would be a murderer?"

Deflated, the Rabbi lowered himself into his chair. His tone became softer. "You want to know something, Doctor? That's my least favorite story in the Torah. I never believed Cain had motive enough to kill his brother. And Abel certainly was not at fault in any way." He picked up a drinking mug on his desk and studied it, as if looking for an answer there. "I suppose Cain is meant as a symbol," he said. "A warning that we all have the capacity for evil."

"One of two brothers. Fifty percent evil. That's quite a warning."

"You forget Seth."

"Yes, there was also Seth. So two thirds of our human make-up is good."

"Most of the time." Wearily, the Rabbi moved his arm in a circle above his head, perhaps to indicate the stone walls that surrounded them. "But that's another matter. Are you asking me to delay the funeral?"

"Not at all. There's no need for that."

"You're not suggesting we call in the police? They disturb us enough on their own."

"No police, Rabbi. Certainly not till we have more information."

"So why have you told me this?"

"Medical ethics, in my view, requires that I pursue the matter. I plan to take the residue to a chemist in the town, to find out what it is. I just felt that, as the head of the community, you ought to be informed."

"What if you're right, and the chemist goes to the police?"

"He won't. We pay him hundreds of gulden a year for medicines. He'll do as I say. Besides, I won't tell him the circumstances."

From outside the window came the sound of another narrow carriage clattering along the cobbles. The Rabbi unfolded from his chair, looked at his watch, placed it in his vest pocket. "I suppose I should thank you for telling me," he said. "Now I'm sure to get heartburn from the Sabbath dinner my good wife has spent all day preparing. I hope I still have some soda powder upstairs."

"If you don't, we have plenty at the hospital. It's our most common request."

Moving to the door, the Rabbi stopped. "What about soda powder! That's white. Have you thought of that?"

"I'm afraid I have. But it fizzles when you drink it. I would expect to find residue on the roof of the mouth, perhaps inside the cheeks. Not just on the tongue and throat. That's just my surmise, of course. I could be wrong. Even so, why would Herr Gruen drink soda powder first thing in the morning?"

"It fits," the Rabbi said. "Solomon woke up with chest pains. He thought it must be indigestion. So he took some soda, to settle his stomach.

And he went out on his rounds. Only this time it was not indigestion. The pains were from his heart. When he reached the end of the lane, his heart failed."

"It's a tempting scenario."

"Of course that's what happened! You can dispose of your residue. I'm glad you came to me, Lev, to talk things out before you did anything rash."

"I'll pray that you are correct," the Doctor said. "But on Monday I'll take the residue to the chemist."

"Why stir up trouble that isn't necessary?"

"If Herr Gruen was poisoned, there is a sick murderer among us. He could kill again."

For the second time in the conversation the Rabbi felt deflated. "Go," he said. "I won't discuss this any further. My wife is waiting upstairs. No doubt she's angry already."

The Doctor opened the the door, and turned. "I'll keep you informed, Rabbi."

"I'm sure you will," the Rabbi said. Then, as if realizing he should not be so angry at the young Doctor, he said, "What you should do, Lev, if I may call you that, is take your mind off your work a little. It struck me this morning, when she found the body, how nicely the Schnapper girl has grown up. Maybe pay her some attention. She's got a brain in her, that one. She's become a jewel of the lane. "

"Rabbi, you sound like the women."

"They all want you to marry the Schnapper girl?"

"They all want me to marry their daughters."

Rabbi Eleazar smiled through his beard. He clamped the Doctor on the shoulder.

"I'll think about what you said," the Doctor told him

The Rabbi answered, "And I'll try not to think about what you've said."

3

The usual aromas of oak and wood oil in the shop of the cabinet maker were obscured by the smell of newly cut spruce from the coffin that stood upright against a wall. The janitor from the synagogue was supposed to come for it, but hadn't; perhaps he was at the cemetery, digging the grave. Through his open door Yussel Kahn saw the girl from the bakery kneeling motionless beside the trench. She looked as if she were praying, but Jews didn't kneel when they prayed, Catholics did. He wasn't sure about Lutherans.

Even Gentiles, he was certain, didn't pray to floating turds.

