

# **HITLER IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

*A non-kosher story*

**Jacobo Schifter Sikora**

## INTRODUCTION

“The Sikoras are dying out!” I shouted as I awoke. “The Sikoras are dying out!”

The long dream had started in the Jewish cemetery. The graves of my maternal relatives seemed to be going up everywhere, two or three under construction while the cement was still fresh on the others, like a poorly planned but teeming slum of the dead. While the Schifters, my father's family, were reproducing like yeast, my mother's side was experiencing a population implosion. Before long, there would be more of us within the cemetery's brick walls than out.

Hector asked me to calm down. “Stop bringing the house down with your shouting,” he said. “There are still some relatives of your mother left. It's true that some of them are a little mentally defective, but there are others who can keep the species alive.”

“You mean I had a nightmare?” I asked.

“Another one,” he said, referring to the dreams I had been having all week. “I guess you won't be able to go to sleep right away. So,” he added without much enthusiasm, “why don't you tell me your dream? It might help you to settle down.”

San José's Jewish cemetery is located in a southwestern district of Costa Rica's capital, behind the much larger Catholic cemetery. The property was bought on April 19, 1931; my grandfather, David Sikora, was one of the promoters of the project. In one of the early dreams in the series, I saw him signing a check and handing it over to the seller in the name of the few Jews then living in the country. “I intend to have my wife join me here,” he told the seller, “and I want a plot for her. If I have to strangle her one day, I don't want her buried in the streets like a dog.”

On October 9, 1932, the first burial took place. My grandfather was thrilled. “Didn't I tell you that it was good to think ahead?” he said to the other members of the *Chevra Kiddushe*, the religious board that managed the cemetery and made sure that the dead were buried according to prescribed rituals. “We already have our first tenant.”

“The man's lucky,” said Don José, a fellow Jew. “He bought this plot dirt cheap.”

“Yes, sir,” said my grandfather. “Just imagine what it's going to cost to live here in fifty years.”

In another dream, I had seen myself in the present, entering the cemetery alone. Over the decades, the population of the graveyard had indeed grown. Hundreds were there, including

my mother, who had died on October 2, 1985. I had visited the cemetery to look at the tombstones and verify the birthplaces of my ancestors for a novel I intended to write.

“But you don't write fiction,” Hector had pointed out when I told him that particular dream.

“In the dream I did.”

When I entered the cemetery, the first thing I saw was a marble and cement monument, financed by a group called *Yad Vashem*, which stands for “Commemoration of the Holocaust” in Hebrew. The monument described itself immodestly as the first of its kind in the Americas and its slogan was “Remembering is our duty! Never again, our cry!” Two columns tried but failed to uplift the spirit; one was decorated with the Star of David, the other with a nondescript rhomboidal shape, its symbolism perhaps best left unexplored.

“Does such a thing really exist?” asked Hector.

“It most certainly does and it's so ugly that it belongs in a nightmare.”

Next to the monument, a small washbasin allowed visitors to wash their hands before leaving the cemetery, since visiting the place of the dead, like menstruation, required ritual cleansing. A sort of vase, full of small stones to be placed on the grave markers, had been donated, if I remembered correctly, by Masha Scharf, née Teitelbaum. The graves themselves were arranged more or less chronologically. The oldest ones, to the right, were easy to recognize because of the frequent fallen-tree motif in their carvings, a symbol of prematurely interrupted lives and the unpretentious use of cement instead of marble. The names of the dead on some of the oldest tombstones were no longer legible, their occupants bereft of even this modest form of immortality. In the older part of the cemetery, some families had made reservations, so to speak, buying several plots near one another so that their relatives, even those who would not die for many decades still, could all find eternal rest together. That had not been the case with my grandparents. My grandmother used to warn us: “I'll come back to haunt you and pull you by your toes when you're sleeping if you ever bury me next to that man.”

During the 1970s, a competitive spirit began to guide the design and particularly the grandiosity, of each tomb: a sort of arms race, except for the fact that everyone was dead to begin with, instead of being a potential victim. The tombs, no longer content to remain close to the ground, started growing higher, vaguely reminding one of New York City's early 20<sup>th</sup> century skyscrapers, the oldest of which, the tallest of their day, were soon dwarfed by newer and ever taller buildings. Cemetery visitors started losing their way, unfamiliar with the changing landscape. Plants no longer exposed to the sun except for a few hours each day started withering. “Moishele,” someone might ask a friend, “can't you make that Star of David a little smaller so I can plant some roses? Can't you see that your mother's tomb is so high that no light ever shines on my grandmother's?” Others would complain that some of their departed, separated even after the death of both because of the unavailability of plots

next to each other, could no longer talk to each other. “Yudko, your father's grave has a *menorah*<sup>1</sup> so high that my father, who is behind it, can't communicate with my mother.” Yudko would reply with a question, in the time-honored Jewish tradition: “If they never talked to each other when they were alive, why do you want them to start talking now?” The debate became so acrimonious that a woman known for her wisdom offered a Solomonic solution: ban any tomb higher than five feet. Since the new rule would not enter into force until the following year, to accommodate those who had already commissioned a given design at great expense, some wags suggested that several of the oldest members of the community hastened to die before the deadline so they would not have to live – if that is the right word – in cramped quarters.

“Did that put an end to the problem?” Hector had asked, stifling a yawn.

“No,” I said. The new rule, like the proletarian revolution in Russia that so interested my poor grandmother, did not bring about social equality. If encroachment into the heavens was no longer allowed, expansion would now be horizontal, with thicker slabs and fancier finishes. The plainer ones were all cement. Others combined cement and floor tiles. Many used a combination of cement and marble. But the largest and most luxurious ones were completely covered in marble or, what was even more fashionable, blue granite. Even among the fancy ones there was social distinction depending on the provenance of the stones used. The best ones came from Italy. The middle class had to settle for a Brazilian material of inferior quality, while the poor put up with, God help them, Guatemalan marble. Some of the tombs were so luxurious that they attracted petty thieves, eager to run away with anything valuable they could prize off. But that was not the worst kind of aggression. Sometimes the neighbors would throw stones over the brick walls when a funeral was underway, to remind the Jews that even in death they would find no peace.

For those who could not afford fancy building materials, the epitaphs on the tombstones provided some compensation. “Thou was the princess of our home,” read one in Spanish and Hebrew. The inscription next door raised the stakes: “To the queen of our happiness.” A variation on that theme was more precise: “To the tsarina of our joys.” Men, for some reason, were never princes, kings or tsars; they were “righteous,” “loving,” “just,” or “wise.” One inscription, ambiguous because it was unclear whether it should be read as a description of the departed or a post-mortem admonition, read: “The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increaseth understanding. (Proverbs 16:21).”

In that dream, I remembered what my mother had once said to me during a visit to the cemetery. “Even the most *ganefim*<sup>2</sup> have epitaphs that proclaim their rectitude,” she noted. “But mother,” I said, scoring one for gender equity, “there are also a lot of *kurvehs*<sup>3</sup> who are described as saints.” My mother, Elena, ignored my comment and laughed at Don Abraham's tomb. His wife had demanded that the inscription describe him as the wisest man on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Candelabrum

<sup>2</sup> Thieves

<sup>3</sup> Easy women

“And all the damned fool knew was how to write checks,” she said. I retaliated by pointing to Dona Mishke's tomb. To call her short would have almost been an understatement and yet there she was, described as “the dove that flies the highest.” Elena responded by pointing out Mr Guasesteyn's tomb. The inscription spoke of him as “a generous soul,” whereas everyone knew that his *métier* was exploiting financially troubled fellow Jews, buying him or her out when their businesses were on shaky ground. One of his specialties was taking over businesses whose owners were at death's door and not paying the heirs.

In my nightmare, the poor, the ever-present poor, had their own ways of getting even. One cannot take flowers to a Jewish cemetery, but nobody ever said anything against planting a few bushes. On Dona Sarah's tomb, the daisies were as profuse as if they were being taken in a truck to market. Rachel's had so many rosebushes that they were considered a public hazard. “Miriam,” said a visitor, “I've just impaled my arm on your thorns. You can't walk in peace around here with that jungle you've planted.” Competition in the gardening division even led some to theft. “They say Samuel is so tightfisted that he steals his neighbor's daisies to plant them on his father's grave,” some would say. The rivalry soon extended to tree planting. Don Rogelio planted some pines. Herman, his neighbor, not one to be outdone, planted some beautiful fichus trees. What he did not know was that this species grows enormous roots and pretty soon his departed wife and several other occupants were inadvertently disinterred. And of course the birds perching on the many branches did not exactly help to keep the fine marble slabs clean. The wise woman who lay next to my grandfather suggested that a regulation be passed to ban the planting of more trees.

“Did that put an end to the problems?” my friend asked.

“No, competition sprang up in another quarter,” I said.

The more numerous families had a clear advantage in their reproductive force. When someone died, family members arrived in droves, regardless of how close they had been to the departed. Nobody could compete with the Rubipleins: like mushrooms, they seemed to reproduce by spontaneous generation. Their funerals were as crowded as those of great statesmen or popular entertainers, the cemetery overflowing with mourners.

“When you see such a packed funeral,” Dona Ruth would say, “it's to die for.”

The mortals who had less aggressive genes would compensate by employing social or economic pressures. If someone had amassed a reasonable fortune, hundreds of debtors could be called upon to attend the funeral or settle their debts. “Who was Dona Menche?” I heard someone ask. “Why, the grandmother of Golcha, your grandmother's cousin. If you didn't know her, why did you come?”

“I owe money to her son.”

For one without such means of persuasion, a final strategy remained: to attend everyone's funeral, in the hope that the relatives of the departed would reciprocate when the time finally came for one's own reversion to dust and ashes. Dona Perla, a friend of my grandmother, looked forward to a well-attended funeral, since she had not missed one in four decades. So terrified was she of alienating potential mourners at her own funeral that if someone died while she was on vacation, she would rush back into town, even from abroad. At the risk of acquiring a reputation as a bird of bad omen, she would call the relatives of the sick to plan her agenda. "Do you think I can go to Puntarenas?" she would ask solicitously about her plans to visit a seaside resort. "Of course," her friend would reply, "Lupita still has a week to live."

The most haunting fear was not merely the lack of a decent turnout, but far worse, a lack of quorum. The Jewish faith required a *minyan*, a minimum of ten men, for the funeral to take place. Women did not count, of course. Some families had to suffer the anguish, in the very middle of a funeral, of trying to find a man, any man, when things ground to a halt. "How many dicks have we got?" an enraged feminist asked in my dream, upset that in spite of thirty women being present, the proceedings could not begin because only seven men had turned up. "We need six *baitzim*<sup>4</sup>," said her sister. The poor woman had to rush to a payphone to call three nephews who had just turned thirteen and therefore qualified. "If you don't show up right now at the cemetery," she shouted into the phone, "you won't be left with a single ball among the three of you to make a *minyan*!"

Although I had been looking down upon such silly games of one-upmanship, in tonight's dream I got caught up in one. It is the Jewish custom, when visiting the dead, to leave a pebble atop the gravestone. Nobody knows how the ritual started. Some claim that it began during Biblical times, when the pebbles could be used to help build the crypt. At some point they stopped having any practical use, except as a memento. In my dream, however, the ritual served as an excuse for another arms race, since some gravestones did not have a single pebble, while other ones had so many that it could only be explained as the result of a suspiciously large number of visits.

The gravedigger – not a Jew but a *Tico*, a Costa Rican with a beer belly and strong sun-burned arms – told me that the gravestones that had no pebbles belonged to people who had no living relatives or whose families had forgotten them. "Others were not from Costa Rica but died here during a trip, far away from their loved ones," he said and then added slyly, "Some relatives simply cannot bring themselves to visit the cemetery, or they think they're too busy. I personally visit my poor little mother's grave every other Sunday, weather permitting, but then I'm a Catholic, you know.... I don't think I've seen you around here very often, have I?" I chose to ignore this comment. What the digger had said accounted for the gravestones that had no pebbles, but what about the ones with a surfeit? "Is it true what they say," I asked him, "about you getting paid to put pebbles on some of the tombs so the

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<sup>4</sup> Testicles (literally, eggs)

relatives don't have to visit the cemetery every month?" The man scratched his beer belly, grinned and said, "One tries to be of service. It is one's Christian duty."

"What sort of a sick brain could think that a humble worker would try to profit from people's pain?" asked Hector. "I really think you should talk this over with your therapist."

In the dream, I decided to even out the competition so that my mother would not be in the lowest percentile, pebble-wise. But I got lost and could not find her grave, although I walked up down among the gravestones. I wondered if my mother, annoyed at my infrequent visits, had decided to move house, leaving no return address. In desperation, I reluctantly enrolled the gravedigger in my search in spite of his persistent grin, which seemed to suggest that some people visit their loved ones so seldom that they forget even the whereabouts of their graves. I finally apologized to Elena in my mind. "If I have not visited you more often, it's because it still hurts to know that you are dead," I said under my breath.

As is the way in dreams, I found the grave immediately. "You mustn't forget to write about how your mother punished you by hiding herself from you," the gravedigger said, laughing and scratching his belly as he walked away.

The gravestone had only two pebbles. I deposited twenty more, pilfered from nearby markers. It was cheating, I suppose, but at least it would uphold the tarnished honor of the Sikoras. While I did so, I paid attention to the two original ones and noticed that one of them – not the one I had left during my last visit – was blue, with a red triangle in the middle. Somebody had taken the trouble to paint it. I looked for the gravedigger and asked him if knew who had left the colored pebble. The man asked me to please take it away. "Otherwise, others will start competing with brighter colors and before you know it this place will look like a fast-food restaurant's playground," he said. "That pebble was brought by a gentleman who always comes on the first Monday of every month at two o'clock. He always brings a different one, not like some people I could mention who pick them up off the street."

I ignored his obvious retaliation for my earlier comments about his reputed sources of extra income and I asked him what the man looked like. "Oh, I don't know," said the gravedigger. "Tall, distinguished-looking, maybe 75 years old, white hair. Does that ring a bell?"

I had to admit that the description did not fit any of her living relatives. "Well, he's no ghost," the gravedigger said. "That pebble's pretty solid."

I ventured a guess. "Elena – that's my mother – founded an organization to fight cancer. Maybe they helped him and he's still grateful."

"Listen, young man," said the gravedigger. "I don't know who that gentleman is, but I've been working in this cemetery for more than thirty years and if there's something I can tell you, it's who he is not. He's not a grateful acquaintance and he sure as hell is not just a 'friend

of the family', if you know what I mean.” He grinned again, a habit I could have done without.

Nothing, I vowed to myself, would keep me from being there on the date of the next visit by the gentleman of the colored pebbles. Looking at my watch, as is often the way in dreams, I realized that the day was Monday, that it was Monday the third and that it would be two o'clock in a few minutes. I went away a few paces, so that I could watch the arrival of this mysterious visitor without revealing that he was being observed.

“That's a pretty long dream,” said Hector, apparently despairing of going back to sleep anytime soon. “It makes *Gone with the Wind* look like a short film.”

“There's more,” I warned him.

A man who fit the gravedigger's description to a T arrived at two o'clock sharp, as if the dead should not be kept waiting. I watched him take out a colored pebble from his pocket, kiss it and deposit it on my mother's grave. While I was torn between respect for his privacy and the urgent desire to find out who he was, my curiosity won out. “Excuse me, sir,” I said, approaching him. “I am a son of Elena and I was told about your visits. I am very impressed by your devotion and I just want to thank you for your lovely gesture.”

“You startled me,” he said, his Spanish tinted by a northern-European accent, his eyes pleasantly blue. I noticed that he was also looking deeply into mine, as if we were two oculists.

“My name is Carlos,” he said. “I was a friend of your mother and I like to visit her. Would you care for some coffee?” I mumbled something incoherent about not wanting to take up too much of his time, but he insisted and soon led me to a waiting Mercedes Benz driven by a chauffeur.

That he was rich was plain to see. A Mercedes Benz in Costa Rica is worth a fortune and Rohrmoser, a Western suburb of San José where he lived, is not a place where real estate comes cheap. His white two-story house, emphatically modern with its straight lines and large dark mirrors, could be described only as ostentatious in a tastefully understated way. Finally hearing his well-known surname, I realized that he was German and had made his fortune with a string of clothing stores and private medical clinics.

“Please come in, Jacobo; this is your home,” said Yadira, his wife, giving me a thorough inspection. The living room was large enough to feel spacious in spite of the black leather couches, the glass-and-mahogany coffee tables and the dark cabinets filled with exquisite vases and a collection of colored crystal wineglasses from Czechoslovakia and Krakow that revealed his exquisite taste. The walls were decorated with modernist paintings, some by famous painters from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century like Georges Braque, Paul Klee, Stuart Davis and Marsen Hartley.



“They're good pictures,” I said, “but I don't care for modernism.”

Without any prompting from him, I launched into a tirade against modernity.

“It left us with the worst universal ideas ever,” I said, “like nationalism, psychiatry, modern jails, sexual education, Nazism and Stalinism, the modern State, the concentration camps. Modern art, with its exploration of perception and its limits, strikes me as useless.”

Don Carlos disagreed. He believed in the potential of reason and scientific development. He admitted that people had sometimes wandered off the right path, but there was no option but to “go forward.” He did agree, however, that Nazism had been the worst tragedy in history.

I apologized for criticizing the paintings. “I'm a disenchanting postmodernist,” I said, “unable to believe in anything.” I had lost faith in my scientific discipline, history and above all in the possibility of publishing my research without engaging in self-censorship or provoking the rage of my contemporaries. But I confessed that I wanted to write a novel. My goal was to preserve the experiences of a generation of Jewish survivors, brave men and women whose breed was in danger of extinction. The new generations were a pale imitation.

“My mother was very independent, a feminist, a fighter,” I said, “while the new generation of Jewish girls only aspire to be chosen as cheerleaders in high school and later be elected Miss Dadeland in Miami. Ever since Elena died, they speak of her as a devoted wife and an upstanding member of the community, when in truth they could never bear her ideals of social justice and women's liberation. I want to write her story before the patriarchal dinosaurs at the Israelite Center manage to silence all dissent and make us believe that Hebrew women, those who could not vote until 1997 or lead in prayer to this day, were submissive from the start. My mother never accepted the submissiveness to the *baitsim* and I don't want them to score a victory now that she is gone.”

“That's a pretty passionate speech,” said Hector. “I had no idea you felt so strong about writing a novel.”

“I didn't either,” I said. “I don't, really. That was in the dream.”

“Yeah, right.”

I told Don Carlos that, much as I wanted to write the book, I had no idea how to go about doing it. “I feel paralyzed. I'd like to write a true story, but I don't have enough information. Besides, I've never written fiction.”

“Why bother describing what never happened, when reality is so magical, sometimes so hellish,” he said.

But I had to admit that I was not sure about my ability to describe even real events. A good novelist could set the scene so that others could visualize it clearly, bring characters to life with a few well-chosen strokes of the pen. Me? I could not even remember what color my shorts were. How could I describe a landscape, a city, or a person, if I was so unobservant that I sometimes wore shoes that didn't match? "One day," I told him, "when I was living in Chicago, I walked three blocks on freshly paved sidewalks. The only reason I noticed that I was leaving a trail of deep footprints in the wet cement was that the workers started cussing me out."

My host wanted to know what my objective was in trying to write the novel. "Do you want to make a contribution to the Jewish faith, to Israel, to the Hebrew people?" he asked. I had to admit that I was not clear on my purpose, that all I knew (perhaps echoing what the gravedigger had said back at the cemetery) was what it was *not* meant to be. My book was certainly not aimed at promoting the complaisance of the religious, the rabbis, the orthodox, the Zionists, those who would eat only kosher food.

"How can we the Jews still believe in God after Auschwitz?" I said, repeating my favorite rhetorical question.

I could not stand those who would not, for example, eat meat and cheese in the same meal, as if God, who was not brave enough to stop the gas chambers, would have the *chutzpah* to punish them for it. "I'd love to stand before God and have him tell me that I wasn't kosher and can't get into heaven," I said. "I'd look at him straight in the eye and tell him: 'You did not keep your promise to protect the Chosen People. Who gave you the right to judge me?' But I won't be meeting God. He burned in the ovens, went up in smoke."

"But there's the State of Israel," Don Carlos said.

"The Zionists," I said, "negotiated with the Nazis and played their own little selection game." I knew they had worked out a deal with Hitler to funnel Jewish confiscated wealth from Germany to Palestinian banks, precisely at a time when American Jews were for the boycott of Hitler's economy. When the Nazis still allowed Jews to leave for Palestine, the Zionists chose the ones they considered most 'fit.' I can imagine them saying, 'Let's fill this small quota of visas with ignorant Jews who know only how to plant potatoes. In Palestine, what do we want intellectuals for? Let's leave them in Germany.' When the news came out that Hitler intended to kill all the Jews, it didn't even get front-page coverage in Hebrew newspapers in Palestine. They thought a football match was more important. Now Israel has proclaimed itself heir to the Holocaust and the protector of all Jews. They just use it to promote nationalism. No, I don't want to write my story for any of them."

"Then who is the novel for?" asked Don Carlos. "For women, for witches and for queers," I said.

“You sound just like your grandmother,” he responded and reproached me for my breach of etiquette. After all, we hardly knew each other. He might have spent the War in Germany, helping to push the Jews into the cattle wagons. I did not know anything about him and here I was, exposing my deepest thoughts and feelings.