The coffin maker's story was well known to Guttle and to all the women in the bakery. From his earliest adult years, Yussel Kahn had been the finest carpenter in the Judengasse. He made tables and chairs and cabinets for all the wealthiest families (though wealthy in the Judengasse was not like wealthy outside.) Because his fine work was too expensive for some, he made coffins at no charge for every family that needed one. The boxes did not take long to make, the wood was the cheapest, he asked from the bereaved only a small donation to the temple, at which he prayed each morning, often walking the last few metres alongside the Schul-Klopper.

Yussel took his childhood love Lainie as a bride as soon as he turned twenty-five. Although the minimum age had been established to keep the Jewish population down, Yussel and his young bride learned quickly that Fate (they were reluctant to blame Yahweh) had other ways to achieve that end. In the first year of their marriage, Lainie gave birth to a boy, but he died after two days. Tears rolled down Yussel's cheeks and wet his beard as he banged together a tiny coffin in which to bury his first-born son. In the second year, Lainie gave birth to a sweet baby girl, the image of herself. The

girl lived only a week. Yussel tearfully buried another child. But worse happened the third year. Another boy was conceived, and grew in his mother's womb, but this one was born dead, and in his posthumous birth he took his bleeding mother with him.

Yussel was near to crazy. For months he didn't work. Each morning and each evening in the synagogue he asked Yahweh what he had done to offend. He received no answer. He swore he would never marry again, would produce no more children. When finally he reopened his shop, he let it be known that he would no longer make coffins for infants. Adults were supposed to die, he said, but children were not.

This, of course, did not prevent the children of other families from dying — in infancy, or in their first year, or their second. The Judengasse was so overcrowded, the sanitary conditions were so bad, the trench in the street like an open sore, that disease struck often, overwhelming the weakest, the little ones, first. But when the bereaved parents of a dead baby came to the coffin maker, he always turned them away.

"We have to bury her!" the crazed mother would wail.

"Take a drawer from a cabinet," Yussel would reply calmly, "and bury her in that." And he would give them a piece of board with which to cover the burial drawer, and he would send them on their way.

The people of the Judengasse were not happy with this, but the other two carpenters in the lane, both of whom had apprenticed with Yussel and loved him dearly, sided with the coffin maker. They would not break his rule. Someone, they said, needed to stand up to Gott.

Inevitably, what would happen is that month after month the bereaved parents would see the dark space for the missing drawer in their bedroom dresser or kitchen cabinet and be reminded again of their loss. They would come to Yussel again, and plead, and he would agree to make a drawer to match the one now buried in the cemetery. When it was done, and he gave it to them, and they paid him and thanked him, he would always tell them: "You think this will help you forget. Believe me, you will never forget."

They didn't argue with him; they knew his own sad story.

In time, a few cynics began to whisper that this was all a business ploy, that because the carpenter made coffins for free, but charged for replacing drawers, he emerged with a fatter purse. But none who knew the coffin maker believed that. Certainly not the women in the bakery. Certainly not Guttle Schnapper.

He wanted to go to her, seeing her kneeling by the trench, ask if something was wrong, but he held back. He would only torment himself. It was five years since his wife had died, since the third of their three babies had

died, since he had vowed that he would never marry again. With the passing years his maleness had grown heavy; he needed release more loving than a twisted sheet. But he had made his vow. And the girl was young. She was the daughter of the Court Jew Wolf Schnapper, he knew, and would come with a fine dowry — but what did he, Yussel Kahn, have to offer? Only a small bedroom above the shop, with a small kitchen shared by three families. There was no reason her father would agree.

Turning from the doorway, he bumped his elbow on the coffin. With a fierce burst of strength he embraced the coffin, his chest hard against it, his arms tight around it, and carried it through the open doorway. Carefully he leaned it against the wall outside.

The girl didn't look at him. Her eyes might as well have been closed.

Had he, when his wife died, embraced a living death as firmly as he'd just embraced the coffin? Perhaps.

In the center of the workshop was a piece he'd been crafting all week, a new writing table commissioned by her father. Only the drawer for pens and paper was missing. He'd have finished it today had it not been for the interruptions. On his work bench lay a new hammer he had carved at the request of the Chief Rabbi, a gift from the synagogue for the next Schul-Klopper, whomever that might be. He'd donated a rare piece of mahogany he'd been saving for something special; it held a smoother, more graceful curve than oak as the hammer broadened from the narrow end that fit in the hand to the wide end that withstood the thumping on doors. Her father's writing table was lambent with light from the oil lamps. Perhaps he could invite her in to see it. But would she care? Would she think him strange? Would she be frightened?

He was thirty-three years old, and a fool. His rust-colored hair had begun to thin, his beak of a nose made him less than handsome. At his age he could not throw himself at a virgin. If he ever should marry again, a widow with hungry children to feed would make more sense. There were so many of those in the Judengasse.

Her hair had been in braids in the morning, wrapped atop her head. Now one braid had fallen, and hung behind her shoulder, with a white ribbon dangling. She seemed not to have noticed. One day the previous autumn, after she had washed her hair for the Sabbath, he'd seen her hanging her head out the window of her third-story room, apparently hoping the light breeze twisting above the street would dry it quickly. The long dark hair spilling loose, framing her innocent face, became imprinted on his pillow that night. Only on rare nights since had he not imagined her hair splayed there. It was an image, he assured himself, that was historical. He could imagine her in

some ancient desert, wrapped head to foot in white, a shepherd's crook in her hands as she moved among a flock equally white. Behind her, in the distance, was a tent. It was an image from the Torah. Every Friday since, the cabinet maker had cut his eyes toward the bakery five, ten, twenty times, in hopes of catching a glimpse of her.

Back from the market, leaning against the Owl, Guttle watches Frau Liebmann walk by as if not seeing her. A few minutes later she returns, carrying a long black coat. It looks like the dead Schul-Klopper's coat. Moments after, Herr Liebmann shuffles past wearing the same coat — then returns without it. Guttle wonders what is happening, wonders if she is imagining things. Leaping about, her mind returns to the threat of marriage to the Cantor. His mother, Sophie Marcus, a contralto, begins to sing.

Just look at her, beside the stinking ditch,
A fit place for a bitch too good for Sonny.
On her knees, the hussy is a tease,
And yet the lad is hers, for love and money.
Filled with gloom, he moons up in his room,
There is no greater pain for any mortal;
When word spreads that he won't be her groom
He fears that all the lane will surely chortle.
Now my Jake must to the Court Jew go
And end my Viktor's woe with an arrangement —
A future marriage match! And if he dare say no
This cobbled lane will know a mean estrangement.
See her sweat — she acts as if she's mute,
As if she cannot see or hear me.
Listen, sweet: if you don't change your tune
I swear by God above, you'll fear me.
Not high stone walls, not even iron gates,
Can hurt like Sophie Marcus when she hates!

The shadowy image of Sophie Marcus slunk away. Feeling dazed, Guttle did not notice her friend Izzy approach.

"Your mind is far away," he said. "Do you want to tell me where it is?"

"Maybe some other time."

"Can I tell you about something, then?" Izzy asked. Focusing, she began to discern the excitement in his voice. "It's about the Torah. I've been thinking about about how it ends, with Moses leading the Jews to Eretz Yisroel. Moses dies, he never gets to enter the Promised Land. And his story just stops, more than two thousand years ago."

"What else should there be?"

"The Gentiles added their own New Testament. Which we don't believe happened, which we're not allowed to talk about. But what about the Jews? What happened to them? We're still here. Did our people forget how to write?"

Their homes were side by side, touching. On the Schnapper residence a blue owl, now faded, had been painted long ago. Guttle ran her fingers over it, trying to listen. Many of the tenements had pictures of animals on them, or colorful shields, to brighten the ghetto a bit, and to distinguish one adjoining house from the next. Only these small paintings kept the tenements from resembling two large rows of rotting teeth.

Izzy was still speaking. "When Herr Gruen died today" — that got her attention — "I thought: he knew everybody in the Judengasse, from being the Schul-Klopper for so long. He must know lots of stories. The histories of lots of families. Maybe some of them were important for us to know. Maybe angels spoke to some of those families. Maybe even Yahweh. But now the Schul-Klopper is dead, so he can't pass the stories on to anyone."

Guttle glanced impatiently at her door; she wanted to wash her hair. "Adonai, here in the Judengasse?"

"Why not? He talked to the Jews for thousands of years. All of a sudden He stopped. Why did He stop? Who says He stopped?"

"Maybe He can't find us behind these walls."

"I'm serious."

"I'm serious, too."