“I couldn't agree more with Don Carlos,” said Hector. “You're sometimes such a *schmuck*,<sup>5</sup> and shoot your mouth off, so I'm not surprised you do it even in dreams.”

I apologized to Don Carlos and then asked the Big Question. “Well, where were you during the War?”

“In a detention camp for people suspected of being Nazi sympathizers in the United States,” he said. I then remembered one of the photographs on a coffee table next to the vast couch where I sat. It showed a young man, shirtless, in what would have looked like the inside of a warehouse had it not been full of bunk beds.

“Was this -- ?” I began and he nodded. I noticed that he had been very handsome and dashing.

“So you knew my grandmother?” I asked. “I most certainly did!” he said with a smile. I did not know what to say. I did not dare to ask the Other Big Question. While I was considering how to phrase my inquiry with more diplomacy than I had displayed so far – the when, the how and the why – I looked at one of the paintings on the wall. It was a cubist picture. At first one noticed mostly triangles and globes, but one of the triangles, a yellow one, framed the face of a beautiful woman whose eyes looked strangely familiar to me. I suddenly felt as if I were looking into a mirror. “Is that ... Mom?” I asked in a small voice.

“Yes, it is. I had one of my fellow prisoners paint it for me. He needed money to buy drugs.” “Is that triangle around her face the same one you paint on the pebbles?”

“Yes!”

“Why did you change the color?”

“Because red is the color they used in the German concentration camps to identify the Germans who had opposed Nazism,” he said.

“Did you ... like each other?” I asked.

“Of course! We loved each other! But what made you think of that?”

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<sup>5</sup> Ass

“My mother hated the Nazis, but she never said a word against the Germans,” I said. “Three of her best friends were German.”

“I can't believe you had such an immoral dream,” said Hector. “Your own mother!”

“What do you want me to do? Censor my unconscious?”

In the dream, I could not help thinking that my mother's story was becoming more and more like *Romeo and Juliet*, or, perhaps more appropriately, *West Side Story*. He was Christian and German; she was Polish and Jewish. The families must have been opposed to the match; religion would not have allowed it. Since there was a need for a shrew, the role would fall to my grandmother Anita. The lovers would have had a favorite song, perhaps “Singing in the Rain,” given the rainstorm undoubtedly brewing in the horizon. They did not die in the end; in a concession to modernity, they only married the wrong person. In the case of my mother, at least, that was absolutely obvious. Hers had been an arranged marriage and my father had been the worst possible man for her.

“He isn't very bright,” my grandfather David used to tell my mother, “but with him you'll never starve.”

My father had been as close to me as the planet Pluto. If Elena had been involved with this charming fellow, I considered it an excellent choice. At least there had been one man she had loved.

A question had been bursting to come out of my mouth and now I blabbed it. “What about Elena's children?”

“Among the Sikoras,” said Don Carlos, “it has always been said: 'Have no doubts about the paternity of the first two children, but worry about the third.'”

“Now it turns out, according to this dream, that you're a bastard!” said Hector.

“And proud of it.”

My mother's friend was concerned about my turning my back on my people. He said that, according to the *Shoah*, the new generations had the obligation of “not granting Hitler a final victory.” Assimilation, loss of faith and indifference to the State of Israel were all ways of making him win. If I was to write a book about Elena, how could I possibly leave out her Judaism? He admitted that it might be hard to hear it from German lips, but he claimed that he had lived in torment ever since he had realized the enormity of the Holocaust.

“Nazism,” he said, “came close to erasing the Jewish people from the face of the earth and it is a moral imperative, both for the Jews and the Germans, to make sure it never happens again. In a sordid sort of way, our peoples were linked for all Eternity.”

In spite of his belief in modernity, my host detested the notion that a nation must be made up of people of the same race, same religion and same ideology and, he did not hesitate to add, same sexual orientation.

“The true wealth of states lies in their diversity and tolerance, not in their all going to Mass and to the football stadium,” he said.

I asked him once again if he had ever sympathized with Nazism and he said yes, at first, but he had become disillusioned with it in time, just around the time he met Elena.

“You're not lying to me?” I asked. “You're sure you didn't push a single old woman into the wagons?”

“No,” he said, “but like the rest of my generation, I abandoned her on the platform.”

I asked why he wanted me to support the State of Israel when, until recently, it did not allow gays to immigrate. “Can you imagine a nation founded in response to Nazism passing laws that it is a crime to love people of the same sex, while it was bombing civilian Arab villages? We did not learn a great deal from the Shoah if even today we Jews treat one another this way. And most of the Costa Rican Jewish Community, the same ones who experienced the Holocaust up close, treat us like dirt. I'll write for them the day they consider it a reason for *naches*<sup>6</sup> every time a *faigeleh*<sup>7</sup> is born.”

“I don't like groups who try to take advantage of the Shoah,” said Don Carlos. “Gay activists now use the extermination camps as a public-relations tool. Some have even had the gall to talk about a Gay 'holocaust,' as if there could be any comparison. The few thousand homosexuals who may have perished due to Nazism were a very small sector of the German gay movement. The others did not face any persecution.”

“What others?” I asked.

“The macho ones,” he said; “the ones who were Nazis.”

“What would you like me to do?” I asked Carlos.

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<sup>6</sup> Pride

<sup>7</sup> Homosexual

“Before you start writing, I'd like you to learn more about your history, more about your mother's story, which is also my own. I don't want you to do it like those cows in the Spanish saying: if they don't shit on the way in, they shit on the way out.”

He said all writing had a mission and mine could not be divorced from my people. He spoke of the “other Jewish tradition” that I seemed to ignore, that of the Talmud and the quest for justice. He was astounded by my ignorance of what he called “the most important Jewish book of all, more important even than the Bible.”

“I fail to understand how you could have embraced postmodernism without being aware of one of its most important sources: rabbinical literature.”

Don Carlos also felt that my “paralysis” as a writer was due to a struggle not between fiction and non-fiction but instead between going all over the world “like a real wandering Jew,” and finally growing some roots of my own.

“You, and by that I mean, you and your mother, have always become paralyzed when faced with the important decisions in life. She was paralyzed twice. One time was before leaving Poland and the other was in 1942. And how many times has it happened to you?”

“I don't know, Don Carlos, but if you keep on talking to me like that, you'll soon see another fit.”

The man was a Talmudic expert. He had obtained the Talmud, in a German translation, from a Jew who had been to his store and had sold it to him for a few dollars in order to pay for the boat trip for his wife, who had found temporary refuge in Spain. “When I met Elena I became interested in learning about the Jewish religion and I came very close to conversion. Although that didn't happen, this book remains for me an extraordinary source of wisdom, a cry for universal justice, which is at bottom what your mother always sought. I learned much from your grandfather, with whom I used to discuss the Talmud.”

“Hang on a minute,” I said. “Are you telling me Don David used to talk with you and accepted your being a friend of my mother?”

“At first there were a few problems,” he said, “but later on we became good friends and enjoyed discussing rabbinical lore.”

My *West Side Story* script was starting to unravel. In my mind, I had already prepared the scene of Carlos and Elena ready to elope, only to have my grandfather find them and shoot them both. Don Carlos would have been wounded, but not mortally since he was still evidently alive; my mother would also survive and from a back room you would have heard a lullaby.

“Well then,” I said, “I’m sure my grandmother must have been opposed to your friendship,” I said, to save the few remaining scraps of my far-from-original plot.

“Not at all,” he said. “Dona Anita did not like us discussing religion instead of Marxism and she did not like the fact that your grandfather had homosexual friends, but she never had any problems with me as such.”

“That can’t be!” I said. “We’ve all seen *Fiddler on the Roof* and we all know what happened to the third daughter. Don’t you come to me with that cute story about how they had no problem accepting you.”

“Your problem,” he said, “is that you consider yourself the national hero of the oppressed and as my American captors used to say, you don’t know shit.”

I could not reconcile what I was hearing with my image of Don David and Dona Anita, to whom I had never felt close because their Spanish was so poor and they seemed so old-fashioned, he praying and discussing the Talmud all day, she a common housewife who blamed him for all her suffering, possibly for all the suffering in the world. Where could they even have met any homosexuals? At the synagogue? In the family kitchen while beheading a chicken?

“Don’t tell me that my grandfather and the rabbi were a couple or I’ll faint,” I said. “Much less that Dona Anita would leave the chicken boiling in the pot to attend Communist meetings.” And now on top of it all, it turned out that my grandfather used to discuss the Talmud with a former Nazi. I felt like shouting at him, “*A lung un leber oyf der noz!*”<sup>8</sup>

“Don Carlos,” I said, “you’ve ruined my novel. Nobody’s going to be interested in an impossible love in which the lovers faced no obstacles whatsoever. Somebody’s got to die, commit suicide, or at least suffer on a grand scale. Besides, you’ve even brought faggots into the story and now no newspaper is going to print a review, especially not *La Nación*, which is jam-packed with queens but makes a taboo of printing anything that has to do with gays.”

My host burst out laughing. “Poor little Jacobo! You’ve lost your tacky little theme! It makes me want to cry. Besides, a book like the one you were contemplating would have been just another cliché. “*A klap fargeyt, a vort tsvey,*”<sup>9</sup> he added in perfect Yiddish. And who told you there were no obstacles?”

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<sup>8</sup> Literally, “Don’t imagine a lung and a liver in your nose” or “You are speaking nonsense”.

<sup>9</sup> A blow passes on, a spoken word lingers on

I had been feeling tempted to run out of the house, complaining that all those cubist paintings made me dizzy and shouting, “*Ahf meine sonim gezogt!*”<sup>10</sup> But Don Carlos' last words made me stay. However, he did not want to discuss personal matters just then.

“There'll be time for you to learn what I know about your mother,” he said. Instead, he wanted me to learn more about the Talmud, which brought to Judaism the possibility of contradictions, resistance and rebellion. Sometimes, he said, utterly contradictory interpretations could be found on the same page; minority views, instead of being repressed, were preserved for posterity.

“Notice that, when this law was approved, there was a dissenting minority opinion, which was also included.”

He also wanted me to note that, no matter how elevated was the topic under discussion, it always led to the ordinary, the everyday, to what others might consider trivial.

“As an historian, you must appreciate that the Talmud does not disregard what some might consider insignificant – the small stories of the minorities, the voices of the marginal.”

Don Carlos was also charmed by the playful use of language, by “the fascinating idea” that reality rose out of those words. “There is no awareness apart from the word; there is, therefore, no independent perception. We are all literary creations, built by language.” That is why he was so concerned about my objectives in writing the novel.

“Perhaps you will turn us all into monsters, force us to wander like *dybbukim* for all eternity.” If there was something I needed to learn from that great book, it was the wealth of possibilities in the lives of the characters.

“Your perceptions about your grandparents and about your fellow Jews, are a minuscule part of what they were, which is in itself a small part of what they might have been, of their potential. Why should we be afraid, when writing your novel, to discover what you did not expect? If you repress that, wouldn't you be yet another censor of dissident tales? Why don't you let the characters develop naturally, according to their potential, instead of forcing them into a straightjacket?”

“What do you want me to do?” I said. “Ask my characters how they would like to be portrayed? Hand out a questionnaire? '1. Who are you? [Fill in the blank.] 2. What would you like to be? 3. In case you have sex in my novel, select your preference: (a) sex with men, (b) sex with women, (c) sex with both, (d) sex with yourself, (e) sex with Mother Theresa.' The questionnaire could even take into account the dissenting opinion of the characters. 'If you disagree with the author's physical description of you, please describe yourself in 100

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<sup>10</sup> Let this happen to my enemies!



words or fewer.' Of course, these precautions offer no guarantee that my characters will be pleased with their roles. I can already see the headlines: 'Secondary character sues author over homosexual sex scenes, claims severe psychological trauma.'"

Don Carlos was not amused by my Talmudic caricature of an author's responsibility towards his characters. "If the novel is going to be the last refuge of dictatorship, it isn't worth it," he said. "If you want me to help, I should warn you that I will not give you the kind of material you would need to write a standard historical account. It is impossible to tell what actually happened with the information we have available. There are gaps, blanks that you will have to fill in by using your imagination. I have documents, to be sure; photographs, journals, letters, newspaper clippings and above all, memories; but you will have to weave them with your own memories and your own fantasies to write your novel. And you will have to claim it is a work of fiction, because a lot of this information cannot be presented factually. Some of the people involved are still alive, including relatives of mine. I cannot betray my own friends, even if they were the worst Nazis on the face of the Earth. I cannot betray my wife."

Don Carlos would have written the story himself, he said, but he had cancer and his days were numbered. At one point he thought the story would die with him. Now here was Elena's son in front of him, telling him he wanted to write a novel about his mother.

"You don't know how much I loved her," he said; "how much I love her still."

Don Carlos went away for a while and came back with a cardboard box. It was wrapped in blue, with a red triangle pasted on it. "Here is just the first installment," he said. "I suspect you will not see me again. I went to see my doctor on Friday. But on the first Monday of every month, at two o'clock, my chauffeur will deliver a package like this. It'll be done 'on Polish credit' or 'in Polish installments,' as they say here, so you don't forget about your heritage." We embraced.

"I never thought you would have been able to push an old lady into a train wagon," I said.

"I'm not sure I believe that story about the Sikoras and the third child, but I would have wanted it to be true," he said.

In my dream, I rushed home and opened the package. I saw myself sifting through letters, brittle yellow newspaper clippings and copious handwritten notes that, however tidy the script, were not necessarily chronological but seemed to follow some other ordering principle, perhaps Talmudic. I saw myself writing the novel, unable to wait until I had all the information, because I would have had to wait for years and the story had to be written, my memories supplementing the material provided posthumously by Don Carlos, the characters themselves demanding to be heard, guiding my fingers on the keyboard, refusing to cooperate even when I argued heatedly that this or that scene was exactly what the plot needed, telling me exactly where I could put the scene I had in mind. And every month, on the first Monday, at two o'clock precisely, the new "installment" of information showed me

that the characters were right, even if I would have gladly fired or even killed some of them, since murder is still the lawful prerogative of novelists and executioners. I decided that Don Carlos had been right: if novels were to be the last refuge of dictators, why bother writing them? As I looked at my completed manuscript on the desk, a gust of wind started blowing all the sheets out the window. Although I tried to grab at least a few, they were all soon gone, every page a relative, a Sikora and the wind, death taking them away.

“The Sikoras are dying out!” I shouted.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked Hector, certain that he would recommend my switching therapists immediately, preferably hiring four or five of them, since just that one dream would keep a single analyst busy for a decade or two, with little hope of success. And yet I must admit that I felt pride in the fertility of my unconscious. Coleridge, after all, must have bored every relative, friend and acquaintance of his, for months on end, with his feat of writing Xanadu in his sleep and all he had composed was a measly poem, of which he had forgotten the better part after a short interruption. Whereas I had written a whole novel in my dream and could remember every last scene, every character and every description of places in Poland I had never set eyes upon in real life. I could prove it, too, as I intended to demonstrate immediately by telling Hector the plot in profuse detail, even if it meant condemning us both to weeks of sleeplessness and myself to chronic hoarseness. But he had foiled my plan by going to sleep. I had no choice but to write the damn novel after all.

## I

Elena looked at the harbor and the vast transatlantic ship, an overbearing gray plateau that was going to take her away, she knew not where. In 1934, what notion could a Jewish girl have of a country called Costa Rica? It sounded to her like an exotic fruit or dessert. The girl knew that the place had been named by another traveler who was believed to also be Jewish and who, shortly after the time that the Sephardim were expelled from Spain four hundred years earlier, crossed the same ocean four centuries before in a much less overwhelming vessel.

The clouds over Hamburg were turning reddish brown, with small darker patches like ink-spots. She had never seen so much water in one place; she came from central Poland, far away from boats and from the sea. At 14, she was about to be saved from death, but she did not know it. She had lived in Długosiodło, a village half-an-hour away from Treblinka, one of the most efficient extermination camps during the Nazi era. A German train had allowed her to escape and now a German liner was about to take her away from the pulsating heart of the coming Holocaust.

The girl walked a few feet away from her mother and the other passengers, from the shouting dock laborers, from the cranes and trolleys and the bales of cargo that were still being loaded, to where it was a little quieter and she could see more of this fascinating immensity of water. She fancied that she could see her own reflection in the swirling eddies below the wharf. The face in the image in the shifting black mirror was that of another Elena, the one whom she would never be, the one who stayed at home and yet knew things about Elena's life that the girl herself did not know.

Ever since Elena was seven, poverty and the absence of a father had forced her to help her mother in the shop and to care for her brother and sister. David Sikora had gone to America in search of better prospects. Although Elena had heard legends about the fabulous wealth to be gained in the New World with little effort and discipline, she was not sure what form this wealth took. Some said that in America the streets were paved with gold, but her mother had explained it was only in the United States, not the rest of that remote continent.

“Where your father went,” she said, “I doubt the streets are paved with gold, or even silver or copper. Since he went away, the man has not sent me so much as a little paving stone.”

Długosiodło, between Warsaw and Białystok, was a lumber town. The only large structure was the Christian church, which she had never seen from the inside. On the outside it looked imposing enough. Its two tall towers of red brick had long arched windows and pyramidal black spires so pointy that they made her think of fairy-tale castles or witches' hats; in the center of the façade, a rose window was flanked by two other stained-glass arched windows, as if the church has aspired to become a gothic cathedral in its over ambitious youth. In the Polish village, or *shtetl*, Christians and Hebrews lived together but apart; although they had

economic relations and were sometimes even partners, they did not socialize. The Christians lived mostly in the neighboring countryside, in farms, while the urbanized Jews preferred to live in the center of the village. For the Christians, the Jews were the **Other**; their own shadows, everything they themselves were not supposed to be: competitive, materialistic and obscene, far from generous. Some considered the Jews idolaters, because they danced and worshipped rolls of paper; others called them stubborn, because they would not accept the obvious fact that Christ was the Messiah.

The Hebrews had their own prejudices. They denigrated the Polish peasants as ignorant, for not knowing how to read or write. Unlike the religion of Abraham and Moses, which emphasized the reading and discussion of the Holy Book and the many rabbinical commentaries thereof, Christianity seemed to promote the blind acceptance of dogma and—in its alliance with the wealthy classes—the continuing poverty and illiteracy of the peasants. The latter's ignorance, whatever the cause, made them blame the Jews whenever something went wrong. They believed that, to celebrate Passover, the Jews poured the blood of Christian children and that they had made a pact with the Devil to suck dry the wealth of the nation. In times of crisis, these beliefs encouraged pogroms. In normal times, however, the stereotypes did not prevent daily contact. The Polish peasant would buy his horses from the Hebrew seller and in return sell him wheat and potatoes. His wife would buy her clothes at the Jewish shop and sell the owner her ducks and chickens. For more than a thousand years, this arrangement had prevailed. Each was the other's other, but one that was familiar, known if not loved.

The houses in the village, wooden and painted in pastel colors, their roofs and fences made of the same material, surrounded the village square and the monument to a General, a Polish national hero who had killed countless Russians and Ukrainians and who still sat scowling on his rampant horse, ready to destroy all enemies of the Fatherland. The Poles, like the Jews, thought of themselves as a long-suffering nation; they used to compare their misfortunes. Before World War I, Poland had been annexed by neighboring Prussia, Austria, and Russia. The loss of independence during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century had been a hard blow to Polish nationalism and it promoted conflicts with the Hebrews. When Austrians granted Jews more rights than the Poles had ever done, the Poles resented the Jews' willingness to support Vienna's policies. On the Russian front, the situation was different. The Polish Jews who had fallen under the power of the Czars dreamed of greater freedom and fought alongside the Christians for the independence of what they considered – however provisionally, until the next expulsion – their land.

The Brums and Sikoras were small merchants whose two shops faced each other across the village square; one belonged to grandmother Rivke Malke and one to Helena's mother, Anita Brum. Inside, the merchandise was varied: it included kitchen utensils, decorative knickknacks and suitcases, always ready to be used by the owners themselves in the event of a pogrom. As was the custom among the wealthier Jewish families, the women worked while the men read the Talmud and studied the *Torah*<sup>11</sup>. In the *shtetl*<sup>12</sup>, the Jews could not aspire to

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<sup>11</sup> The five books of Moses

<sup>12</sup> Mostly Jewish town

title, political power, or an academic degree; the only status to which a family could aspire was having a rabbi or a Talmudic scholar in the home. The men would spend their days practicing their dialectical skills in the synagogue, while the women took care of more humdrum tasks such as securing the daily sustenance.

While Anita worked at the shop, Elena played the role of mother and father, caregiver and disciplinarian, to her brother, Samuel and her sister, Sarah. She also had to help with the bookkeeping and even tend to customers. Since the Brums and Sikoras sold mostly *shmates*<sup>13</sup> she learned early on to recognize the fears and inhibitions in clients that might lead to the loss of a sale and she used her powers of intuitive salesmanship to secure the deal.

“That yellow blouse looks divine on you,” she would say in perfect Polish.

The woman was at all not certain the color or cut became her at her age, but a child could not possibly lie: the garment must indeed suit her. The child was not so innocent, however. “The poor woman doesn’t realize,” she would think, “that in that blouse her tits look like cabbages!”