"Anyway," Izzy went on, "I had this idea. It's crazy, I know. But I worked my courage up, and I talked to Rabbi Simcha after class. About shouldn't somebody be writing another sacred book, about what's happened to the Jews since then? All the way to today. Even here in the Judengasse. Just the important stuff, of course."

"Like what? Moses parting the sewage?"

He ignored her jibe. "You know what Rabbi Simcha said? He thought it was an interesting idea. 'A powerful idea,' he said. He took me in to see the Chief Rabbi, without even an appointment, and he made me tell the whole thing again, with the Chief Rabbi sitting there in his big leather chair, with a red carpet on the floor. I never was in there before."

"And then?" She was getting excited for him now. She had an idea what was coming.

"I was scared. At first he didn't say anything. He just sat there, stroking his beard. When he finally spoke, he agreed it was an interesting idea. 'Especially coming from one so young.' He said it would involve a lot of

research, it would take many years to finish. Which meant it was an undertaking only for a young man. He looked at me with those lentil eyes of his, with the centers hard, only now they seemed soft and kind somehow. I'm so stupid, I didn't understand what he meant. Then he said, 'I'm told the other boys call you Izzy the Wise.' I still didn't get it. So he said, 'What do you say, Izzy the Wise? Do you think you are up to the task?'"

Isidor began to cough, had to struggle to catch his breath. His freckled face reddened.

"And you said?"

"I began to cough and choke, just like now. I couldn't say anything. Then I blurted, 'Do you really think I'm worthy of doing this, Rabbi?' He sat there and looked at me, stroking his beard again. I think maybe he thinks with his beard. His eyes became like tiny woodstoves, bits of fire flaring in them. 'Whether you are worthy enough is between you and Yahweh,' he said. 'My question is, are you smart enough?'"

Guttle laughed, a short burst, and covered her mouth in apology. She placed a hand on his arm. "What could you say to that?"

"I didn't know what to say. But I got inspired. Maybe from the painting of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, which is on the wall behind his desk. Or maybe from my own excitement. I had never meant for me to be the one to write such a book. That would be crazy. But all at once I wanted to. More than anything. The Chief Rabbi just sat there, waiting for me to answer. What I finally said was, 'If I am entrusted by you to attempt this, perhaps Yahweh will make me smart enough.'"

Guttle grinned, her eyes glistened. "We don't call you Izzy the Wise for nothing. I'll bet he ate it up."

"Like a freshly cooked chicken. That's my new task — my burden, is the word he used — for all my yeshiva years. Starting now. To gather old stories. To find out what happened to the Jews since the Temple was destroyed. To set it down. As if for a new holy book, for me to write later on, or for my descendants to write. He used that word. Descendants. I never thought about us having Descendants. Have you."

"That's wonderful!" Ignoring his question, she squeezed his hand. His breath stopped at the warmth of her touch. "I was going to kiss you on the cheek, for good luck," she said. "But now I don't think I'm allowed. Now that you're a holy man."

Isidor looked at the ground. Why did she always do that to him? Even in his time of triumph. Perhaps underneath, Guttle was cruel. He managed to mumble, "I don't think I'm holy yet. Writers aren't holy, anyway."

With his eye cast down at the cobbles, Isidor saw neither the smile that parted her lips nor the gleam in her eyes as she leaned close and kissed his cheek. By the time he looked up to see her face she had disappeared into the entrance of the Owl. He could hear her swift footsteps bounding up the stairs. He touched the cheek where for the merest of moments her lips had lightly pressed, where perhaps a wisp of her breath still lingered. It had happened so quickly, he wondered if he had only imagined it.

Guttle wished that Joan of Arc had been Jewish. Her name then would have been Jennie Aron, as in Aron Kodesh. She would have been revered in the lane, just as the women of the Pentateuch were. Guttle was happy for Izzy in part because history intrigued her. The Holy Roman Empire was so scattered that little of interest had happened there, as far as she knew, but neighboring France had been alive with heroes, with vast adventures. Sitting on her bed by the third-floor window, trying to put the dead Schul-Klopper out of her mind, she pulled from her shelf her favorite book, *The History of France from Hugh Cept to Louis IV;* her father, approving of her interest, had bought her a German translation for her fourteenth birthday. She had been enthralled by all of it, but nothing could equal the story of Jennie Aron. Jennie had been only seventeen when God told her to lead the armies of France into battle, to drive out the English, who had taken over her country. Covered head to toe in armor, sword in hand, Jennie had gone to war. Guttle herself still had a year and a half before she reached seventeen — plenty of time for Yahweh to speak to her, to tell her to tear down the gates. She would do it fiercely, if only He would show her how. She kicked off her shoes and stretched out on her bed, wiggling her toes, and opened the book to Jennie's story. When her chores were done she liked more than anything to read; her books allowed her to escape from the lane. But here was the terrible illustration — Jennie being burned at the stake. The French girl was looking toward the heavens while flames around her knees crept higher. Some of the spectators were laughing.