There was no electric light in the village, or even much awareness of the existence of the peculiar powers of electromagnetism. Transportation involved horse-pulled carts, often carrying timber headed for Warsaw or Białystok. In the winter, the lumbering wooden wheels kneaded the snow that shone so white on the roofs and the branches of trees, mixing it with the soil of the unpaved roads and producing a light-colored mud that splattered on the shoes of all passersby. The only establishment in the village intended for recreation was the tavern, which only the Christians visited and which was infamous for drunken brawls. In the summer, the richer Poles departed for their farms and country homes, leaving the village half-deserted. They were not much wealthier than the Jews, but since the girl could not leave the village, she had no way of knowing how they lived. A few of the Jews had more money than the rest, such as Magda, the butcher’s daughter, who ate much better, could afford beautiful dresses and did not have to work like Elena.

“It’s because her father is here,” her mother explained.

Elena would think then that a father was worth his weight in gold.

Their decrepit house always smelled damp. The rooms were small and lugubrious. For some reason, the windows faced the backyard where the corral and the outdoor privy stood. Since all the houses huddled next to one another, their chickens and those of the neighbors enjoyed a great deal of mutual intimacy.

“Elena, go get me a chicken for dinner,” Mother would say. “Try to pick a neighbor’s by mistake.”

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<sup>13</sup> Rags.

Excrement—human and avian—was collected only on Mondays; the man with the foul smelling cart took it away at night, shoveling when no one could see him. The stench was so strong that sometimes they could not sleep, victims of olfactory insomnia. In winter, the cold was so intense that one of the worst tortures in this vale of frozen tears was being the first to tuck into those icy bed sheets. Since they shared a bed, the two girls would dispute the privilege of not having to warm it.

“Sarah, I did your homework. Don't you think I deserve a warm bed?”

Samuel, as a boy only a couple of years away from his *bar mitzvah*, had the dubious privilege of his own room and bed, with no one to warm it. Whenever it rained, however, although leaks in the ceiling were profuse throughout the house, the holes in the roof over his bedroom were particularly large and he had to go back to sleeping with his sisters or face a downpour that would have forced him to build an ark and collect two of each kind of animal, male and female as He created them.

“Why do you complain about the holes in the roof?” Mother would say to Samuel, who fancied himself a scholar and romantic poet. “Didn't you say you love nature? Well, look at the moon and the stars through the holes in the roof!”

That was the end of the argument, for no *gelt* was ever available to pay for repairs. “I don't know why they complain about the leaks,” she would say. “Are they going to dissolve in a bit of water, as if they're made of sugar?”

Elena's fond memories of village life were few. But she enjoyed the summer walks into the nearby forest. Amid the tall evergreens, wild berry bushes proliferated; she loved filling her basket and taking the berries home so her mother could bake a pie. Her mother, however, would often eat them uncooked in large quantities, until indigestion set on.

“The only stuff that's free in Poland are these berries,” she would complain, “and they give me a belly-ache. Instead of bringing wild fruit and putting your mother's life at risk, why don't you go to Golde and bring a few eggs?”

Friday night dinners, in honor of the *Sabbath*, were also pleasant. Mother would unfurl a special tablecloth, light the candles and cook the best meal of the week, particularly *gefilte fish*, or fish cakes, that Elena loved. Aside from these few pleasures, everything else was *tzores*: sorrows.

The other Elena, the one who heard the story in the Hamburg harbor as if it were not hers, was aware that all memories are colored by later events. The way things end determines their interpretation. She felt guilty remembering even those few joys. They seemed to suggest that people who decided to stay in the village had been in the right, but she was sure, somehow, that they were not. The wind had started to blow.

Walking away from the edge of the pier, saying goodbye to her reflection in the water, it was as if she had been forced to leave early the funeral of the girl she would never be. Leaving a life behind is a kind of death, a road abandoned for another. Travelers know it well. Millions of possible actions lie at the bottom of the ocean, she would later think: the actions of those who left and never came back. To leave her reflection behind without even a small ritual felt like sacrilege to her. She threw a few breadcrumbs into the sea. "I'd rather leave you something to eat, instead of flowers," she said to her image.

But Jews never knew when things ended or began. Some said their martyrdom had started at the time of Abraham; others, at the time of Babylon or the Romans; others talked of the Christians. Elena was never certain of how the end of her village life began. Her "countrymen," as they called themselves, were always ready to pick up their belongings and leave; the question was how to manage it, in this day of nation-states and borders. Her mother had taken her to Warsaw to get some photographs taken and arrange for their passports.

"I need to have the papers ready, in case the bum who fathered you ever sends for us," she said.

In Poland, securing a passport was as complicated an ordeal as crossing the border with Germany. In the absence of a generous bribe, applicants were at the mercy of bureaucrats whose procedures seemed arbitrary except in one respect: the applicant's inevitable need to visit one government department after another, to wait endlessly, to be sent back because the necessary stamps had not been applied to the travel documents.

During these expeditions, Anita never lost an opportunity to complain to Elena about her marital sorrows. Her marriage had been a *shidduch*<sup>14</sup> since people did not marry for love but to survive.

"One looks for the man who can give us something to eat," Anita always said.

The marriage was Anita's second, not at all a common situation among Polish Jews. Anita asked the *shadchan*<sup>15</sup> for a good match this time, but she was disappointed.

"The bitch didn't look as hard as she should and got me the first man she found," she said. "Your father read the Talmud and she thought that it would be good enough for me. She said divorcées can't be choosers and I would have to pay her extra for finding me a husband. I would have been better off spending the money on a dress."

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<sup>14</sup> An arranged match.

<sup>15</sup> Matchmaker

Although her eldest daughter was her confidante, on that day Anita did not want Elena to come with her to the government offices.

“Stay at home,” she said, “because I’ve got a lot to do and you’ll be bored.”

“I don’t want to stay alone, Mommy,” Elena had cried. “Why don’t you take me?” Elena found it odd when her mother, before leaving on her errands, did her hair and surreptitiously put on some perfume.

Elena was left in an old house in the Warsaw ghetto that belonged to Aunt Fruncha, who used to rent rooms to her out-of-town relatives. That day, no one else was at home, because all the boarders were looking for a job in the Jewish shops. Not that the merchants were hiring; industrialization was wiping out small businesses and Jews had found only a niche in the consumer goods sector, which was the most fragile in economic downturns.

“It’s better to at least look for work than to stay at home doing nothing,” said a cousin before setting off, down to her last few pennies, on another job hunt.

Fruncha, who charged for room and board, always wished them all luck, since, as she reminded her relatives, they owed her three months in back rent. “*Az och un vay*<sup>16</sup> No one pays! I have to beg for the rent, as if I were asking them for a favor! You’ll be sorry when you find my putrefying corpse, a victim of starvation!”

The notion of children’s rights had not yet come to Poland. Minors were treated like little adults, who had to help with work and with household chores and who could be left to fend for themselves while grownups were busy elsewhere. But Elena had never been alone in another house, much less in a strange city. The premises were full of dark rooms and closed doors, behind which dwelt the ghosts of relatives who had died *meshugeh*, mad, *orehman*, in misery and abandonment, or by their own hand.

“Don’t go in there. We haven’t opened that door since my husband killed himself in there with a gun,” Aunt Fruncha had said. It made Elena wonder if the body, or at least the skeleton, was still in the room.

The only décor in the whole house was the menorah for the Sabbath and a mirror into which Elena now looked at her reflection, far steadier and clearer than that she would later see in the waters of the North Sea. Was she pretty? She would never know because, although she could look at mirrors, she was never able to see herself; it was always someone else, even then, who would stare into her eyes. Not that her beauty was a matter of taste. She was lovely. Her skin was clear, with just a tinge of olive. Her eyes, tender and intelligent, disconcerting sometimes, were loving and furious at the same time. Her mouth was sensual,

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<sup>16</sup> Tough Luck!



her nose long and symmetrical. The black hair was wavy and fine like silk. She would attract people's stares until the day of her death, but she was never aware of her own beauty.

“Mirrors don't tell the truth,” she would say. “They fool us, show us things as they are not. We cannot trust them.” Years later, a mirror would show her that she was wrong.

Elena's features were not common among Polish Jews. She had inherited them from her father, David. According to the family legends, the Sikoras came from Itil, capital of the Khazar Empire, a Jewish kingdom that disappeared from the map. According to some historians, due to landslides into the Caspian Sea, the remains of the city lie under the shifting waters. The Khazars descended, among others, from the Oguric Turks, who came from Central Asia. The kingdom enjoyed independence for 800 years, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Khazar Empire established an important commercial route between Asia and Europe, although this was not recorded in the history books. What made it stand out was that its rulers, in the year 740, converted to Judaism. The Kagan, their king, apparently chose this course as a way of neutralizing the pressures of his neighbors, the Byzantine Empire, which was Christian and the Muslim Caliphate. He was then able to play the role of a neutral mediator between the creeds.

According to a legend her father told, the Khazars became Jews in a fittingly Solomonic way. In letters written to Jasdai Ibn Shaprut, physician and minister to Abderam III, Caliph of Cordoba, the Khazar monarch reported that an angel had come to King Boulan, ruler of the Togarmi, their ancestors and brought word from the One True God that if he abandoned idolatry and worshipped Him, he and his people would triumph and prosper. But which of the three major monotheistic creeds was he to choose? Since the king was wise and was courted by both Christians and Muslims, he decided to hold a learned debate about which religion was the better one. However, the representatives of each faith defended his own at the expense of the others. In the end, the king went to the Muslim delegates and asked, “Which is a better religion, that of the Israelites or that of the Christians?”

“That of the Israelites is preferable,” said the cadí. He then talked to the Christian faithful and asked, “Which religion is better, that of the Muslims or that of the Israelites?”

“That of the Israelites,” said the priest.

The king then said, “You both admit that the religion of the Israelites is better and truer, so I choose the faith of Abraham.”

Anita was not very sure of the veracity of this legend. According to her version, the Khazar rulers were tired of war and conquest and wanted a faith that would provide them with the greatest ease and tranquility. The wise king went to the Muslims and asked them, “How do you treat your women?” “We buy them by the dozen and we keep them in a harem,” said the Muslim cadí. Then the king went to the Christians with the same question.

“Women are temptresses sent by the Devil. We put chastity belts on them, so they do not put horns on us.”

But the rabbi said: “We send them down to the shop so they can work while we spend all day discussing grave religious matters.” The choice was clear.

“Khazaria converted to Judaism and ever since we poor women have had to work hard while those good-for-nothing Turks loaf to their heart's content,” said Anita.

The history teacher confirmed that many Khazars had converted to Judaism, although the kingdom was tolerant of all three religions. With the loss of independence at the hands of the Russians, Khazars had to convert again or migrate. Many fled to the West, particularly to Poland, where they blended with Western Jews and lost their language, identity and customs, but not their faith. Nor did they lose their beauty, which made their women,(and possibly their men), all the rage in the courts of Byzantium and Baghdad.

Not that Elena was thinking about any of this while she wandered timidly through her aunt's house. In room after room, the armchairs and sofas were old and dark, as if they were sponges that could somehow suck in shadows, never to release one. The odd item of furniture might have been in good condition, but the upholstery of most was full of patches, when not rent outright. Some of the rips in the fabric seemed long enough to be able to swallow not only a comb but also a person. In the village, they used to say that armchairs would swallow children if they misbehaved. Elena never put her *toches*<sup>17</sup> on one; like many Jews, she never used the living-room furniture. Years later, she would think that suffering had reached such a point in Poland at that time that the furniture started swallowing families whole and, later, all her people. Maybe the Jews who had disappeared were still trapped in old sofas and chairs that are now decorating Christian living rooms. Rather than sit on an armchair, possibly hurting the children who had fallen in, she stood and looked at the pictures on the wall, mostly photographs of old relatives who frightened Elena with their long beards, dark clothes and sad eyes. Long afterward, a cousin would tell her that the faces of horror shown by the Polish Jews in those pictures were due to the novelty of the invention and its as-yet-unknown effects upon the captured soul. Perhaps, facing a blinding flash for the first time, they had a hunch of what would be their destiny.

The people in the photographs had adopted a solemn pose, if not downright rigid and brittle and the way they stared directly at the lens created in the viewer the impression of engaging in dialogue with them. One of the pictures was of her father and mother; they did not smile, nor did they hold hands nor touch in any other way.

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<sup>17</sup> Buttocks

Elena felt as if Anita were saying to her, “What are you staring at, you silly girl? Are you shocked by how young I look? It is the fault of this man that my life has been so unhappy. I have done nothing but work and age, while he had idled away, reading the Talmud.”

Her father defended himself. “If I'd had a chance to examine this shrew more carefully before consenting to the *shidduch*, I would have moved to Siberia or starved to death instead. Living with her has been as pleasant as getting a summons from the Holy Inquisition on a day when they were in a particularly bad mood.”

Dizzied by this imaginary exchange, Elena chose to look at the other photographs in the hope that they might be less antagonistic. One portrayed Samuel, the uncle who had committed suicide. He was attractive, with fleshy lips that seemed to smack with an unfulfilled and yet irresistible desire. “He killed himself when he realized that he could not get into the United States,” her aunt had told her.

“Why would he kill himself for a country?” Elena had asked.

“*Meshugener kop*,”<sup>18</sup> the aunt had muttered under her breath, before explaining that Samuel had a very dear friend who moved to Chicago. When he realized that he would not be able to rejoin his friend, he had shot himself. “You should know that there are men who become too fond of other men and fortunately leave us women in peace,” she said. “Those who kill themselves must be buried far away from their loved ones, as punishment, outside the cemetery wall. Their souls will never know rest.”

The uncle now seemed to sneer at this version of events. “Yes, I did kill myself. But there's one thing that damn fool of a wife didn't tell you. I did it because I was fed up with her and the whole family. My only hope was to get a visa and the Americans refused to give me one. Now I wander this filthy house like a *dybbuk*<sup>19</sup>, hearing Fruncha complaining all the time. Isn't that punishment enough for a thousand sins?”

“What you're not saying is that you killed yourself for love,” said the photograph of a fat woman whose terrified face reminded Elena of her favorite painting, *The Bulgars Fleeing from the Vaccine*, of unknown author. “You don't have to blame my sister Fruncha for your tragedy. It was your fault, for being a degenerate.”

A shout came from the photograph of Samuel's parents. “*Oy Gevalt!*”<sup>20</sup> How can a relative throw filth at a mother's finest blossom? Samuel was the most saintly and good son that I had. How dare you tell family indiscretions to a stranger?”

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<sup>18</sup> Crazy

<sup>19</sup> Wondering Spirit

<sup>20</sup> What a calamity!

The father had to intervene. “Shmulke,” he said, addressing Samuel in Yiddish, “Why don't you stop fighting with your sister-in-law. You know I never approved of your relationship, or your way of being. But now we are all dead, so why mortify each other?”

“But Father,” said Samuel, “you never gave a damn about my life. You always preferred my sisters. And now you come and tell me off? If I loved Lazarus, it was because he was everything to me that you were not.”

“Oy! Now it turns out that it was your father's fault that you were the way you were,” said the sister-in-law. “You should be ashamed of yourself. You should beg for forgiveness.”

Samuel, in desperation, turned to Elena. “Do you think I should repent of my love for Lazarus, when it was the most beautiful thing I ever had in my life?”

“No, Samuel. If you loved him, I think you did the right thing,” the child said.

Elena fled the quarreling photographs and sought refuge in the kitchen, the least interesting room in the house for any wandering ghosts, since they no longer needed to eat. However, a scratching sound revealed that she was not alone and with chattering teeth she wondered if the *dybbuk* would try to steal her body. Wasn't she going to America, the place Samuel had dreamed of, the place where his lover lived? What would happen to her, if evicted from her body by a dead uncle? Would she be forced to remain in this gloomy house forever, wandering the halls, arguing with old photographs?

An enormous rat jumped from the cupboard and fell on her. Elena collapsed on the floor, unable to rise because her legs would not respond, feeling the rat crawling over her a few times in search of breadcrumbs.

Although the economy was in bad shape, as shown by the many occupants of the house who were out of work, people had not stopped multiplying and, with them, waste and rodents. In every home there were as many rats as humans, if not more. In Elena's town, some said that every Hebrew soul in this land of misery has a rat as companion; surely this was Samuel's, she thought.

Elena was able to see the impact of reproduction, something she had learned from her *moreh*<sup>21</sup>. The teacher had explained to her that since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European cities had experienced unparalleled demographic growth. Jews, who had become urbanized around that time, benefited from this development. The high birthrate could be seen from the fact that the Jewish population had grown fivefold in a single century.

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<sup>21</sup> Teacher

The rats had also proliferated and she had become her latest victim. Their powers of adaptation were phenomenal. They did not care about the heat or the cold. When there was no bread in the pantry, they ate timber, books and paintings. Sometimes, like Herod, they devoured small children. In other times, they attacked in packs, in what came to be known as pogroms. When they were hungry, their ferocity exceeded Goliath's. However, the Jews had lost their Davids and had no way of defending themselves.

Although several doctors examined her over the next two years, no one was able to find out the cause of the paralysis.

“She must have had a great fright that prompted an attack of hysteria,” said one.

“If you have the money, take her to Warsaw to see Dr. Wallenstein; he cures using hypnosis,” another recommended.

Some tried to make her regain her sensations with massage, others with needles. She was finally cured when a physician experimented on her with a new method, developed in New York, involving electrical discharges. The girl did not know if what healed her was the new invention or the stories she heard from the doctor about life in America.

“The rats are under control in New York,” the physician said. “Unlike in Europe, they live in the sewers and the subway tunnels. When they come out, the public is more aware of the need to exterminate them, for hygienic reasons.”

Later, Elena would write in her diary:

*My paralysis had to do with the coming trip. I knew that my mother was downtown, arranging the paperwork for us to leave. Perhaps my reaction was to show my apprehension by becoming immobilized. What I never imagined was that soon all our people would be similarly paralyzed.*

*Nacht falt tsu.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Night fell

## II

The paralysis was corrected just in time. Elena, like the rest of her generation, was caught between two worlds, unable to live fully in either one. Her Hebrew community was immersed in a series of millenary traditions, some of them opposed to the modern world. Rabbinical thinking had not stopped going in circles since the Middle Ages, while Christian thinking had been updated since the Enlightenment. Science, industry and technology were of increasing importance, but most Jews did not practice any of them. Marriages were still being arranged, while romantic love conquered the souls of the Christians. Food was ruled by ancient dietary laws, some of them out of touch with the new awareness of hygiene and the role of microbes and bacteria. Social life was divided by gender, at a time when integration was growing in Europe. Jewish girls and boys, for instance, were treated as if they belonged to different races: the benefits went to the latter, domestic obligations to the former. In a country engaged in modernization, this arrangement became increasingly intolerable. Hebrew women participated in all aspects of economic and social life and did not want to be left out when it came to education. Moreover, religion told the Israelites that they were the Chosen People, while reality showed them to be impoverished, marginalized and old-fashioned. They had been left behind, content with pre-Capitalist occupations on their way to extinction. Rabbis defended community union above everything, while capitalism placed the rich and the poor, regardless of race or religion, in opposite classes. Civilized Poland was also ferociously antidemocratic and anti-Semitic. The few crumbs of “advanced” thinking flung at the Jews were contaminated with the deepest hate. The host country, like the evil stepmother in the *Cinderella* fairy tale, did not want them. No matter how European they tried to appear, even more nationalistic than natives, to the Poles they would always be enemies. The “Enlightenment” in Poland came in wolf’s clothing; it was not meant to benefit them. Elena’s people did not know what step to take. Some were immobilized by fear, while others fled in time.

The girl attended two schools, and at each she learned a different reality. In the morning she attended *cheder*<sup>23</sup>, run by the town’s rabbi and a *moreh* of Jewish history. Girls were not welcome and they had not been for several millennia: Rabbis kept them ignorant. But Anita had decided to fight for Elena’s admission.

At first, the rabbi rejected the notion outright.

“The Talmud says that a woman is exempt from education,” he said.

But Elena’s mother was not one to give up easily. “If you don’t let her in, I’ll tell everyone that you and my brother Samuel used to sleep together,” she said.

“I’ll let her participate as an invited guest, not a full participant, but let’s not make too much noise about it. Otherwise, other girls will want to participate and we’d have a revolution on our hands.”

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<sup>23</sup> Jewish Elementary School

Her mother later told Elena, “You have as much right to learn as anyone else. If any boy says something nasty to you, kick him in the *baitzim*.”

The school was only a dark room in the rabbi's house, with long benches and a soul that was harder than the soul of Pharaoh. Her *moreh* had a white beard and wore an invariably black Caftan. “He was a very religious man, wise like no one and a scholar of the labyrinths of the Talmud,” she would write later in her journal. But she never liked him. “He has a prohibition for everything and he never gives me a good reason.” She would often ask him where in the *Torah* it said that women should not be educated.

“Nowhere in particular,” the rabbi replied, “but where have you read that Sarah or Rebecca went to school?”

In the afternoons, Elena attended public school. Over more than 300 students attended the facilities. The building was wide and had twenty classrooms. Its chairs and chalkboards were much better than the ones in the *cheder*. Teaching was carried out in Polish. They studied everything, from history to grammar, not to mention mathematics, which she enjoyed. Teachers were more modern, to the extent that they sought causes for any given effect, instead of going back to laws written several thousand years ago. But that did not preserve them from fanaticism. The history teacher accused the Jews of having assisted Germany in annexing Poland. “When they invaded us, they came from Germany,” he said. “They speak similar languages and their goal is to turn us into slaves.”