Guttle shivered, as not the voice of Yahweh but a chill wind blew through the open window. She thought again of what she had been trying to keep out of her mind. The questions the Doctor had asked her about the spilled milk. Later she had seen him going into the Rabbi's study. The Doctor was not very pious; she had never seen him go there before. She had a strong feeling that something was very wrong, and that it had to do with the death of the Schul-Klopper. She closed her eyes against the vision that assaulted her, and the terrible word: Disease. Had the Schul-Klopper died of the

smallpox? Or the plague? Would pock marks blow through the lane like poisoned leaves, spreading pain and death?

She tried to calm herself. If that were the case, the Chief Rabbi or the Doctor would already have made an announcement about what should be done.

As Hiram and Hersch Liebmann strode the cobbles together, a stranger might have mistaken them for twins. Both were broad-shouldered, their arms and legs well-muscled. Both kept their hair long but their faces beardless. They wore faded clothes Yetta had bought at one of the rag picker shops. Their shirts were open at the neck, a tangle of chest hair poking through. Their sturdy faces were similar, though Hiram's features were leaner. Hersch at twenty-four was two years older. He wore a dark blue yarmulke pinned to his hair; his job at the synagogue required one. Hiram's head was bare; he would worship no God that had deprived him from birth of hearing, of speech.

An occasional rag picker or dealer in junk furniture waved at them as they passed. Most people in the street did not. The boys were not outcasts, there just seemed no reason for them to be included in other peoples' lives. When Solomon Gruen a few years back hired Hersch as janitor at the synagogue, most people accepted it, but nobody cheered.

Their first stop was at the coffin maker. They found the coffin leaning against the wall outside. Hersch pointed to the narrow lower end, grabbed the wider end himself, and together they carried the empty box down the lane and across the trench to the hospital. At the direction of Doctor Berkov, they placed it on a low table in a small room. Through the doorway of an adjoining room Hiram saw on another table a long shape covered by a sheet.

They left the hospital quickly and crossed to the synagogue. Hiram waited outside. He pulled his watch from his pocket. Barely more than a minute passed before Hersch emerged with Rabbi Simcha, the second in command, and together the three walked toward the south gate. Just before reaching it they turned right. The cemetery spread before them, the only piece of visible land remaining in the Judengasse. Gray tombstones, many listing at odd angles, seemed to grow in uneven rows all the way to the ghetto wall, which veered away in a slight arc to accommodate the graves. The burial ground was older than the Judengasse; it had been there when the Jews of Frankfurt were free to come and go. The oldest grave was from the Christian year 1234. More than five thousand graves had been dug since.

The boys grabbed weathered spades that lay inside the cemetery gate. They followed as Rabbi Simcha, walking among the stones, reading an

epitaph here, another there, looking for a spot in which to fit Solomon Gruen. Near the center of the cemetery, he stopped. "Let's do it here," he said, looking at both, then realizing, speaking only to Hersch. "It's the Becker plot, but there are no more Beckers here. They moved to France years ago. The graves are tight, but Solomon Gruen had no family, we'll squeeze him in. He was a good man. I don't think the Beckers will mind."

"If they do, they won't complain," Hersch said.

The Rabbi put a hand to his lips to hide a small grin. He was not sure if Hersch was indulging in morbid humor or was just being crude.

Thirty-six years old, Rabbi Emil Simcha was a slim man, with a calm demeanor despite intense dark eyes that peered, ever curious, above his full brown beard. A pink scar ran from above his left eye to his left temple. His cheeks were pitted with souvenirs of smallpox. Pacing off where the grave should be, he took Hiram's spade and drew a narrow rectangle in the dirt. When he handed the spade back, Hiram waved his free hand in front of him, and made knocking motions with his fist. He pointed at the ground. When the Rabbi hesitated, uncertain, Hiram repeated the motions in reverse, pointing to the earth, knocking in the air, tapping his hand on his chest.