At the *cheder*, the history teacher said it was not so. Most of the Hebrews, he claimed, had been invited into Poland. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the spiritual and demographic center of Judaism had shifted from Western to Eastern Europe, he said. In the 1930s, three million Jews turned Poland into the world's center for Jews. The teacher explained that the invitation came about in the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Prince Popiel, the sovereign of Poland, died. His subjects gathered in Krushvica, the old capital, to elect his successor. But the disputes were acrimonious and no consensus could be found. As a way of finishing the debate, the participants agreed to proclaim as king the first man to walk into the village. It turned out to be Abraham Projovnik, a Jew. Soon captured by the security forces, he was forcibly crowned as king of the Christians. He rejected the honor and told them that if they were going to choose a ruler, they should consider a wise Pole named Piast.” Nevertheless, he was let to stay and bring his fellow Jews.

The child's mother, as always, had a different version. Projovnik did not want to become king of the Christian Poles because the kingdom was in serious debt and its trade balance did not look good at the moment. “I have enough *tzores*,”<sup>24</sup> he thought. Accordingly, he looked for the biggest fool of all to take over the job. “Since all wise men, including your father, are more concerned with the afterlife than with the here and now, it turned out that he was the greatest fool of all, so he had to accept the position,” her mother told her.

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<sup>24</sup> Miseries

Elena knew that not all Polish Jews had come from Germany, as attested by her own olive skin and dark hair, like those of the other Sikoras who claimed to be Khazars. However, it was equally plain that the ancestors of most of the Hebrews in Poland had migrated from Germanic territory. Her teacher of Jewish history attributed the resettlement to the growing anti-Semitism promoted from the Crusades onward, well into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Another explanation was the need in Poland and other Eastern European nations for tradesmen and artisans to contribute to economic development. The incorporation of Poland into the Catholic Church,” explained the teacher, “had increased trade with the West, attracting a great number of merchants, many of them Jewish.

The history teacher at the Christian school had another interpretation. Poland's poor economic development had forced the nobles to promote the immigration of a class “that could help them exploit the serfs. This position of intermediaries had been one of the chief causes of anti-Semitism. The Jews allied themselves with the nobles to collect their taxes. So closely did they collaborate that in some Christian villages, the nobles handed over the keys to the church to the Jews, with the warning that the temple should not be reopened until all fiscal debts had been settled.”

Elena was one of the first in her village to attend public school. It was kind of an achievement, considering that the educational system was so anti-Semitic that in 1841, out of half a million Jews, only 2,500 went to non-Jewish schools. After World War I, opportunities increased when Poland acknowledged the equal rights of minorities. However, not all Poles agreed. Years later, she wrote in her journal:

*It was a shock to me, a surprise, to learn that I was not equal to the other children, that I had absolutely no rights in that country, that I was “a stranger and a sojourner.” They often made us [Jewish students] feel that way. We were always afraid. When we were leaving school, for instance, someone might throw a rock at us. We did not know exactly who had thrown it, but we knew it was a Christian. They were always shouting at us to leave Poland, to move back to Palestine, where we belonged. It was very difficult to accept it. We felt hostile, even rebellious, but we could not show it. We were too small and too weak; we could not defend ourselves, only resist.*

The girl, however, was aware that not all teachers were anti-Semites. The mathematics teacher was impressed both by her beauty and her skill with numbers. “How many is 130 divided by 7?” he would ask and Elena would reply a few seconds later, “18.57.” “I don't know how you do it, Elena. If I were Jewish I would marry you, for your beauty and your intelligence.”

“There's nothing special about it,” she would say. “When you're poor, you need to know your arithmetic.”

“What would you like to study when you're older?”



“I’d like to be a historian, but I don’t think I’ll have the money to go beyond this classroom.” Nor did she hope to marry well, since the poor do not attract suitors.

In spite of her age, Elena was aware that hostility towards them had an economic basis. For Polish peasants, the administrator, the innkeeper, or the tax collector was the personification of exploitation and Jews played many of these roles. Anita, however, thought that Poland was more hospitable than other countries. She told Elena, for instance, that it was even worse in Ukraine. There, in 1569, the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic peasants had become the serfs of the Polish nobility, who were Roman Catholics. The peasants hated the Poles as much as the Jews who sometimes acted as their intermediaries and in 1648 they rose up and carried out the worst massacre until World War II.

Her mother was convinced that both Poles and Jews suffered at the hands of the Ukrainians, sometimes fighting jointly against the common enemy. On other occasions, however, the Polish nobles saved their own skin by sacrificing their weaker allies. But Anita said it was common among all nations: when it came to choosing between the welfare of your own people and that of others, you would choose the former. In spite of the prevailing anti-Semitism, she thought that for many centuries Poland was a haven of tolerance for their people. The kingdom accepted immigrants during the Christian persecution in Western Europe and granted them rights no other country had been willing to contemplate. In spite of the efforts by the Catholic Church to impose ghettos, distinct ways of dressing and segregated working conditions, the Polish nobility had never agreed to those terms. Hence Jews were able to enjoy such spiritual and political autonomy that they even had their own parliament, the Council of the Four Nations.

Anita explained that when the economic situation was good, the various ethnic and religious groups coexisted without any problems. “But when the economy deteriorated and the country was divided and conquered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the old allies ran into new difficulties. In some cases, the new masters treated the Hebrews better and thus obtained their support, which the Poles resented. In other cases, the Jews yearned for the return to Polish rule,” she sighed.

Elena was aware that the worst anti-Semites were those who obtained some economic benefit. She had gone with her mother one afternoon to visit a Polish woman.

“Mrs. Ursula,” said Anita, “I need you to pay me the money you owe me from last year. Things are very bad and I barely have enough to eat.”

The peasant woman was not a bad person. She and Anita had helped each other in the past. Like many in her social class, she did not know how to read or write and she believed in myths and superstitions. One of them, common among the Polish peasantry, was that Jews were a diabolical race, born blind that needed Christian blood in order to open their eyes.

Ursula did not believe such things anymore, but she was going through hard times and it was easier to turn on her Jewish friend than on her Polish creditors.

“You Jews from Hell,” said the woman. “Wasn't it bad enough that you killed Christ? Now you want to crucify me too? Can't you see I have no *zlotys*<sup>25</sup> to pay you?”

“But Ursula, I saw you buying three cows yesterday; how can you say you don't have any money?”

“Well, I don't and those cows weren't mine.”

Two days later, Ursula's daughter threw a stone at Elena. “Goddamned Jews, why don't you all go to Palestine and leave us in peace?”

Elena knew, from her mother, that the world was not divided exclusively into rich Polish nobles, poor Jews and poorer Polish peasants. Some of her “countrymen” had made money and they hired their co-religionists to exploit them. There was a sector of large merchants who lived off international trade in fields such as timber and imports. This group controlled the *shtetls*; religious leaders depended on their largesse. Many of these merchants bought off Polish officials for their own benefit, without thinking of the needs of their people. Such was the case of Lazarus Guasestein, who had made a fortune in usury. Dozens of Jews had lost their properties when they were unable to pay his high interest rates. When they begged him to forgive them their debts, or at least give them more time to pay, he said there was nothing he could do, because bankruptcy was “a Divine decision.”

Lazarus Guasestein provided the local Chassidic rabbi with a handsome living so that no one could question his morals or his actions. Years later he would do the same in Costa Rica, to which he would also immigrate. “The man is a crook,” Anita would comment, “but he sure knows how to run for his life.”

Anita was neither fond of Lazarus nor of Capitalism. “One day we'll take over and get right of all those exploiters of the working class,” she would say. Poland's poor Jews had a political voice in the Bund, the Socialist Workers' Party, which aimed to put an end to anti-Semitism by means of a proletarian revolution. Socialists thought that marginalized Poles and Jews faced a common enemy, the capitalist system, which was responsible even for their hostility towards each other.

This phenomenon allowed Anita to rationalize the theft of her neighbor's chicken as “a redistribution of wealth.” The woman was convinced that rich Jews took as much advantage of her as the Poles did. She was furious when she learned that the Guasesteins were bribing

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<sup>25</sup> Polish currency

the Polish tax authorities in order to pay very little, while she was expected to pay all the taxes on her modest sales.

The much longed-for proletarian revolution, however, did not appear imminent. “It is never darker than just before dawn,” Anita would say; “we must be patient, like Job.”

And patience they would need, because things were definitely getting worse. The Jewish history teacher would explain to Elena that Jews had linked their fortunes to pre-capitalist trade in Polish rural areas; when paying in cash was introduced into the rural economy, hundreds of thousands of Polish peasants were forced to move to the cities and the Jews with them.

He nevertheless pointed out that there was a downside to this story: as a highly urbanized group, Jews were among the first to be affected by capitalist recessions. In 1927, Polish Judaism had sunk into such poverty that four out of ten depended on social assistance and half were unemployed. “What began as an internal mobilization ended up as an exodus from Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. Between 1900 and 1914, two million Jews left Eastern Europe.

David Sikora, Elena's father and Anita's husband, was among those who left. By 1927, the family barely had enough to eat and discussions about Divine benevolence did not fill their stomachs. “David,” Anita had said, “we're going to starve if you don't do something. I can't even steal the neighbors' chickens anymore, because ours are so skinny that they are easily recognized.”

For his daughter, the departure of the father meant instant maturity. She had to play the role of companion to her mother and of parent to her brother and sister. When her mother left home early, she had to prepare breakfast and lunch. She did not know a day of rest, not even the Sabbath. In the *cheder*<sup>26</sup>, the children mocked her for wanting to study in the public school. In the public school, the children threw stones at her for being Jewish. She did not expect a great deal from her people, or from Poland. Her uncle Herschel, conservative like her father, warned that as soon as Polish workers had overthrown the rich, they would toss the Jews into the ocean. Anita replied that the right wing and the rabbis had already drowned them in religious filth.

Although the situation was severe, nature had given her two gifts to help her survive: beauty and outstanding intelligence. Perhaps her role as surrogate parent and confidante helped to explain her wisdom of the heart. She was an innate, intuitive observer who could read the feelings of the most introverted individual. When her family got together, she could sense the turmoil in her relative's minds.

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<sup>26</sup> Jewish elementary school

“Aunt Gisela is depressed because her favorite son got married,” she would write in her journal. “The rabbi is happy because he earned a lot of money by granting the baker a divorce.” “My mother is worried because Golde suspects her of stealing her chickens.”

She could also soothe people's feelings. “Don't worry, Mrs. Mirtembaum,” she would say, “your husband will write from New York. It must be that the Polish postmaster thought your husband was sending you money and stole his letters.” Some said that she was a natural healer who could lay balm on the soul, a virtue of the greatest rabbis. “It is the Messianic touch; this girl must be a reincarnation of Sebatai Zevi, our last Messiah,” a Chassidic aunt would proclaim. Her more modern kin thought that Elena was as sharp-witted as the new Jewish scientist who was causing a revolution in psychiatry. In spite of the various interpretations, no one doubted that she had great powers. A Polish schoolmate summarized it thus: “Wherever you are, Elena, *Gan Aiden*<sup>27</sup> can be found.”

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<sup>27</sup> Garden of Eden

### III

David Sikora's prospects in the village were far from promising. In his studies, he had not gone beyond the *yeshiva*. In earlier, more prosperous years, the community had supported his efforts to become a religious scholar. Later, when whole families were forced to emigrate from the *shtetls*, his countrymen could not support him anymore and he never reached a higher level than that of *baruchim*. Even his wife used to mock his lack of schooling. Once, when David was telling the children the story of Joseph and Pharaoh, Anita interrupted him.

“If Pharaoh had come to *me* with that silly dream of his about the seven fat cows and the seven lean cows, instead of interpreting it,” she said, “I would have asked him where he had spotted them, so I could go eat them.”

He had never consented gladly to his wife's habit of stealing fowl to supplement the family diet; it made him feel, irrationally but no less poignantly, like the greatest sinner the world had ever known.

“Anita,” he would say, “how can you expect me to hold my head up high in the village when everyone for miles around knows that you regularly steal the butcher's chickens?”

“I do it out of necessity, like Noah,” she would reply. “Do you think he owned every pair of animals that he shoved into the Ark? Giraffes and rhinoceroses and panthers and anteaters? He must have done the same as I. You know, a little redistribution of wealth....”

The former *yeshiva* student attempted to get a United States visa. However, as with Samuel, whose failure had brought the shame of suicide on the family, it was already too late. The land of liberty and equality – the nation that greeted the arrival of hard-working immigrants with a poem by Emma Lazarus, a Sephardic Jew – no longer welcomed Europe's tired, poor and wretched refuse yearning to be free, at least not if the refuse in question was Jewish.

Nevertheless, life was getting so hard that Anita had started eyeing the chickens of the rabbi. David realized that drastic measures were required.

“I'll try my luck in some country close to the United States, so later I can cross the border,” he said. His wife did not reply, thinking that the bum would never get as far as the corner shop.

Bad economic conditions had forced the descendants of Aviezer Sikora to migrate to smaller *shtetls* near Ostrołęka, each forming a new branch of the family farther from the original tree. In each of the small towns, they continued the tradition of Talmudic learning and family fighting, another of their pastimes. Neighbors would argue that the Sikoras searched in the Talmud for an answer to their conflictive lives since most of them could not stand one another. Their strong character and mood swings were known to friends and to

foes and David's father, Jacob Sikora was so terrifying that when he walked the dirty streets of Wonzyszubi, his hometown, people ran for their lives. "Sikora." Anita would argue, "is the name of a typical lively Polish bird, but the only calm and quiet bird I know is your father's."

For the Sikoras, their real love was their devotion to the Talmud and it led them to marry women who could finance their studies. They expected their wives to attend the shops while they spent their precious time reading the sacred books. For this reason they ended up with the wrong women. In their pursuit of money they chose materialistic families, whose main concern was their love of *gelt*<sup>28</sup>. Anita would be one of those who was interested in the material and in the here and now, oblivious of spiritual and religious matters. She was such a strong believer in modernity and such devotion would lead her later in life to embrace Socialism and Bundism. "Money talks," she would respond when asked about her spiritual life.

Both Anita and David tried to lead Elena to what they consider "life's most important values," which by a strange twist of faith happened to be exactly their own. Every time one of them lectured their daughter on them, the other would jump into the conversation, creating chaos and terrible fights. David thought his wife was leading Elena to Communism and Atheism, modern curses that would end in disaster. Anita, on the other hand, would believe her husband's religious instruction was the origin of Jewish backwardness: "We Jews - because of the religious fanatics - have learned only to subtract, since we haven't added up to anything in the last thousand years."

David would defend the Talmud from Anita's criticisms. She would criticize the book as more a children's puzzle than a religion. "Who on earth would write a book with different readings in one single page and make such a mess of it that it turns out to look more like noodles?" she would say with scorn and cynicism. She disliked even more that the book was full of prohibitions against women's choices. "On the basis of this book, your father wants to make a *shikseh*<sup>29</sup> of me," she would complain to her daughter. "According to such a book, women should not get an education and must remain as ignorant as possible," Anita would add, to convince Elena. The fact that Talmudic rabbis had interpreted women's periods as unclean and in need of ritual cleansing infuriated her even more. "Listen to me Elena, if we are going to be fair we would have to conclude that the rabbi's *toches*<sup>30</sup> is the one that stinks the most from rotten *gefilte fish*, but no one is saying he should clean it. Who gave the right to the men who wrote the Talmud to describe our menstruation as dirty?"

David would accuse his wife of acting like those who used to criticize the Talmud without having ever read it. David explained to Elena that Christians described the never-ending

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<sup>28</sup> Money

<sup>29</sup> Maid

<sup>30</sup> Rear end

book – a work in progress if ever there was one, for it had been amended, collated, cross-referenced and commented on for as long as anyone could remember – as a confusing hodge-podge of perverted logic, absurd sophistries and foolish fables. For them, it was a book obviously authored by the Devil, full of impiety, superstition, even obscenity.

Elena's mother, on the other hand, considered that the Talmud was as straightforward as the spaghetti she was making for dinner and that it lacked the historical wisdom that Marxism was offering to the Jews. She considered the Talmud an “impossible book that shifted abruptly from the spiritual to the trivial, from epigrams full of intimations of immortality to the most pedestrian instructions about everyday dietary and hygienic issues. Some theological disputes appear to be of only theoretical interest, mere displays of dialectical juggling.” The woman considered that this book was responsible for keeping her nation poor and exploited. “If you expect to find out how to fight oppression, Elena,” she would advise her daughter, “don't waste time in Talmud dialectics.”

David was furious over his wife's “absurd” commentaries. He strongly believed that the study and rabbinical discussions of this book had kept Jewish minds agile for more than a millennium. He told Elena that during the Middle Ages, while most Christians lived in ignorance, Jews kept their minds agile with such endeavors. “Whereas Christians were burning witches and books, we learned how to read and write and were trying to figure out how to live in peace and with social justice,” he added.

But Anita was not convinced. She thought that the Enlightenment had changed everything. “Christianity roused itself from its stupor. Modernity imposed the need to understand science and Aristotelian logic. The Jews, forced to live in ghettos, incapable of connecting with the main forces of modernization, lagged behind. We need to learn science and technology now, not religion,” she concluded. Elena's mother had been a strong supporter of the Enlightenment. She had fallen for a new movement that tried to incorporate the values of European enlightenment into Judaism: the *Haskallah*, whose most prominent pioneer was the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. He believed in providing a secular education for Jewish children, so that they could learn science and technology instead of solely attending the eminently religious, quaint but impractical, *cheder* and *yeshiva*.

“I fought for education, Elena,” admitted her mother, “and did my best for you to learn your Jewish background as much as the new science. Had it been up to your father and the religious *Agadah*, you would not have attended school. You owe your education to my modernist and Socialist principles that come from Mendelssohn and Marx,” argued Anita as if this discussion had to have a winner. He and Anita were ideological opponents and disagreed to the last day of their lives on whether Marx or God would free the Jews from such a dire predicament. But the two of them also knew how to stretch philosophical issues to fit their needs and support each other in darker times. On the dreaded day that his neighbor finally confronted him with Anita's chicken thefts, the man would turn to the Talmud to defend his wife's socialist “redistribution.”

“Mrs. Golde, how can you accuse me of eating your chickens? Don't you know that we all make mistakes and you might have made one when you counted your chickens, just as our Lord did when He created the world and was unsure of how many days it took to finish it?”

“Don't use the Scriptures to defend that woman! The only mistake I made was assuming you had any *baitsim*. If you don't warn your wife, I will find another man who will.”

“Perhaps one day we will find out that He wanted you and me to fight over these chickens for some unknown reason,” said David, suddenly turning metaphysical.

“I hope our Lord forgot he created men like you, because He would repent of His creation!” cried Golde, as she stormed out, unwilling to continue this Talmudic discussion that had somehow strayed so very far from the fundamental issue of her birds and who got to chop their heads off and stick them in a big pot.

David and Anita, had they belonged to different species, could not have been more dissimilar. She came from a secular family and divorced her first husband. Although Judaism grants only men the right to separate from their spouses, she managed to convince the council in charge of *gets*<sup>31</sup> to threaten him with excommunication if he did not agree to the breakup. She had decided to leave him for reasons that could hardly be considered eccentric: he was a drunkard, smelled bad and was impotent.

Divorce depreciated her in the marriage market. No beauty to begin with, her pale skin, dirty-blond hair and long lips and nose did not mix into a pleasant pattern. Certain rigidity in her face made her look older than she was. She almost never wore makeup or attractive clothes; she hardly ever laughed and when she did, it was with twisted features that seemed to betray scorn more than the display of joy. Many women, aware of her unprecedented divorce, did not want her anywhere near their husbands, in case her lack of conventionality extended to polygamy or other abominations.

“Husbands aren't meant to be picked; they're meant to be put up with,” one of the neighborhood gossips would mutter.

“I wish *mine* was impotent, so we wouldn't have to do it anymore,” said another housewife. What's so great about having a *potz*<sup>32</sup> shoved inside you?”

“I bet she paid them off, the members of the tribunal and the rabbi, to get her divorce,” said another member of the habitual tea party.

When it came time to look for a new husband, Anita did not have much to choose from.

“I've got a rabbinical student who's without a job and is looking for a woman who can keep him,” said Aida, the village matchmaker. “I can't introduce him to you because he doesn't live in this town. I'll bring him on the day of the wedding, to save unnecessary expenses. You won't dislike him: he's got Moorish eyes.”

Anita was not at ease with her immediate matrimonial prospects. In her previous marriage, it had been her father who had picked the groom. She did not meet her intended life partner until the ceremony, under the *chupah*, the wedding canopy. Nor did she know anything about the pre-matrimonial contract her father and the groom had signed or the sum the father had promised as *mohar*<sup>33</sup> in the wedding contract, the *ketubah*. She did not even dare look at her imminent husband until he gave her the ring and solemnly groaned his wedding vow, *Hare aht mekudeshet li be-tabaat zo ke-dat Moshe ve-Yisrael*<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Divorces

<sup>32</sup> Penis

<sup>33</sup> Dowry



According to tradition, the husband not only acquired a wife and a good dowry; he also became the administrator of all her worldly goods, including (in the case of Anita) the shop. Judaic law states that all a woman owns at the time of marriage and any inheritance or personal gift, is the woman's personal property. However, the husband is expected to administer these assets. But Anita's first spouse, whose binges were monumental week-long explorations of every possible way in which alcohol and the dubious ability of engaging in incoherent dialogue with perfect strangers can be abused, would have misspent all of her scarce fortune if she had not concealed some of her earnings from him.

Marriage, in the Jewish tradition, is meant for procreation. Anita's first husband was useless in that department. She was only 17 when she married and had not known a man in the biblical sense; accordingly, she was blindly unaware of the mechanics of sex. Her husband – a hypochondriac on top of everything else – was afraid of intercourse since he dreaded that in the middle of an orgasm he might die of a heart attack. The Jewish faith, however, demanded that he fulfill his marital obligations. So as not to put his heart at risk, he pretended to make love to Anita without penetrating her, a task he would not have achieved, even if he had the desire.

On their wedding night, he climbed on top of her, but lacking an erection, he growled like a lusty male whose *potz*<sup>35</sup> did not show any signs of life. Anita assumed that everything had been done according to the book. She moaned once or twice, heeding her mother's advice that, when her husband started panting she should “imitate the sounds chickens make when we chop off their heads,” in order to please him.

Anita was aware that Judaism is not opposed to sexual pleasure. On the contrary, rabbis maintain that men should marry at the age of 18 in order to perpetuate the species and their enjoyment is a fundamental way of encouraging frequent intercourse. If a man has not married by the age of 20, he calls upon him the wrath of the Lord of Hosts. The Talmud recommends that an ordinary, healthy man have sexual relations every day. There are some exceptions: sailors, for instance, only have to have sex every six months, presumably so as to discourage them from frequenting gentile brothels while in foreign ports. Therefore, the woman came to the conclusion that her husband, given his lack of ardor in the bedroom, was a sailor.

“My husband works in the Navy,” she would tell her mother.

“But daughter, the only Navy we have in Długosiodło are the ducks on the lake! What makes you think he's a sailor?”

Rivke Malke, Anita's mother, was shocked by her daughter's naiveté. Although sex is a religious duty – as well as a pagan, or at least non-denominational pleasure – Jews had been influenced by Christian asceticism, exposed to it over many centuries of forced coexistence. Anita's mother – like the majority of Yiddishe mothers - had not taught their daughters anything about sex and she was not to break with this tradition. To spare herself the embarrassment, she preferred to go along with her daughter's story that her son-in-law had

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<sup>34</sup>Look, you are consecrated to me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and of Israel.

<sup>35</sup> Penis

become a sailor. However, since Anita had yet to become pregnant after so many months of marriage, she turned to her friends for advice.

“Am I doing something wrong?” she said.

“If the man rides you, he's doing it right,” a friend said. They did not talk about pleasure, because none of them had experienced it.

“Well, he does ride, I guess,” said Anita.

One day, Ursula, the Polish peasant she had befriended, visited her shop, wanting to buy several colored panties. “Why do you need so many?” Anita inquired. With some embarrassment, the peasant woman admitted that sexual relations with her husband usually hurt and made her bleed. Anita was totally perplexed.

“How is it possible that you bleed if the man only rubs you?” she asked Ursula, who was not sure whether Anita was pulling her leg.

That afternoon, the Polish woman took her new apprentice through a 101 course on sex and reproduction at her farm. Ursula's bitch was in heat and was able to demonstrate to the visitor how animals knew how to do things better than her own husband.

“The scoundrel has fooled me!” screamed Anita as she saw how the dogs were performing their sexual act. Ursula felt relieved and proud that this poor woman had finally learned the truth and after having served her a hot cup of tea to calm her down, took her back into town. Anita was walking in a dreary silence and, without it having been her intention, shocked the peasant one more time:

“For how long do I have to stay connected to the man?” she inquired.

As she became aware that she had the same chances of being impregnated as the Virgin Mary, Anita ran desperate to the town's rabbi. The man was not fond of divorces since he thought these contradicted Heaven's designs. However, he shared in the profits from the sale of many aphrodisiacs in Długosiodło's market, so the first he recommended was wine.

“Make sure your husband drinks two glasses of wine before bedtime,” he recommended.

“But the man is a drunkard. Why should I give him more alcohol?” she asked, questioning the soundness of this logic.

“Vodka is one thing, which is what your husband drinks, but the wisdom of wine is quite another,” answered the rabbi, as he reflected on the percentage of sales he got from the liquor store.

Anita was so desperate that she followed his advice. When her husband arrived late at night, she served him two full glasses of wine.

“How did it go?” asked the rabbi the following day, hoping amongst hope that the remedy had worked.

“Bad, bad,” responded the woman with sadness; “the man ran to the tavern and I have not seen him since.”

The rabbi was not going to give up easily. “Fatty meat, lentils and beans rekindle the sex drive,” he now intoned, happy that he also got a commission from the grocery store.

The woman went to the market and searched for each ingredient with care. She bought the best meat she could find and the largest lentils and beans in the market. Once at home, she made the most concentrated soup she could cook and that night gave it to her husband.

“Eat, eat,” she insisted of the man, who already felt that he was going to explode from too much food.

“Did it work?” asked the rabbi the following morning. “How did he react?”

“He had such flatulence that I thought the Russians had invaded Poland again and I had to send him off to sleep in the guest room,” responded Anita, disillusioned.

“My best potion is mandrake,” recommended the rabbi, whose wife sold it in the market. “The tea made of this plant is so strong that even Christian witches use it as a remedy for male and female sterility. Look here, Anita,” he said, pointing to a page in the Torah; “it says that Rachel, who was infertile, obtained from Leah these roots (*duddaim* in Hebrew) found by Reuben and after many years of failures, she became pregnant with her first child, Joseph.”

The religious man had not finished closing the book when Anita was already in search of the miraculous roots. She did not care that the rabbi's wife had increased its price “only this morning” and bought several large roots to make the strongest tea she could think of.

“Was he able or not?” inquired a less patient rabbi the next time he saw the woman at his door, with a terrible expression.

“Would I have returned to you if he had been able?” she replied.

When the rabbi ran out of elixirs, he and Anita were convinced that there was nothing they or her husband could do to get her pregnant. He explained to the woman that the law did not allow the wife to file for divorce. “It is a man's prerogative,” he indicated.

“He will never do it!” responded Anita, who was convinced her husband was happy with the status quo and would not divorce her of his own will. “Then, you have to get to persuade the *kallah*<sup>36</sup> to put pressure on him to do it,” he recommended.

Anita was aware of how important it was to get the community's approval. She decided to donate some money to help repair the synagogue's roof that was leaking since the Great War and to donate some clothes to the orphanage. She also would send birthday presents to each member of the board. She wanted not only to get a divorce but also to recover her dowry, a right to which she was entitled by Jewish Law. But the men on the board were not very supportive and were less optimistic about her chances. At first they did not even want to exert pressure on her husband.

“It is not acceptable in our community for a woman to request a *get*,” replied the board secretary.

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<sup>36</sup> Jewish Community Board

“Neither is it tolerable that our Jewish people should disappear for lack of heirs,” came Anita's response, since she knew that she had Genesis on her side.

“We have no proof of your husband's sterility other than your word,” said the president of the board, who did not like this woman's independence.

“What do you want me to do, bring the *corpus delicti* here? Do you think I would be here if this man was able?”

The rabbi finally broke the impasse. He had made so much profit out of the woman's despair that he was feeling guilty.

“I can guarantee that the plaintiff has done everything in her power to resuscitate the dead,” he said without intending sarcasm. The rest of the board could not help but laugh.

“Well, if you assure us that the defendant is dead, we can recommend a *get*,” said the fourth member of the board, unable to withhold his laughter.

Anita, who was fed up with the board and their discussion of her husband's *potz*, offered a larger contribution to improve the conditions of the *Chevra Kiddushe*.

“If this woman is so sensitive to the dead to make such a generous offer, it must be that she lives with one of them,” the president of the board finally responded, seemingly tired of this lengthy session. The board decided to support Anita's plea and press her husband to file for divorce with the warning that, if he would not agree to do so, he would be ostracized from the community.

Her new husband was also a stranger. However, when she saw him under the *chupah*,<sup>37</sup> she heard herself saying: “This man is not bad looking, even if he was less tanned he would still be handsome.” He indeed had beautiful eyes, and a very sensual mouth, and she dreamed of their first kiss as she walked to the canopy. Anita could not help notice that David had wonderful buttocks, hard as a *bagel*. “No one can criticize me for wanting to pinch them,” she told herself. The Torah did indeed recommend that a man's wife should be pretty, and there was no reason why a woman should not expect the same of her husband. This man was also educated, a scholar, and the Talmud offered special blessings for those who married brains and beauty.

What Anita had not experienced with her first husband she made up for with the second. When she realized how a *potz* could change its personality with a little blood pumped in to provide such an exquisite pleasure, she was happy to have paid the *shadchan*<sup>38</sup>. “Where in the world has this man learned to do what he does?” she thought to herself. Anita started to believe that the Talmud did indeed have a secret passage where men like her husband learned the art of lovemaking.

A few weeks later, Anita got pregnant and Elena was born. Four years after that, Anita gave birth to a boy, Samuel, and as a farewell present from her husband before his trip to America, she then had Sarita. This second husband was not a heavy drinker, but was a

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<sup>37</sup> Bridal canopy

<sup>38</sup> Matchmaker

studious man. If things had not got sour in economic terms, their marriage would have been a good one. However, there are no relationships that can withstand hunger, and Anita's - despite her numerous orgasms - was no exception.

An inevitable hostility started to brew between the two lovers as the number of chickens decreased at the Sikora's table. Anita started to resent the fact that she had to support a scholarly husband who did not help her in the store. She became so hostile to the men's prerogatives and their control over the community's decisions that she blamed the Holocaust on men like her husband.

“These *schmucks*<sup>39</sup> were so used to negotiating and to basing their thoughts on Talmudic labyrinths that the Germans knew how to take advantage of them. The Nazis started offering alternatives and awful choices, finally limiting them to whether the Jews should die standing up or sitting down. *Genug iz genug!*”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Idiots

<sup>40</sup> Enough is Enough!

## IV

*My Dear Wife:*

*As I wrote a few months ago, my health has deteriorated and the doctors have confirmed T.B. This forces me to rest and to remain isolated for a few months. As I also mentioned, the economic future is very difficult and I have not saved enough to travel to the United States as we had originally planned. Given this predicament, I have borrowed some money to bring you and my children here on the assumption that you will look after me and that you will help with the business so as to afford the medical treatment that I need. This is why I wish you to come here immediately. The tickets for the transatlantic voyage were sent to the agent of the Hamburg-Amerika-Linie Company in Warsaw. You must travel from Hamburg. I hope the tax dues have not increased from what you mentioned the last time. Say hello to Elena, to Samuel and to our new daughter, Sarita.*

*Your husband, who thinks of you constantly,*

*David.*

"Your father wants us to be with him. But for me, he would still be discussing whether Rabbi Aquiba or Rabbi Potz was right concerning the circumcision of mice," Anita finally said to her daughter. "We will have to embark in Germany. Nowadays this is risky with Hitler in power." Elena did not know who this man was and why her mother was afraid of him. She was only told that the German politician wanted to get rid of the Jews, but had come to power promising to fight the Jewish "cause."

"But mother, what power is this man talking about if we don't even have enough to eat?" Elena asked.

"Our only 'power' is making all these lunatics make scapegoats of us for their problems. The Nazis are blaming us for the world economic crisis and the fact that they lost the previous war. Cousin Fanny writes that things are getting worse for our people at the time and that the Nazis carry out violent demonstrations against us. Our stay in Germany should be as short as possible."

If their plans to emigrate were known, the authorities would not allow them to go until the taxes they owed had been paid. To prevent this, Anita sold all her merchandise to her mother, who owned one of the stores, asking her to keep silent about their plans to leave. Years before she had managed to get the passports, and no one would foresee they were about to use them.

"Mother, why won't you pay the taxes?" asked Elena. "First of all, because we are bankrupt," her mother answered. "Why should I pay taxes," she said, "if the Poles keep all the *zlotys* and give none back to us?" Anita thought that when a Jewish-owned industry became prosperous, the State nationalized it, as in the case of tobacco. On the other hand, commerce, an activity mostly in the hands of Israelites, provided the State with most of its tax revenues. "The new Polish state was built upon our backs," Elena's mother concluded.

The young girl shared her teacher's distrust. Each pair of trousers or *shmate* or shirt sold had to be changed into German currency so as to escape police confiscation and to take some money for the road. She had been warned that, in case fiscal agents were to confront them, she must withdraw all the funds in the cashbox. They were not to find traces that any sale had taken place.

Anita never knew what to expect from the Polish government: "Sir, could you be so kind as to tell me what I should do to get an exit visa?"- Anita once beggarly asked. "Just promise never to come back here, you piece of Jewish shit!" answered the civil servant, smiling broadly. On another occasion, she had gone to the Post Office with a letter for America.

"Please tell me the cost of a stamp to Central America?" She asked.

"Twice what a Pole pays," answered the female clerk.

"But why should I have to pay double?"

"Because your letter contains twice the trash," came the reply.

One day Elena went through a dreadful fear. Wearing long and hateful faces, two government officials suddenly "fell upon us like the Egyptian plague." "We are here to collect overdue taxes," one of the officials said angrily. "Sales have been really bad, Sir. Give me one more month to pay them," begged her mother with a face like a death row inmate. The tax collectors laughed: "Oh, what a bunch of crooks you Jews are! If you don't have money then I will take this shirt," said one of them, helping himself to the garment. Shaking, Anita thought, "These drunkard Poles come here to rob us and then exchange the goods for vodka. Luckily they only want that old rag from the Great War."

Despite all this, Elena could not understand her fears since she didn't want to leave. For her, it was the same to stay or to move to an unknown country. Her father had not convinced them about the advantages of living in America. He had simply left seven years earlier. She couldn't even remember what he looked like, and now he wanted them to come to him. Her heard her mother's complaints: "Why did that good for nothing wretch leave, if seven years later he still can't afford a few cheap boat tickets? He himself laments the harshness of life in Costa Rica. Surely, that miserable man is living with a *kurveh* and is making fools of us all!"

In 1934, the family received from Costa Rica one pre-paid ticket with the Hamburg-Amerika-Linie. The two small clothing stores they owned in the heart of downtown were bankrupt and people had less and less *zlotys* to eat and practically nothing with which to buy clothes and house wares.

The Sikora stores would be the first to go down the drain and the family had no choice but to leave Poland. It was not easy saying good-bye to Długosiodło. The journey was an entirely new experience for the family, as they were not used to long distances by train. The entire journey normally took eighteen hours, with stops at several stations: Warsaw, Frankfurt Oder, Berlin Ost Bahnhof, Berlin Zoo and Hamburg Altona. Now with the Nazis in power, border controls were reinforced and the trip took longer.

Back in April 1934, traveling to Germany was dangerous. After being scared witless at the border checkpoint, not knowing if her family would be let across to Germany, Anita felt relief once she had abandoned her fatherland. Soon they were passing clusters of towns, and according to Elena's mother, most of them were Jewish. She mentioned one relative after the other in each of these villages, as if the entire family had spread like spilled wheat. "My sister, Rebecca, has been living in Siedlce for the last ten years. She married a very religious man, a good for nothing, and just like your father, useless at trading. The poor wretch has to sustain herself as a seamstress." "In Krakow, I have an aunt working in a jewelry shop. She thinks she is a *Fiddlefortz*<sup>41</sup> because she lives in a sophisticated town. She has forgotten us ever since then." While her mother continued this rosary of complaints, Elena could not know that these relatives would soon disappear like smoke in air. Many years later, when she asked about her aunt Bruma who lived in Krakow, she was shocked by the answer: "Only smoke remains of her."

Cousin Motl, who immigrated to Argentina, had forewarned Anita that the German custom was to harass passengers using rival travel companies such as the British Cunard Line. These travelers were often robbed at the last minute, confronted by guards with impossible demands. The slightest variation in a letter on the ticket was reason enough to force a passenger to return to Warsaw, or even to Moscow, or else to pay higher fares. "Here on the ticket it says that your name is Povlovich and not Povlowitz; we can't let you in," Elena heard as a German official rejected an entire family of Russian Jews. "You must return to Moscow to have it fixed."

According to cousin Motl, the Germans had built special barracks to fumigate the passengers. "But only passengers of German travel companies were allowed to use them." The border guards could quarantine anyone suspected of having a contagious disease. If a person was quarantined, he or she could only use the barracks of German rail companies, effectively losing the right to travel on tickets issued by non-German companies. Using such arguments, "the Germans fleeced many passengers, selling them new tickets at extraordinarily high prices," cousin Motl had reported. "They also clean our pockets, charging us for the soap and disinfectants," he wrote. In the disinfecting baths, where passenger's clothes were treated as

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<sup>41</sup> Fancy Fart



well, a simple procedure was used to take advantage of them. They were told to keep their money in their hands as they placed their garments into the fumigating chambers, on the pretext of preventing the heat from burning their bills, of course. "In this way, the money that each passenger carried could be seen, and later confiscated using all the deception of practiced crooks."

When Anita and her children made it to the dressing rooms and were asked to take their clothes off, her youngest daughter refused to comply. "No, mother, I do not want to strip in front of that ugly German official!" "But sweetheart, listen, if you don't cooperate these people will punish us and things will get much worse," she said removing her daughter's blouse. As she struggled with the child, Sarita felt dizzy, and could not help throwing up all the meatballs she had eaten earlier all over the official's neat white apron. "You dammed full of lice little twerp," shouted the woman as she ran for the bathroom. "You will pay for this," she screamed and slammed the door.

At the port of embarkation, a number of agencies approached the new emigrants with self-interested offers of help. The Evangelical mission promised to pay their ticket in exchange for undergoing Christian baptism. Anita would always remember this, as well as the resolution to "save" their souls made by these *judenmissionen*, as they were known in Hamburg. Even little Elena advised her mother to accept the offer to convert in order to have more funds for their trip. "In any case," she said, "who is going to know what we did?"

Arriving in Germany had been akin to entering a fairy tale. The towns, cities, and above all, the houses were much prettier than those they had left behind in Poland. These had well kept gardens and spring flowers that livened up the landscape. Young Elena's interest was caught by the fact that she could see no outhouses. "Most toilets are inside," her mother pointed out, "a luxury previously only seen in Warsaw." People were much better dressed here and seemed happier and kind. "During the Great War," her mother continued, "the Germans had been good to the Jews because they could understand each other; you know, Yiddish and German are much alike."

She recalled that one of her cousins lived near the German border and did business with Germans and never had problems collecting payments, something more common among her Polish customers. Perhaps Hitler had changed all that, but still she accepted that, even with him in power, the Germans treated them better. "It's a civilized country," Anita told her daughter, amazed at the passing towns. "The Germans have progressed a great deal, unlike Poland, which is poorer than a cockroach."

Located on the banks of the Elbe, Hamburg was, said Anita to her children, the most important port of Germany and the best way to travel to Costa Rica. In 1926, there were several thousand Jews of a total population of over one million people. Some were foreigners, like cousin Fanny, who worked as a *shikseh* at the home of a wealthy family of German Jewish bankers.

Anita and her children were taken care of and well treated. It was 1934, and Germans still considered Jews to be human beings. The border police and immigration officials had complimented her daughter: "What a beauty!" said the officer inspecting their passports. Anita was flattered at first by this attention, but was less happy with the rest of the compliment. "This girl," he went on, pointing at Elena, "is not like you at all. She is beautiful!" For a woman who so greatly admired the Germans, Anita was unsure just what to do next. Should she smile and say, "thank you", or start to cry?

Once in the city, they went to the Jewish neighborhood and rented a place for the night. The dark hotel room close to the sea allowed them to look at the water, cold and indifferent--the same sea that would take them to the New World. This time, however, young Elena could not see her face reflected in the water. She did not know whether to be happy, or what to expect from the long journey ahead.

Later, the whole family got ready to eat at the restaurant of their small and dismal hotel for emigrant Jews, close to the ghetto, just two blocks away from the famous synagogue on the Born Platz. That night, they visited Fanny to say their goodbyes, going first to the famous synagogue to pray and ask for God's good luck on their Odyssey. "Don't let the mosquitoes devour us, help Sarita fight her asthma, help us keep our faith," Anita prayed.

Her cousin Fanny was a woman of about thirty years old, tall, and white with *Ashkenazi*<sup>42</sup> features. Among the Jewish community of Hamburg, divided as they were between the *Ashkenazi's* and the *Sephardim*<sup>43</sup>, Fanny's traits placed her in a social order higher than the Sephardim but far below her patrons, the Stern family, who belonged to the upper crust of German Jewish society. These families owned large companies, whereas their social inferiors were mere peddlers and small merchants, like David Sikora and his other cousins in America, who were the poor descendants of religious but unskilled workers. The Stern family, for example, would have employed a German girl, but given the increasing Nazi opposition to let Germans do domestic duties for Jews, they took on Fanny instead. Although the laws prohibiting Germans working for Jews would not be in forced until some years later, this family preferred to see itself as being provident.

The two cousins were happy to see one another. They had been childhood friends and had thought that they would never see each other again. Fanny had to cook, clean, and act as Governess to the three small children of the Stern family so she had little time on her hands. They treated her well, but no different to any other maid. "The German Jews," she said, "think they are better than us Polish ones. They believe us to be uncultivated and primitive, while they spend their time listening to Wagner and discussing their problems with psychiatrists." Soon they would need to visit these doctors with alarming frequency, since the Nazis came to power, their rights and freedoms had been running from them like water slipping through the open fingers.