"Yes," the Rabbi said, nodding, mouthing his words slowly to Hiram, not knowing if he could read lips. "The grave is for the Schul-Klopper. You'll dig his grave here."

Hiram nodded vigorously. The Rabbi replied with two nods of his own. He was glad to have communicated, though he was not sure he understood all that had been said.

The Lord speaks in many tongues, the Rabbi thought as he left the brothers. We are deaf mutes in front of Him. We cannot hear, neither can we reply. Yet we pity the obviously deaf and dumb among us — but not ourselves.

Restless, Guttle asked her sister Amelia if she would help pump water for the Sabbath. Seven years old, with bright blue eyes that were unusual in the lane, and pale brown hair, Amelia did a skip and jump, indicating she was eager and ready. She loved working the hand pump, watching the water spurt as if by magic from beneath the ground. Guttle lifted a large bucket from beside the stove, handed a kettle to the child and took a larger kettle herself.

Together they went down the stairs and through a narrow passage three houses down the lane that led to the space in the rear where the pumps grew like a stunted iron tree between the front and rear rows of tenements. Guttle set the bucket in the mud under the spout. Amelia, using both hands, primed the pump vigorously, until water began to fall from the spout and splash into the bucket.

When it was almost full, Guttle, straining, lifted the heavy bucket away from the spout and set a kettle in its place, and Amelia began to pump again. They needed enough water till Sunday; pumping on the Sabbath would violate the day of rest.

"Will you dance with me tomorrow night?" Amelia asked as she pumped.

"I don't think there will be dancing this week."

"But there's always dancing on Saturday night."

"The Schul-Klopper died today. I don't think the men will bring out their fiddles. It wouldn't be appropriate."

The child stopped pumping as the kettle overflowed. Guttle replaced it with the smaller one.

"Didn't the Schul-Klopper go to heaven?" Amelia asked.

"I'm sure he did. He was a devout man."

"Isn't going to heaven good? Shouldn't people be happy for him?"

"That's a good thought. But grown-ups don't seem to look at it that way."

The child stopped pumping. The water had filled the second kettle.

"I've got an idea," Guttle said. "Why don't we dance now?"

"Here? People might see."

"They always see in the lane." She took the child's hands in hers, and led her a few metres from the pump, to where the ground was dry.

"There isn't any music."

"Listen to the music in your head."

Humming, Guttle began to turn her sister in a slow dance. Amelia heard her inner music, danced more rapidly, causing Guttle to spin. Guttle was hearing a waltz; the child seemed to hear a polka.

"Swing me, now!" Amelia said, and as she ran in a rapid circle around Guttle she lifted her legs off the ground and their arms stretched taut. Guttle, whirling in place, spun her about, the child's legs extended full out under her green dress, her hair flying behind her. Around and around she swung, her feet inches off the ground, till her arms tired and she let her legs sink and dragged the toes of her scuffed and muddy shoes, and stumbled to a stop. The grinning faces of both sisters were flushed. Wiping perspiration from her

forehead, slightly dizzy, Guttle stepped backwards, and nearly bumped into Eva Hess, the rag picker's wife, who put a hand forward to prevent a collision, and placed an empty kettle on the ground.

"Looks as if you were going around in circles, Amelia," the slim young mother said.

"That's what Jews do."

"Why do you say that?"

"If we went in a straight line, we'd bump into a wall."

Guttle looked at Eva, but spoke to Amelia. "Who told you that, Ami?"

"Nobody told me. It's obvious."

Eva looked at the child. "The lane is a cruel teacher."

Climbing the stairs, Guttle felt confident she would not lay awake that night thinking of the Schul-Klopper's body. She had seen a body before, when her brother Joseph had taken ill and died; she'd been nine at the time, and Joseph four. But Amelia's picture of Jews walking in circles, exhausting circles with no end in sight, was an image new to her. A weary carousel, without color or destination — already it turned and turned before her eyes.

The Origin of Sorrow

Full book available in print and as an
http://www.combustoica.com/sorrow.php