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<sup>42</sup> Western Jewish

<sup>43</sup> Middle East or Spanish Jews

Fanny was allowed to receive the visitors in her small bedroom facing the canal. "Generally they don't let me have Polish folks in the house so as not to irritate the German neighbors." She was convinced that things would get worse in Germany and that Anita was lucky to be leaving. "The patroness says that Germans "project" their fears on the Jews and blame us for all their woes. This is what her Psychiatrist explained to her. Still, she was not convinced: I think these explanations from her Psychiatrist are designed to get more her money. My patrons believe nothing wrong can come to them because the man fought in World War I and he received all sorts of medals for bravery."

Anita did not believe it: "I have a foreboding of impending evil," she said. Both women knew that the rich would be the first to be saved, at least those that were not numbed by unfounded optimism. "The truth is that they have money and they will be able to get away from this mess at any time," Fanny assured her cousin. "But we, the poor, where are we to go?"

"But cousin, even us, penniless as we are, we are leaving." "But you have a husband," cried Fanny. "The man might be a good for nothing Sikora from Ostrołęka, whose own grandfather, Aviezer, and his father, Jacob, were bums who only studied the Torah - but at least he has sent for you. Who cares about a poor maid like me?" "I do!" replied Anita. "I do," and as the two women hugged, "I promise that I will send the tickets as soon as possible, so that you too can get away from here. You won't ever see another German for miles around."

Fanny was not at all convinced. "These people carry with them the seeds of doom, cousin, don't be so sure they won't conquer the world and that you won't have them even in the last corner of the Earth."

The departure was emotional. "Take good care, Anita! May God give you all the happiness of the world," sobbed the other. "Let life treat you well and may you find a good husband."

The following day, mother and all three children boarded the ocean liner for America. "Those traveling in third class go through the other door," shouted a German officer, unable to disguise the loathing dwelling in his soul.

## V

Three months at sea allowed Elena to think as she had never thought before. She imagined what other passengers just like herself might be feeling and thinking as they floated on the ocean towards the unknown. She had read about Christopher Columbus, while investigating the place her family was about to move to. Contrary to what was happening to her, Columbus got lost and all his calculations about the date of arrival in India were wrong. This must have sent the poor Admiral dizzy, she thought, searching for an elusive land that was not showing up across the horizon. Again, and contrary to their own experience, at least Columbus was used to the swaying of ships.

For her family, the first three days aboard the dirty third class cabin had been hell. There were no windows and they had to endure the stifling heat of a cabin next to the rattle of immense steam boilers. Used to the vast Polish landscape, the tightness of the liner was torture. Two people could barely walk side by side along their section's corridor, and the constant comings and goings of numerous voyagers made walking through the tight space an Odyssey in itself. Things were no better in the cabins. The small rooms had but one tiny round skylight from which you could barely see a piece of sky. Bunk beds were placed at both ends of the cabin, making it more like a cell in a prison than the temporary home of paying passengers.

Elena missed the sun. Down in the depths of the third class section, she could barely catch a glimpse of it. Two electrical lamps that made all things appear faded lighted the rest of the place. In the midst of such heat and over-crowding, Anita and her three children threw up everything they ate. Since they had to share the toilet with the passengers of six more cabins, they spent all their time in the queues waiting to get in. Once they had relieved themselves from what little food they still kept in their bodies, they started again at the end of the queuing lines to prevent any sudden mishaps. This they did so often that throughout their floor they were nicknamed "the emetics."

On the third day aboard the dank and noisy vessel, young Elena decided to get a breath of fresh air. The sea breeze she felt would do her well, helping to stop the *chaloshes*.<sup>44</sup> She went via the second-class section, one floor above, and saw two men who looked like rabbis discussing the Talmud. "Where are they going? What will their lives be like?" she wondered.

Once on deck she felt a little better. She was looking at the sky, the few seagulls, the imposing blue ocean, and the well-to-do passengers of first class. She distrusted these hundreds of dressed up women, happily decked out and enjoying themselves, far distant from her kind of worries. If they felt dizzy, the waiting boys would immediately bring smelling salts. If the heat bothered them, they were offered natural fruit juices, a cup of cold wine, or mint tea. "Waiter, bring me a lemonade, I'm hot," a woman from New York was shouting. Beyond her, a lady from the height of Parisian high society was wearing light cotton dress, diaphanous like the ocean breeze. "How thrilling it is traveling to the New World!" she was saying while searching

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<sup>44</sup> Nausea

for Central America on a map. "See how far away it is, darling," she pointed out to her husband.

Hearing about 'that place' reminded Elena of the day when, together with her sister, she visited the town library looking for information about Costa Rica. "Costa what?" demanded the librarian, believing the two young girls were trying to trick her. "Is that a place or a cake?" she added sarcastically. It was obvious that this woman hated serving Jews, who to her misfortune, had taken to using the small library at Długosiodło more frequently than any others. "Surely because theirs is a wandering race, they are always looking for places to go," she commented to her colleague. "I will help them as long as they only request geography books."

"Look, young lady, here we only have books about the history of Poland and other important countries. Where is Costa Rica anyway?" she asked. "My dad moved over there. It's in Central America," Elena answered. "Well then, tell him to stay there and never come back here." Nonetheless, she eventually found an old copy of **A History of America**, which included some maps and a few chapters on the voyages of Christopher Columbus. "Here you are girl, don't be taking it away with you now," she told Elena, slapping the book on the table. Elena took it enthusiastically and sat down to read. Her younger sister, Sarita, only wished to know if in that new land where they were bound, she could get all the free chocolate she could ever want. "Don't be such an idiot, Sarita, the only place where they give you all you need is the United States!"

Reading, the young girl learned that Christopher Columbus, on his fourth voyage to America, arrived at a place called Cariari, nearby to what today is the Port of Limon on the Atlantic coast of Central America. His goals had been similar those of their mother; he too was looking for a fortune, "although the explorer had other designs in mind as well. Accordingly, while in Cariari, Columbus received reports from "two Indians" about the fabulous gold mines to be found and he turned greedy. The natives took him to Carambaru "where the people go about naked, wearing gold mirrors around their necks." They swore that there were large mines near the coast, where they dug the metal for the golden mirrors they wore. The "discoverer" of America did not find any mines.

He was wrongly convinced of having found large amounts of wealth and that this place must be near the Ganges River in India. "The man must have been totally misguided," she explained to her younger sister. He believed in the theories of Florentine Toscallini, that traveling westward was the shortest way to get to India. "Columbus took the same route and had the same purpose as our father", who knows, she told Sarita, eventually luck would completely change for both of them. "I hope that in trying to reach America, we don't end up in India, and sold as slaves to a harem in Bombay."

"The Admiral, you know, he arrived in Central America", she told her little sister, "and not in India as he first suspected. Just like our father, he didn't know any geography when he ended up in a different place, far away from the borders of United States. Columbus should have marched straight away to North America. Instead he discovered America much later than he expected, and the end of it all, he was left as poor as the mice in a synagogue. He should not

have let himself be taken by the first things he saw. The Indians indeed wore trinkets made with golden metal, but that was about as much as they had. The natives did not realize their mistake in talking about the riches to be found in these fabulous gold mines. So the Spaniards got hungry, and, like the Poles and Jews we know today, the explorers became greedy and searched everywhere for these mines of pure gold. Oblivious to the exuberant flora and the rare fauna that covered the newfound land, these conquerors, and others that would follow, were bewitched by the stories of vast mines "rich" with gold, and would call this new land Costa Rica. It is there that we will go in a few more weeks," she told her sister.

Elena returned to her reality. After all, Columbus died without ever learning where he had really arrived at and maybe he had not suffered as much as it was believed. "He used to be around kings," she told herself, "and surely a few good parties he must have had." When they were discussing how to reach India to bring back lots of clove, they drank bottles of wine and ate dozens of partridges and boars. Surely, these parties were paid for with the spoils the Spaniards got when they ejected half a million Jews that same year. Elena imagined the two greedy Catholic Majesties getting ready to receive the treasures the Jews would later leave behind. The ejection decree of 1492 stated that the Jews could not take with them neither gold nor silver and that they were expelled for "attempting to judaize the converts," for "subverting the Catholic faith," and, "for killing Christian children" according to the famous inquisitor Torquemada.

Elena imagined the Catholic queen asking her husband,

*"Please, Ferdinand, pour Columbus more wine, I love his tales of how he is going to reach India. I am dying to try this salty hog spiced with a bit of cinnamon. If we have run out of wine, ask the servants to bring bottles from the Jew. He gave them to me so that I would let him stay in Spain three more months. Beware of that Torquemada finding out about it though; otherwise, he would want some more pesos, as he did with the 300 converts that he burned in 1481. Back then, he concocted fake stories against the Jews, accusing them of ritual murders and other witchcraft, asking me to give him half the fortune of those burnt at the stake. Do not forget the promises he made to the converts: first he would let them go free if they confessed their Jewish practices, but later he would force them under torture to accuse even their own grandmothers. We did not even see one single royal peso. Instead, go get me some partridge eggs among the goods we took from the merchant Ester Iwasrobbed, who I allowed to convert in exchange for a donation to the Crown."*

The Queen must have felt generous and magnanimous despoiling the poor Spanish Jews and Moors. She had taken advantage of the situation created by her own decree, buying for peanuts the *haciendas* of those ejected, and suddenly forced to sell all they owned. "And about Columbus, why should we worry about him? After all he is just another treacherous Jew who converted only to ingratiate himself with the Christians." After all, thought the young girl, he had sold his soul to the Devil. He was just another one in the long list of traitors, including her mother's idol, Karl Marx.

Still, Columbus would not have wanted to know that the cost of converting was worthless, even if, as in her own case, he obtained the transatlantic voyage free. If, as the legend had it, the Catholic Queen gave him her jewels to pay for the expenses necessary for his first voyage, "he would have been an ass not to keep a ring or an embroidered cloak, to be used in case of unforeseen circumstances."

"Elena fancied the Admiral saying to the Queen: "My Lady Isabel, what do you know! They gave me less pesos for your jewelry than we expected." The Royal Treasurer, willing to sow discord between them, retorted that he believed those jewels to be a fake. "Surely you were deceived by those Jews from whom you bought them."

The Queen would get so mad that the poor goldsmith would be beheaded at her request, because in this way nobody would know that Columbus kept for himself many *zlotys*, or their equivalency in royal pesos. However, young Elena had learned the real truth from her history teacher. Instead, Jews like Gabriel Sanchez and Luis de Santángel were the real financial backers of Columbus. Still, Isabel's legend was more romantic and Elena had a passion for chivalrous tales.

Her Majesty would eventually get what she deserved. Elena daydreamed about the face she made when Columbus presented her with a few Indians wearing loincloths and some cockatoos as the spoils of his discoveries. "Are you telling me that I sold my wedding rings and bracelets and for them I now get a pair of tiny beasts that are shitting all over the place and increasing my headache? Do you think that I am stupid, or what?" Isabel shouted in a fit of ire. "I would have done better keeping the Jews and the Moors than dealing with this imbecile Columbus. The only good thing from this voyage is that he has become infected with syphilis and there does not exist a doctor that may cure it."

While the young girl remembered Columbus and his dealings with the great Isabel the First of Castile, the sun was at its best. First class passengers (many of whom were descendants of the Admiral but rather more successful at taking money from poor Indians besides putting them out to work), sat to drink cups of tea on the open lounge by the stern. From there, she would have been able watch all the happening on decks built of precious woods, but had to be contented looking on from afar since such an exclusive spot was banned to third class passengers.

This spot was a social center for the wealthy and famous. Elena thought that it must be a safe place, for if the ship were to go down, these people would be the first to reach the lifeboats. She felt a bit calmer thinking this, at least, the liner was carrying a cargo barge and in case of an emergency, some third class passengers could surely find safety on it. There were women and men from all nationalities. The well-dressed gentlemen wearing top hats and the ladies pointed hats made of fine jipijapa straws, or Andalusian hats with upturned brims.

In front of them, a few German sailors were having a good time with some ladies. Elena watched amazed at how common and wild they looked, apparently incapable of harming a fly, and free of all the perversity that Fanny attributed to them. The men could model for the illustrations of a novel about knights: arrogant, virile, their large white teeth contrasting perfectly with blond hair that waved in the breeze like the little flags on the mast. They were, apparently, wooing the ladies who watched them, enticed by impeccably tight uniforms outlining the shapes and bulges of manly bodies. Facing them, the aristocracy carried on a delightful gossip around small porcelain cups filled with English tea. The bustle of their conversations reminded Elena of the multiplicity of nationalities present: British, French, German, North American, Italian and even Portuguese. It was a beautiful afternoon, full of colors, and the smell of the fine pastries, which the richer passengers eagerly consumed.

Suddenly, two of her countrymen approached from the second-class section, wearing caftans and black hats, they walked steadily towards the sailors. Unforeseen by the Talmud, the men were arguing about who knows what dilemma, perhaps about the dangers of impiety in the New World where their co-religionists had already forgotten their Jewish traditions. The conversation must have been captivating because these men of God were distracted, oblivious of all other passengers. In a sudden movement, a German sailor came nearby, bowed before the two Jewish men, took the hat from the head of one and tossed it into the sea. The other sailors did the same thing to the second Jew. The two men were astonished, and stood deadly still. The young girls who had been chatting with the sailors burst into laughter. The more they laughed, the more the boys were encouraged. "*Juden, juden,*" they shouted. In the heat of the bustle, the taller sailor began to kick at the men's rear end, and ordered them to leave the deck. "We don't want swine Jews on this ship! Go keep company with the rats!"

Elena was unsure what to do. She felt like jumping into a lifeboat, swimming out to sea, or start crying. Did they know she was a Jewess? "Would they take away her small sky blue hat, the only one she owned and that her friend, Shosha, had given to her as a parting present?" As she tried to appear as small as possible, she felt as if she had shrunk so much that it would be hard for others to see her. But she was able to see the faces of the distinguished first class passengers, eyewitness to the event. Some pretended to look the other way and kept drinking their delicious tea. "Wonderful biscuits!" they said. Others shook their heads disapprovingly, while some others approved the action and laughed along with the sailors, lifting their cups as if toasting them. Still some other passengers looked around hatefully but said nothing.

Everything was suddenly caught by a deathly silence: The porcelain tinkling in the tearoom stopped, no one said a word and the different languages and accents were stumped by the roar of the sea. All were relieved when the two Jews ran towards the stairs and disappeared below.

The young girl was sure she would be next. Her vivid imagination made her believe that this time the sailors and the guests in the tearoom would join forces to throw her hat away and kick her harder than they had kicked the men of God. These two men, her fellow compatriots, had rented a "second class" cabin after all, and were more powerful and wealthy than she. It was common knowledge that the larger the fortune, the larger the invisible bubble protecting the



individual. The poor barely possessed clothes and their bodies were easy to hit. If the "second class" passengers were kicked in their rear ends, then those in "third class" would be even less respected and accorded the morality of a transatlantic liner divided into classes. Passengers from this last section would surely receive the harder kicks.

While figuring out just how to hide her hat so as not to lose it, a woman's shrill shouts brought her from her thinking. She noticed an attractive high society woman rushing onto the deck. She was about forty years old and in good shape, wearing a white dress that reached her knees and was crowned by a hat of the same color from which a veil fell across half her face. The woman was coming from the tearoom and had left a few passengers around her table that now looked at her as astonished as Elena did. "Hey, you band of savages and cowards!" she shouted in perfect German. "Why don't you throw away your savage mother's top hat?" The woman in white got closer to the sailors, and as she did so she removed her white hat. She looked just like any one of them: All white, all blond, all blue eyed, all Germans.

She threw her coiffure at one of the sailors. "Toss it into the sea, you big coward, I dare you. Throw it to the waters and then tell me how manly you are!" The sailors and the girls they wooed, the entire tearoom, Elena, and even the gulls, remained silent. In the midst of this eerie void, Elena could hear only the sea and the ship's gigantic motors, but it seemed as if the Tower of Babel had split in two before her very eyes. It had fallen and sunk into the blue of the bluest ocean and nobody spoke another word.

The Captain of the ship, quiet until then, broke the deadly silence. "Baroness Gerffin, what's going on? Are these gentlemen giving you any trouble?" The woman turned her head towards authority, barely opening her lips, and as if thousands of years of aristocracy had reduced the spaces needed to talk, she said: "This grimy Nazi trio have mocked some passengers and I am tired of how they drag Germany's name by the cowsheds' floors." The Captain did not need to ask to whom she was referring, "Gentlemen", he said, "this is my ship and here we shall not tolerate political harassment of any kind." The "first class" passengers, some of whom had been previously celebrating the sailors' actions, now stood up and applauded both the Captain and this exquisite woman, whom they now recognized to be more noble, and surely, wealthier than themselves.

Baroness Gerffin did not return to her friends seated at the table. She stayed to look at the sea, as if hoping to find the lost hats. Elena watched her delicate movements, her poise and her piercing eyes, and she felt as paralyzed as the day she saw the rat. The German woman moved closer to the young Jewish girl. "What a beautiful creature!" she said to Elena, and smiled. "In my entire life, I have never seen such an expressive face." But the looks of her own face were the last thing on Elena's mind. She made a quick assessment of her own clothes: the old gray dress checked in red and sky blue, discolored now after too many washings, the sky blue hat given to her by a friend, the brown shoes that could barely withstand a few more walks, thinning short white socks, and a ridiculous red and sky blue bow, which her mother had insisted on tying around her waist. "I must look like your maid's maid," she thought to herself.

"Thank you for what you did for my countrymen," she daringly responded in Yiddish eventually. "Do not thank me at all, my dear, I did it because the riffraff's that now hold power in Germany make me angry. They are a bunch of gangsters wanting to enjoy themselves on the backs of the likes of those of us who have worked for centuries." "And who are the likes of you?" Elena politely asked. "We are..." Baroness Gerffin continued, but the young girl could hear nothing more above the sudden swell of noise from the ship's roaring motors.

Under the hat, the one that the sailors did not dare to toss into the sea, there was a beautiful and spirited face. The Baroness was the type of person Elena had always liked: a woman of action, a beautiful Amazon, an independent Greek goddess, capable of forging alliances and waging wars, ready to confront men, quite indifferent to the "delicate" feminine version of womanhood imposed upon the century by Victorian Puritanism and movies of the day. "Do you know something, doll? Why don't you come to my cabin so that I can paint your face? I would love to talk about your voyage and paint that very special face of yours. Come tomorrow, at teatime, and look for me in first class. I am Baroness Claudia Gerffin, at your service."

The girl was unable to react, could not say yes or no. She had never been near a noble woman before, a lady sparkling with class, respect, money and something that made her even more attractive than the others: Power. The Baroness possessed something the girl wanted and that bonded both of them beyond race, religion, country, or age. This capacity to command was something women had once enjoyed; it had been taken away from them over time, and was now in need of rescue. This woman, thought Elena, need not ask permission to attend a hovel of a school, nor like Anita, be forced to put her property in the name of her husband, besides serving the useless man on hands and knees like many of the women she knew. "How would you feel about slapping some sailors and knowing they can do nothing about it?" she asked the Baroness. "Marvelous!" she replied.

"At the beginning, in the Bible," explained the Baroness; "we females decided where our people were to live. Abraham left for his woman's lands." However, in a mythical historical moment, these heroines lost their home. "You must be aware that times of exile are key moments for us women." Such times may mean either freedom or slavery. It was the latter in the case of the exile in Babylon. "Biblical women were not weak creatures. They actively participated in the rural society before the exile. Not only did they weave and prepare foods, but they also shepherded and harvested. Women attended public worship and were present at the assembly where Moses issued his laws. They therefore had a relevant role to play."

However, things would change in the days of the Second Temple with the return to Palestine. In order to reinforce nationalism, the powerful priests that compiled the new laws treated women as inferiors. Women were blamed for the exile because they had contravened the principles of the Pentateuch by praying during menstruation. In order to reinforce the family, women were placed under the absolute domination of men and were excluded from the educational and religious systems. Their function would become reproductive and child rearing.

At the same time, the rabbis reinterpreted the very *Torah*. For example, given that the Book of Genesis, had insinuated that Eve was endowed with an intelligence greater than that of Adam, these rabbis concluded that even if the archetypal woman may have more *bina*<sup>45</sup>, the fact that Adam answered directly to God, while Eve answered only to Adam, made it impossible for her to have a full and complete sense of the implications of their disobedience. "The Rabbinic Talmudist tradition that strengthened during the exile took power away from us and imposed submission," added the woman. "You are going to a New Babylon. Be careful that they don't take away the power from you again," the Baroness warned.

Elena descended the stairs to third class, and swore to herself that these were the last stairs she would descend as a 'typical' woman, although as a Jewess she could not be sure if it would mean the same. On arriving at the cabin shared by her family, her mother asked where she had been all this time. "I met a Baroness who wants to paint my portrait tomorrow," she explained. "And I am the Queen of Sheba," came Anita's reply. However, the next day, Elena would be on time for her appointment in the beautiful cabin of Baroness Claudia Gerffin. As she knocked on the door, she thought, "Today is something the poor cannot waste."

The floor maid had assumed the girl came to clean the windows or the magnificent toilet room that included the most luxurious devices of the day--hot water and a marble bathtub. But no, "the young woman is here to pose," the Baroness announced and received her with a broad open smile that clearly suggested friendship. "Come in, Elena, welcome to my cabin!"

The Baroness was an excellent painter; the finished pictures and those still underway were exhibited on the walls and in the corners of the sumptuous room. The young girl was moved by vivid colors of landscapes, by the geometric faces of characters and by the dreamy atmosphere of it all. The Baroness was painting a blue star above a crow placed inside a square; over a dark grass and under a sky of the deepest sky blue she had ever seen. In the next painting, a lonely ballerina with a body made of three balloons danced in a tropical forest filled with waving pineapple, banana and watermelon figures.

While the artist sketched on canvas the feelings aroused by this beautiful girl, she had plenty of time to talk. The Baroness wished to know everything. "This is not a portrait of your face, Elena; what I want to capture is a feeling, an idea, an absence. I am not sure yet just exactly what I am going after, not even if I will find it." The woman made a sketch and then later threw it away, sketched again, then sent it flying towards the waste-bin. The next attempt did not make her happy either and ended up on the sofa. "With the paper you have thrown away, my family could eat for an entire week, Baroness," said the girl. "Do not call me Baroness any more, my name is Claudia." "Well, Claudia, you are wasting a whole forest."

"Silly, silly, girl", replied the painter mockingly, "if you think that I am wasting forests of paper simply trying to sketch you, then you have no idea of your worth." "How much am I worth then, Baroness? How much is a poor Jewess on her way to the jungle worth?" The

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<sup>45</sup> Intelligence

Baroness snatched the fifth sketch and crumpled it into a lump. She turned her head to rivet on Elena's beautiful blue eyes and threw the paper ball at the face of her young guest, smiling: "A girl with the soul of an old woman is worth her weight in gold. It's that simple." Elena felt they had talked enough about her.

"So why is a noble and rich woman on her way to the tropics?" she asked.

"I am going to see my son, a handsome young man by now, I am sure. He left with his father after our divorce. They took him away from me. Nobles also have problems with exiles and separations. The only difference is that pain is easier to endure traveling first class. If you are sad, a glass of whisky will remedy it; if you want to cry, there are wonderfully handy white linen handkerchiefs to soak up your tears; if you are bored a good match of tennis comforts. But the misery, Elena, it is the same misery everywhere."

A silence descended like a small cloud from the ornate ceiling lamp above, filled with the tears kept inside both women. "Speak, your ladyship, tell me the story of your son. I want to listen to your accent, your language, your peculiar way of talking, since one cannot know if it is really a Baroness before me, or the Biblical Sarah before making the mistake of joining Abraham."

Claudia started to laugh. She was surprised that such a young girl could compare her to a biblical female figure and felt that both she and her model had something in common: Feminist consciousness. "You are saucy, woman," said the painter. "I also have to admit that I never liked the biblical heroines but I recognize that things got worse in the New Testament. In my religious high school (because I was sent to one), each time they talked about Mary, I wanted to read about Judith again. At least, the woman had guts." Elena could not believe that a German Baroness could have thoughts so similar to her own. "Don't you think that Judith's is the best story in the Bible?" "Completely," the Baroness replied. "Surely that is why she was removed from the Torah and left as an apocryphal text," the Baroness insisted.

In the Book of Judith, she continued, the traditional role of women is challenged the most. "Contrary to Eve, whose sexuality is regarded as the reason for the fall, she represents the salvation of the nation." The Assyrian forces under the command of Nebuchadnezzar are about to take Bethulia on their way to Jerusalem. The Jewish people, overwhelmed by hunger, beg their leaders to surrender, unless God ordered otherwise. Judith – a beautiful widow - questions why they dare set time limits to the divine intervention. She promises to save the town.

She goes to the enemy's camp, and makes them believe that she will reveal how to take the city. She has an interview with general Holophernes, the Assyrian king, whom she beheads while he was inattentive. Judith appears to the Israelites, carrying her bloody trophy and encourages them to launch a surprise attack. They come out victorious and Judith is regarded as the great heroine and savior of independence. Although she is given a royal treatment in Jerusalem, the warrior woman returns to her town to reject numerous offers of marriage until

her death. "The story is touching because it is inserted in the midst of the most patriarchal Judeo Christian book, like a dagger on manly pride."

"I believe, as Judith did," continued Claudia, "that those women seeking to be historical leaders, do better without male company. The same occurs between Christians and Jews; we may not love each other until the oppression and discrimination are over. No one respects the weaker person, Elena. It is the simplest of mathematics."

The Baroness seemed to have Judith's power. She had shown it to the sailors. "But who may tell you what you should or should not do?" she continued. The painter lit a cigarette, looked at the girl, and started to talk. She had married a General of the German Army, a considerate man at first, "like all men before the passion is spent. According to the story of Tristan and Isolde," she said, 'passionate' love lasts three days. In my case, it was three years. Our love ended, and the only good thing I had left was a son called Max. His father accused me of infidelity and of living with another woman, which was true, and he took me to court. They took away my son, whom I have not seen since. I know he left for Costa Rica and works at the Legation. I am going to him with my soul in my mouth, so that he will not reject me."

Elena had never before met a lesbian, but neither had she met a Baroness, an artist and an independent woman. She was therefore unsure exactly which aspect surprised her most. Maybe the most familiar was also the most striking, since she knew that her Uncle Samuel, "the suicide", also loved someone of the same sex. Without thinking about it, she hugged and kissed Claudia on the forehead. "Not any son could reject such a wonderful mother, Claudia, no one." The older woman could not control her crying. "Come see me at the Hotel Costa Rica, please," she said. Do not leave me alone in that country."

## VI

David Sikora had a rough start in America. He was one of the two Jews that arrived at the Costa Rican port of Limon in 1927. He spoke no words of Spanish, but employing terrible English, he managed to learn of a "German" merchant who owned a large business in San Jose, the capital city. To his surprise, the owner was Enrique Yanquelemi, a fellow Jew. Not knowing any trade, he decided to look for work in Yanquelemi's department store, One Hundred Flowers. As he walked towards Central Avenue, the two men met by coincidence in front of the cathedral. His first conversation with Yanquelemi was fast and fruitful. "How wonderful it is to find a fellow Jew here so far away from Poland!" said David. "To me it is a surprise to find another Polish Jew in Costa Rica. What can you do?" Enrique asked.

"I need help. I only studied at a *yeshiva*. I only have \$25. I must work doing whatever is available," said the new immigrant looking towards the church.

"Without speaking Spanish it's going to be hard to find anything. I can give you a job as a peddler at my department store, One Hundred Flowers. You'll get a commission from your sales and you need to seek your customers away from downtown. One thing, though, leave your passport with me as a warranty."

It was not long before David Sikora found out that the few Jews who had arrived before him also worked for this department store. He had to work, as a *klapper*, a word from the Yiddish "klap-klap," meaning to knock at a door, like the English "knock-knock" or the Spanish "tac-tac." His trade would be to sell clothes and fabrics in the marginal urban and rural areas. By 1930, the records of this department store included 99 Jews working as peddlers (around 90 per cent of those entering the country). Accordingly, this department store helped many people pull away from poverty, while others claim they were exploited and their passports removed in order to keep them controlled.

David's work was to include selling merchandise in the rural towns. Next day he took off on horseback to Alajuela, the second largest town in the country, and its surrounding villages. Since he could speak no Spanish, he was to peddle using signs and numbers. It would be a major challenge to explain the virtues of the rags he was selling, and once in the town, he sat alone with his suitcase in the central park. Later, waving his arms about, he called to passerby. Some stopped because they were attracted to this man with the deep black eyes and eyebrows, gesticulating so strangely that they considered him a magician. The peasants expected a rabbit from his hat or some other kind of magic, and in the usually quiet park shadowed by large mango trees and bordered by stone benches, a small crowd gathered.

Don Paco, a fat peasant from the town of Naranjo, said to his friend, a government clerk, "Look, Abdulio, I don't understand this gentleman at all. I've been waiting for him to perform a magic trick for several minutes now and the only thing he does is to show fabrics and clothes. I don't see anything extraordinary in opening a suitcase and pulling a rag from it. Besides, he uses quite a lot of them. He puts them over that girl over there, as if wanting to play a trick on her. He doesn't speak Spanish and says words that I can't understand. What's going on?"

"Oh, it's an old thing I saw when the circus came to San Jose three years ago. In a few minutes he will pull a rabbit from the fabrics and surely will cut the woman in half. Let's wait a little while," answered Abdulio.

David had no idea what bewilderment he was creating. He tried to explain that the fabric would make a nice dress. The peasants applauded by mere courtesy, since his juggling could not have impressed them. "He must be very good because he has come with his show from far away," said Malaquias, a barman from downtown. "But I see no magic," another one answered. "Don't worry. The rabbit is going to pop up when you least expect it." After looking at the magician from different angles, Malaquias the barman took out twenty-five cents from his pocket and gave it to David appreciatively. "Excellent! Excellent!" said Abdulio, smiling. "It's the best show I've ever seen. It deserves rewarding." The rest did likewise, so as not to be less than Abdulio. They gave him coins, applauding with gusto. David made five *colones* that first day and was able to keep all the merchandise. Such a large fortune was enough to pay for that day's meal.

"How generous and strange these people are!" he thought. "They gave me money and didn't take the goods." David believed he was being paid just for showing his fabrics and clothes. In Poland, no one ever received such kind gestures. While they walked away, Malaquias said to a fellow, "What an excellent show! Did you notice how I got well over thirty *colones* from the ladies' purses while they were paying attention to that madman?" The bartender had taken the opportunity to fleece some onlookers, who could not feel his sharp fingers opening their purses.

Unknowingly, David had started the *klapper* occupation or Polish Credit that was to become the main activity of all the Jews who came after the 1930s (a common and forced experience for them all). Many peddler-friends of Anita's husband, added to this claim while chatting after dinner at Hotel Central, the first hotel to open in the city of Alajuela. For example, Rogelio admitted having had no other option: "I did just like the other 99% of the community in those days, worked as a peddler. It was the only real alternative we had." Those that didn't want this type of work had to leave the country.

Since they could not speak Spanish, it was impossible to figure out the addresses of the places where they peddled. Ingenuity came to their rescue. They wrote descriptions of the houses as an aide de memoir. José made his first sale at a pink house in the Kent neighborhood of San José. In order to remember it later, he wrote it down, "pink house with two windows, 100 yards from the railroad." In order to avoid getting lost in unknown territories without a good command of Spanish, some, the majority, sold exclusively in their own neighborhoods. Others set up a "*tienda*" (store) in the street, generally in a place with heavy transit like Central Park or nearby Saint John the Divine Hospital. For the more ambitious or aggressive, like David himself, the place to work was the "virgin" rural areas, where this kind of trade had not yet arrived. Each peddler had to go out to the countryside for several days in a row be it traveling on foot or horseback, they also had to carry the merchandise or pay a peon to carry the suitcases sometimes.

Life was hard for all of them. Moisés Flinsein, another tenant at the hotel, used to leave for the countryside on his horse on Monday morning and returned to San José, if he was lucky, late in the evening on Thursday. Herman Ropoport, a veteran of nine years in these tasks, told of journeys to the towns of Tres Ríos, San Pedro and Coronado that lasted an entire week and where his only help was the horse, since he was not "one of the 'rich' who could afford to hire a hand for one colón a day."

Jacobo Putowski had a schedule as hard as that of David's guests and companions: "We got credit from the department stores and both my brother and I began peddling by the rural towns. We sold in cash and in installments. I, for example, on Sundays sold in the village of Desamparados, on the slopes of the mountains at the South of the valley, then in Santa Bárbara on Monday, on the Barva volcano, Northwest of the capital. On Tuesdays, I went to the lowlands at the West side of the valley, in San Antonio de Belén, Ojo de Agua and Río Segundo; on Wednesdays, in Barva of Heredia, San Pablo, San Pedro and Barrio Jesús, again on the slopes of the Barva volcano; then traveled north of San Jose to Santo Domingo and Tibás on Thursdays; then Santa Ana and Villa Colón on Fridays, located on the distant southwest of the valley. I even peddled in Sabanilla de Montes de Oca, from La Paulina to Mata de Plátano on Saturday morning, on the east side of the valley, already on the slopes of the Irazú volcano. I did all that walking for about a year and a half or maybe two years."

Many peddlers complained about the state of the roads. "This was a very hard job because the roads were in very bad shape and during the *'invierno'*<sup>46</sup> I endured more than one *'sentada'* (falling down). On the route from Mercedes of Heredia to San Roque, you had to walk with the mud up to your knees. For his part, Salomon Schifter complained of other dangers: "Not everybody paid on time and once a customer came out threatening me with a machete, simply because I was trying to collect a debt."

After those long night conversations at the hotel, the next day David returned to the same park in Alajuela to continue "selling." Again he went through his repertoire of grimaces and the onlookers expected that at any time a rabbit or a chicken would jump out of his suitcase. Still, although they applauded at each piece of fabric displayed by him, they were not impressed by this circus. David had never seen people receiving each rag with such thrill and couldn't understand why he wasn't selling anything. While he pulled out a *shmate* and returned another one to the suitcase, a girl he later found to be a floozy, called Emilia, talked with her companion who was also engrossed in the business at hand.

"Laura, I don't think the magician is any good but can't you see how lovely the fabrics are? I could sew myself a beautiful dress with any one of them for next week's party. I'll ask him if he would sell some."

"Ask him also if he would sell the handkerchief he uses to pull out the rabbits" answered the other woman.

Emilia wrote "two *colones*" on a piece of paper, passed it to David and pointed to the fabric. David understood perfectly well that this was an offer. He wrote "3" on it and gave it back to the woman who, in turn, wrote once more, "2,50," and smiled as she showed it to him. David assented and just like that, he had completed his first sale. The second one would be the handkerchief, sold for 1,25 *colones*.

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<sup>46</sup> Rainy season



"Did you see, Laura, what a good bargain we got?"

"I think you are greedy, buying from the magician his circus tools. The poor man is going to end up unable to play his tricks."

"The truth is that as a magician he is rather poor and it'll be better if he were to sell those things instead of wasting his time."

The next day in Alajuela, the circulating rumors claimed the magician was retiring and was auctioning all his materials. The women heard that Emilia had bought one and a half meters of good quality fabric at a bargain price and that the handkerchiefs were cheap too. Thus, on the third day, people were queuing to acquire the rest of the merchandise. More and more meters of fabric were sold by means of small pieces of paper with numbers written on them being passed back and forth. "Mr. magician, Mr. magician, pick up this piece of paper. I want the fabric you use to pull out the spotted cavy," shouted a peasant woman. "Don't be daft," her friend corrected her. "The magician only pulls out rabbits."

David was happy with his initial success. He had finally made the peasants understand they could take the *shmates*. "The people in Costa Rica," he thought, "are very generous. They pay me just for displaying the fabrics, something no one would do in Poland. Probably they don't have enough money to buy them." It occurred to him that introducing credit sales would make things easier for them.

One of his first permanent customers would be Emilia and her companion, who invited him to sell at their house. Three months later, when David had learned enough Spanish, he visited them. The place was a discreet bordello, patronized by the young gentlemen of Alajuela. There he would meet the elite "*manuda*", as the dwellers of Alajuela were known. David gained more customers there and learned the secrets of the Costa Rican sexual life. "Come to sell at my house," an attractive man of about thirty told him, "but don't you dare tell my wife where you met me."

Some men uninterested in the girls visited the bordello. One of them asked him to sit at his table and show him the fabrics. "Oh, how divine it is!" said the young man. "Your wife will look beautiful dressed in it," answered David, reading the phrase on a piece of paper. "What wife?"- asked the young man. "With this fabric I will have a dress made for me." A few minutes later, David watched as this youth chatted intimately with a man from San José: "I have a special fabric that I want to use at the party in the Casa del Terrón," he was saying. The boy wanted to be called Chepa from now on and promised David he would introduce him to his friends, most of them from San José. "Let me introduce you to my couturier, recently arrived from Poland," he would say. "You may buy using credit and, besides, be honest with him because he knows all about me."

The homosexual underworld would provide David with many customers. Not everybody dared to step into one of their "*bares de mala muerte*", or shady bars, as they were known in San José. Some were located close to the Central Market while others remained on the outskirts of town. Most of them didn't have names, just a sign on the door: "Private Party." The police were not deceived, however, since these signs were usually falling down with

age. David himself would learn this trick from the homosexual bars. When he opened his first store in the Market, he would hang another permanent sign: "Final Sale, This Week Only."

Many famous men attended these bars, and as salesman, David would be invited to the homes of high society where elegant women bought his goods. "Don't dare sell Mario's wife the same fabric that I bought for my dress," said the banker's male lover. "Moreover, I'll pay you double if you convince her to buy that horrible brown rag that has become a '*hueso*' for you"<sup>47</sup>.

These underground bars were packed with customers wanting to buy secretly. Were they to buy at the stores, everybody would find out about their secret lives. They were natural customers to discreet *klappers* like David. "How would this red dress look on me?" a homosexual called Susanita would ask. "You'll look like Salome in the Dance of the Seven Veils," answered David. "I hope so, because my lover, Max, enjoys making love using Biblical themes."

The homosexuals were surprised that such a "decent" man like David would mingle with them. To their even bigger surprise, the police that extorted them did not impress David at all. He was used to such procedures: "In my homeland, if you are Jewish, you get arrested all the time for a trifle, and then they pressure you to pay bribes," he told them. Once, the police raided a bar and everybody was lined up. When it was his turn to be searched, a policeman said to a fellow officer: "It's the only thing we were missing: a queer Pole."

The salesman could identify with these people. He knew what it meant to have to conceal one's identity, experience rejection and suffer the persecution of the Christian church. "We Jews are in Poland what the homosexuals are in Costa Rica," he would tell them. Anni, a homosexual who liked to dress as a girl from time to time, would ask him, "And do you know, over there, someone like us?" "Well yes, a relative of my wife who blew away his brains."

The homosexuals offered him their friendship and something else besides, a profound knowledge of female vanity. Susanita usually reprimanded the peddler: "Why man! Stop bringing those Spanish fabrics covered with fiery flowers. Perhaps you think we all are Gypsy girls in this country?" "She" taught David about the styles and tastes of Costa Rican women: "We are attracted by feminine things, embroidered and laced clothes, but we don't like gaudy or large things. Some small daisies against a green background are all right, but not those pumpkin flowers on a red taffeta." David never again bought a *shmate* without prior advice from Susanita. "How do you like these *foulards* from the United States?" he would ask. "They're as uncouth as the people from Cartago," he would answer.

By providing credit to the popular classes, David was aware that a revolution was in the making since both rural and urban workers labored under harsh conditions. The average salary was \$26 per month, and housing conditions were precarious. In the central county of

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<sup>47</sup> Goods that don't sell

San José, the most urbanized area of the country during the 1930s and the 1940s, many homes lacked toilets and electricity and half of all houses had no electric stove. With such salaries, the lower classes were unable to buy even the cheapest of David's merchandise for cash. The introduction of "Polish installments" made it possible.

Contrary to his experience of Poland, David realized that people in Costa Rica really appreciated this innovation, and an alliance soon developed between the Jews and the lower classes. Susanita defended the peddlers because "without them we would be dressed like beggars." A similar thought passed the mind of La Polvera ("The Duster"), a Communist sorceress: "The Poles are poor, we should never let the exploiter merchants from Central Avenue turn us against them."

These good relations found expression in the low levels of defaults. David understood that the *Tico* clients "pay because they don't want to lose us." The experiences of his friends were also positive. The credit revolution also helped some of the established merchants. Companies like One Hundred Flowers prospered thanks to it. Don Enrique, the owner, was able to boast in front of David that he had contributed to the development of the Jewish community in the country. "And also to the development of your pockets," David responded in thought.

Profits for David remained "rachitic." In many opportunities, he was barely enough to pay for room and food at the boardinghouse he shared with other colleagues. Moreover, establishing one's own store or any other kind of business required the cooperation of the entire family, a self-imposed discipline, and lots of patience. "Your mother was dead wrong when she told you that I was spending the money on *kurvhes*," David said to Elena.

However, it was only fair to Anita to recognize that his friendship with his customer Emilia lasted for a long time and that eventually something could have happened between them before he could afford to bring his family from Poland. After all, his sole entertainment consisted of drinking a glass at the bar and listening to a bit of music before stepping out to continue on his route. The woman pitied him: "Poor David!" she would say. "So far away from his homeland and without a family!" David would smile and answer: "Poor Emilia! So beautiful and yet so lonely." Was there love between them? What can happen between a practically single, relatively young man with beautiful eyes and a sweet smile, without relatives, yet melancholic, and experienced in the art of love-making and an attractive girl in a tropical country where bodies are freely displayed and contorted, where the nights are hot, glances are piercing, sights fly and compliments generate echoes?

## VII

After sailing for three weeks, Elena finally saw land. "Limon by the prow!" shouted a sailor. During these last days she had suffocated under increasingly hot weather. They were reaching the tropics. The breeze now brought much humidity and her hair became as entangled as a bowl of noodles. For the last week, she had posed for Claudia and her portrait was about finished. Following the trends of the day, the Baroness loved geometrical figures. Elena's face was depicted inside a lilac squared background and her body appeared disintegrated in multiple triangles and spheres. Still, the picture was beautiful. The eyes occupied a central place, in the guise of two black suns. The painting exuded an atmosphere of extreme loneliness. Claudia was unable to paint a defined background; it lacked even some objects to create the idea of a place. The model hung on space; her feet didn't touch the earth.

"Elena, this is a present for you," she said. "It is my best painting but I cannot keep it." Claudia, nonetheless, requested that they meet again in San José, where she would do a different portrait. "Maybe I will paint some papayas or bananas in the background."

If Columbus was excited when he distinguished the island of Uvita in front of Limón, young Elena experienced her biggest disillusionment instead. The Costa Rican Atlantic port was decaying because of the diseases affecting the banana plantations. It was but a pale caricature of what this town had been during the first years of the century when it rivaled the capital city. The Victorian style wooden houses were in a bad shape and in need of paint. The park facing the ocean didn't have a single flower; only a few abandoned coconut trees adorned it. The only likeable buildings were the white Protestant churches with green gardens and the customs building. Crowds of poor people could be seen in the streets stupefied by drowsiness.

Unemployment became as high as in Warsaw, when the all powerful banana firm, United Fruit Company, began abandoning the province due to the diseases affecting the plantations. The large numbers of black people called her attention. She had never seen such people before. These Jamaicans, immigrants like her, came to try their luck working in the construction of the railroad and then stayed in the new country. They were not legal residents, however, and could not work in San José. An unofficial "cordon sanitaire" was established to keep them inside this province of Limón. It was similar to encircling the Jews in the Eastern European ghettos. Still, the girl was amazed at the beauty of these men and women. She had never seen such bodily perfection or any kinder smiles.

Upon landing, David was not anywhere to be seen, and their disappointment was immense. "Perhaps we came all the way to this distant place and will now be left helpless in the midst of the Atlantic jungle, not knowing a single soul?" thought both Anita and Elena. The children were impressed by the landscapes that could be seen from downtown. The coconut trees, tall and inclined, were loaded with fruits; along with the large number of other different and unknown trees. Closer to the ocean there were large natural forests creating a wall of impenetrable foliage with intense greens on top, barks of diverse browns, producing fruits like mangoes, pineapples, bananas, papayas, plantains, medlars, "*caimitos*" and

"*jocotes*." They grew all the way to the beach. Hundreds of plants grew side-by-side, seeking the sunrays and fighting for every available inch of space. The flowers were magnificent white, yellow and red belladonna, roses, bougainvillea, "birds of paradise" and many more. There was not only a struggle between plants, but also among dozens of monkeys. They were looking for fruits and tender leaves, they jumped from tree to tree, roaring like hungry lions and hitting each other when one of them tried to steal fruits from the others.

Elena and her mother were not so amazed and felt instead an acute uneasiness. "Did our father know we were arriving today?" asked the young girl. "Well, I don't think many ships come daily from Europe to this hole, and I don't believe we have landed in the wrong country," answered her now enraged mother. "But don't worry. I presume he is on his way from San José on a fancy chariot and will meet us soon," she added sarcastically. The woman couldn't bear her disappointment. She looked all around her, trying to recognize the husband she hadn't seen for the last seven years. "What will I do if he doesn't show up?" "Perhaps he had tanned in the tropics to the point of becoming one of these black gentlemen?" In order to break the tension she said to Elena: "Ask that man if he is your father." Elena didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or rather to look for a black mother.

Suddenly, a short fat lady approached them and asked in Yiddish, "Are you the Sikoras?" "Yes, of course, indeed!" answered Anita, beginning to calm down. "My name is Amalia. I'll guide you. Your husband sent me to take you to San José. His health is not all that well and he preferred not to make the journey here." "Well then, tell him we've gone on a shopping spree in New York while he recovers," answered Anita displaying her most cynical humor. "And how did you recognize me?" she asked her, intrigued. "Your husband told me to look for the most bitter face."

One hour later, they were leaving by train for the capital city on a journey that would take eight hours. Amalia came originally from Zellochow. She advised them to drink and eat something. This was the first time they tried the exquisite Costa Rican coffee, as well as some unsavory doughnuts. During the trip, Elena noticed a band playing at each town when they arrived. First it happened in Siquirres, then in Turrialba and in Cartago as well. With a good sense of humor, Anita told Amalia, "It's such a wonderful country! Each town receiving us with playing bands!" Amalia didn't understand her new friend's sarcasm and worriedly tried to explain: "No, no, woman. It's because the bishop from San José is visiting today and he is welcomed with concerts in the streets."

Their guide told them how San José was more "modern" and prettier than Limón. According to her, the coffee elite had made it a symbol of their power and the capital city, an honor they removed from the old colonial capital, Cartago. As a result of the good economic and cultural times, a number of places for entertainment and leisure were established, particularly "fine" places for the political elite. There were men's clubs, social centers for foreigners, as well as professional and intellectual societies. The ladies attended charity societies and spent their free time helping the poor and homeless. "Did you hear, Elena, we now have something to do in San José?" said the mother. "The only problem is the fact that we are the ragamuffins," she added.

They got a better impression of the country once they arrived in San José. Upon entering the town, the visitors obtained "a civic lesson" from Amalia. She took them first to the National Monument, a sculptural complex celebrating victory over the invading North American adventurers. Gigantic figures in bronze depicted the defense of the national territory, a heroic exploit to protect the country's independence against the attacking filibusters. Later, she showed them the Variedades theatre and the National Theatre; the latter an architectural jewel inspired by the Opera Comique of Paris, a marked contrast against the rather modest town. The building of the National Theatre was a reflection of a new cultural program, which in turn, symbolized the secularization of civic, political and cultural life; rivaling the other major architectural monument of San José, the Cathedral. "This city is very civilized," said Amalia - she felt already part of the "josefina" community. "Ticos are religious but not fanatics as the Poles," she added. Anita, on the other hand, was suspicious. "I think this woman," she whispered to Elena, "is a little *meshugeneh* and thinks she is showing us Paris."

The area around the railroad station was less splendid but still very beautiful. The most important, in terms of its social impact, was the Promenade of the Ladies, which began near the railroad station to the Atlantic. You could see this promenade from the station's platform. This building had been inaugurated in 1908, had an Art Deco facade and handsome benches made with the finest "*cenízaro*" wood. From the station the promenade continued westwards following Third Avenue, by the recently built National Park, then by one side of the Liquors Factory, and further ahead, close by the so-called "Metallic Building," an impressive iron construction erected with the same techniques used to build the Eiffel Tower. It had been sent from France to an unknown Latin American country and by mistake ended up in San José.

Next to it, a group of gardens had been created with the name of Morazan Park. For many years, open-air band concerts and public dances were held in this park for the New Year holidays. These concerts or *retretas* were, from the beginning, an integral part of the festivities. They mainly consisted of competitions between different military bands. "I love military bands," said Anita with irony. "Every time I attended a parade in Poland, the Christians would end up shooting us." "No, not in San José," responded Amalia, "this is a liberal city that preserves its beauty and ornamentation, symbols of progress and modernity."

The urban culture appeared Europeanized. The central areas of the main cities were full of new pharmacies, offices, booking offices, stables and billiards. At the same time, the growth in international trade made it easy to diversify consumption. The stores in San José offered the latest fashions from Paris, Dutch cheeses, French wines, American apples, jams from Westphalia and an exquisite assortment of liquors. The bookstores exhibited the works of Sue, Scott, Byron, Smith, Bentham and other noted writers. Important foreign companies visited the Mora Theatre, inaugurated in 1850. "You will feel here as comfortable as in Paris or London," said Amalia with a smile. The Sikoras, on the other hand, felt the woman had lost her head in the heat. "This lady was shipped off from

Zellochow directly to Costa Rica," Anita told her daughter, who also agreed that this woman had never set foot in a European city.

This was only one side of San José, the city of the wealthy few. The other side was much less attractive. It was the town of the workers and the peasants displaced by large landowners. Their houses were built with wooden planks or in adobe, lacking electricity, running water or enough space for their families. Since salaries were barely enough to buy food, many relatives lived under a single roof in order to pull together their rachitic incomes. This is why people lived heaped up in unsanitary conditions.

The Jews were among these. After noticing the modern conveniences of San José, Anita and her family had to go south of Central Avenue, near the General Cemetery. There, David had rented a small house for his family. Until this point, the man had rented a room with five fellow Jews in Moisés Burstín's hotel. There you could get a room for five *colonos* per month, provided you were ready to share it with five other tenants. As the new family arrived, this was no longer possible. The owner's son complained that he would withhold David's underwear as ransom "until he paid his bill." David had saved to rent a new house and to open a small store in the Central Market and had moved during the previous week. Still, he was only able to buy three beds and had no underwear since he had to choose between furniture and clothes.

When his wife and children knocked at the door and David opened it, neither he nor Anita could recognize each other. It was not only that both had aged, but that they looked so different. The woman wore large gray garments that revealed she came from the boonies. David, on the other hand, no longer wore the traditional Polish dress. He had shaved his beard and had on a pair of cream trousers instead of the usual black ones, a sky blue lightweight jacket instead of the white shirt and tall brown boots instead of leather shoes. Besides, his Yiddish wasn't good. Between words he inserted Spanish vocabulary that his family couldn't understand. His very gestures were different and not even his wife could give credence to her eyes. He had a new irreverent attitude towards religion. David said that in Costa Rica it was impossible to eat *kosher* and that he had to work on Saturdays, something unusual for a religious man.

Elena couldn't decide what impressed her most -- the empty house or the lack of joy. David hugged them as if they were strangers since he barely remembered his children. He grimaced when Sarita was introduced, the girl who was born after his departure. "How old is she?" was his first question. "Exactly seven years old," said Anita without giving anyone else a chance to answer. Samuel had grown without a father and was like an erupting volcano. This bothered his father from the start. As for Elena, he could barely recognize her.

The little girl was now a handsome young woman and her features strongly resembled his own. "The girl from Khazar," he said, greeting her with a faint smile. For her part, the young girl looked at her father as she would a perfect stranger.

After sharing their adventures of Długosiodło, their sea voyage, and endless stories of relatives and friends, it was time to sleep. The next day their father took them to work at his store, because "there's no time to waste," he said. He was under medical care and needed new helpers at the store.

Elena noticed that from the moment they came into the hovel, Anita had transformed herself as radically as Joseph had changed in Egypt. Her family wasn't able to recognize her anymore. In Poland, she had been both mother and father, controlled their money, divorced her first husband and exercised power over her own body and time. But now, in a passing moment, she had lost her vitality. Her attitude, her voice, manners, gaze, humor, all these were now mixed with her current environment and Anita had ceased to be herself. From then on she was David's wife, at the absolute mercy of his whims and decisions. These would always be negative to her. Gender relations, thought Elena, is something so changeable that it might be dissolved like sugar in a cup of hot tea. She had already noticed this phenomenon during their sea voyage. When men were confronted with difficult situations, they "weakened" and became more "feminine," allowing their women to socialize with others. For Anita, and for the rest of the female passengers, once on land the trip was over.

Her father explained to them that the following day they would go to see their store at the Central Market and would start their Spanish "lessons" so that they could help him with sales. Their instructor would be the butcher, who spoke quite correctly since he came from Madrid. Only Sarita, the youngest child, would go straight to the school. Elena and Samuel were to help in the business until the beginning of the next school year. While their father uttered orders and instructions, the young girl intuitively grasped the new rules of their home in America.

From now on, he would be in charge. Her mother was relegated to second place at best. The woman that had carried on her back the burden of home "since always," as if by a magic spell was becoming a submissive Latin woman. The disempowerment of this Jewish woman in the tropics had started. Their father not only informed them how "unseemly" it was for ladies to be independent and to be seen out often; but he was now in full control the most lethal weapon of intimidation, money. "Tomorrow I'll give you three *colones* so that you may buy things to eat." His daughter understood just how those three *colones* would change the alliances and that if she wanted to remain alive in this new environment, she would need to use psychology to steer her small sailing boat on these murky waters. "Father, let me give you a present, my portrait that someone painted on the ship, so that you have something to hang in your bedroom," she told him, giving up the only thing she owned. For his part, David gave her a mutt as a welcoming token. She would call it Adolph.

As promised, the next day, the young girl went to the Market together with her two siblings and their father. Located in the heart of downtown it was a world of its own, full of colors and merchandises. Hundreds of businesses competed against each other in an intricate labyrinth of covered alleys. Here peasants and workers came to buy their essentials. Her father explained to her how the world recession had everybody worried; since 1930, things



"have been deteriorating." The international prices of coffee, bananas and cocoa had fallen and thus the income in Costa Rica had been reduced. International banana prices had remained the same, but the production on the Atlantic plains had decreased dramatically with the impact of diseases such as "The Panama Disease," or Sigatoka. In order to arrest these trends, the President had declared a moratorium on the National Debt and the Government had undertaken the construction of new public works in order to stimulate the market and provide employment. This, in turn, accelerated the size of the deficit and the resulting fiscal greed. The only way to pay the public expenses was by increased taxation at customs, already the source of half the country's tax revenues. Such measures were "extremely damaging for merchants importing goods." "You may therefore imagine how bad it is," said David to his daughter, "this TB infection and the fact that I can't do much work."

His determination to abandon peddling was shared by several of his friends. Jews were already moving away from the trade and Costa Ricans (or "Christians") were replacing them in the marketplace. The Jews had improved their lifestyle somewhat. Some, like David, would remain at small stores or shops all their lives. Those with industrial experience in Poland, or with some small investment funds, were able to move ahead much faster. "A group of friends are planning to open a small dressmaking factory," David commented to his daughter. Other fellows, such as Manuel Stein and Salomon Schifter, had requested loans to purchase machinery from British and Canadian banks. "Both Salomon and his brother, Adolfo, are also suitable bachelors," David insisted.

Her father needed to take care of his health. After showing her the small stalls he had rented in the Market, he asked Elena and Sarita to take a stroll down Central Avenue. Together with his wife, in the meantime, he would figure out how to handle the business from that day forward. Samuel was surely to stay. He would be occupied handling the cranes to and from the higher shelves. As the little girl and the young woman got ready to start their reconnaissance of downtown San José, their father worked out a plan.

The most important and consolidated stores were those aligned down Central Avenue. The rich shopped there; those selling in this area were wealthier. A store called La Gloria caught Elena's attention. It was a general store located two blocks from the Central Market and specialized in fabrics and clothes imported from Spain and Western Europe. Some of the fabrics in colors and styles unknown to the girls were simply wonderful. Instead of traditional wool or cottons, there you could find foulards joyfully stamped, jerseys in diverse colors, taffetas and silks from China. As they passed by a store called "La Más Barata" ("The Cheapest"), a woman gave them a pamphlet; they thanked her but could not read it.

One block ahead they were impressed by the glass cases of La Veronica. In the midst of an entanglement of mirrors were dresses so gorgeous that only queens should wear them. The mirrors made it possible to look at these dresses from all angles. "Look, Sarita! What a wonderful night dress!" Elena said to her sister. It was a dress made of white silk that fell to the knees, with a black belt made of the same material and intricate embroidering on the

lapels. While she was ecstatically examining this piece of clothing, she noticed blue eyes like Claudia's, chasing hers through the mirrors.

Elena felt paralyzed. She glued her eyes to that part of the mirror that held the eyes of the person watching her. For several moments she stood completely still. Those eyes were beautiful, deliciously refreshing, filled with rivers and springs. She could not understand why these blue eyes were after her, why they chased her everywhere, on boats and in the towns, as if they wished to bite her, to swallow her, to trap her. Suddenly she came to her senses.

"Let's go now," she told Sarita. Taking her sister's hand, she was ready to escape, but this time the *dybbuk* obstructed her. "May I help you?" he said. She didn't understand anything but at the same time intuitively knew everything. For, indeed, the *dybbuk* was a man who escorted them back to the Market. The journey back combined terror and the most complete happiness. The last was a new feeling. She couldn't listen to what he was saying, nor understand the greetings of the merchants along the Avenue, or the compliments of salesmen in the Market. She was looking at Carlos as she had examined the dresses in the glass case: too beautiful to make it her own. She had never seen hair made of varied streaks of blond and brown. She had never seen a mouth like his or teeth as white as these. His smile was warm and as comforting as that of the black people she had seen in Limón. But he too was a forbidden beauty. She could not understand why these Germans hated her so much and were chasing her at the same time. "What is the meaning of this prank of Nature? Do I share the same destiny as Samuel, who killed himself?" she said in silence. When he asked to see her again, she answered with a "No" that was unconvincing, even to herself. By the time she realized that they were just ten meters from her father's store, La Peregrina, Carlos had already disappeared in the winding alleys of the Market like another Elias ascending to heaven.

An almighty slap woke her from the spell. "If I ever see you with that German again, I'll kill you," her father was shouting.

## VIII

"They look like cows chewing branches!" laughed Sarita noticing two men sucking sticks of sugar cane. The girls didn't know this plant and couldn't understand why Costa Ricans ate it. For his part, Samuel, the boy falling between the two girls, ate an entire banana, including the skin. Elena herself had peeled and bit an avocado once and its seed almost broke her front teeth. Nor were they used to food made from maize, which they also didn't particularly like.

They didn't know vegetables like *chayote*, sweet potato and *yucca*. They were not used to eating black beans, a central component of the diet in the new country. In Europe, they ate potatoes, haricot beans, noodles, herring, butter, bread and salami. Old World dishes were very heavy on the stomach and had to be abandoned. More importantly, kosher food was nowhere to be found anywhere in Costa Rica, simply because it was impossible to find a *shoichet*<sup>48</sup>.

Elena even had to change her dressing habits. In a letter to her friend Shosha, she wrote, "...in Europe you have four seasons, while here it is summer all year round and therefore, clothing is lighter. When I put on my long winter stockings, people laughed at me. I guess, I looked funny to them." Social life was also different. Suddenly, Jewish Poles found themselves transformed into a psychological minority. Although in Poland they also numbered less than the Christians, over there they lived as an urban majority. These *shtetls* therefore imposed their religious celebrations on the center of cultural and social life in Poland. In the New World, however, social and recreational life became secularized. In the Polish *shtetls* there had been something missing: "Movies are the main component of social life. Its bright neon signs now represent for me all that is gay. Lights turning on and off attract me because in our Polish town there was no electricity."

In Poland, they had spoken Yiddish, the *Ashkenazi* language. Then, depending on what you were doing and needing, Polish would be spoken. Most Jews had an incomplete command of Polish, since they lived separated from mainstream society and communication with "outsiders" was kept to a minimum. In this new country called Costa Rica, they found themselves engaged in a much broader social involvement. Elena and her entire generation took Spanish lessons from the butcher at the Market, preparing to attend the Costa Rican public schools. She wrote to her friend about how fast she had to learn the new language:

*"We immediately realized the need to learn Spanish. Since we arrived when the school year was about to conclude, my father hired a private teacher for us. But I only really got to speak it when I attended school. It has taken me only two months to grasp the orthography; it is based on few and clear rules and isn't complicated. At my first dictation, the teacher announced that a student had made 70 mistakes. I could not believe any girl could be so silly. What a surprise it was when I realized that the fool was me! I was so embarrassed that I studied like a lunatic. At my*

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<sup>48</sup> Butcher

*second spelling test, I only made three mistakes and took good care to tell all my classmates."*

Elena and her siblings were soon speaking the new language like natives, while their parents remained attached to a fading Yiddish and a deficient Spanish. Such differences certainly had consequences. Seven years of separation by the Atlantic Ocean also took their toll on the family's communication. Walls like those of Jericho were erected between them. Thus, Elena wrote, in that continuing letter to her friend:

*"My dad and I were apart for several years. Since we arrived in Costa Rica we have been trying to get used to one another. I grew without a father and now it's hard to accept him. I'll soon be an adult woman. It has been a tough beginning. We are getting used to the customs of the place and to his particular habits. Daily life is different from Długosiodło. Now there is a man at home and everything revolves around him. We all depend on his feelings, his whims and his moods. And most of the time he is cranky. I guess life has not been easy for him and now he has become embittered. We totally depend on his money and it's very frustrating and humiliating."*

These changes, in turn, affected their religious habits. The young girl noticed how her parents slowly slackened from their pious duties. They ceased to attend the Synagogue on Saturdays. The Jews in Costa Rica become *Mechallel Shabes*<sup>49</sup> for economic reasons, concluded Elena: "every Saturday the stores in this town of San José, including our own, are open for business from seven in the morning to ten in the evening. Even though in Długosiodło Saturday is a beautiful and a holy day, here in Costa Rica it is just another working day. My father does attend the Synagogue, but the rest of us have to work because the store must remain open."

Nevertheless, after two days in this country, the punch she received from her father taught her that some things would remain unchanged. "I don't want an *apikoiresteh*<sup>50</sup> going about with *goyim*<sup>51</sup> men," he shouted. "Things here may seem different but not as much as you would like. It's one thing not to eat *kosher* or having to work on Saturdays because you must, but it is a very different thing to convert. I won't have one of my daughters abandon Judaism, at least not while I remain alive."

Like the rest of his generation, her father believed that if Jews married Christians, then they would disappear. "See what happened to the Sephardic Jews that came to this country. They married locals and now their children are Christians and are ashamed of their Hebraic ancestry. The same thing will happen to you if you start seeing that man who, besides being German, is married!"

The young girl had to agree with her father. She had enough troubles of her own not to add one more to the list. She promised him she would not see Carlos again, insisting that these

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<sup>49</sup> Violator of the holiness of Saturdays

<sup>50</sup> Freethinker

<sup>51</sup> Non Jew

were the exact words she had said to the gentleman. However, the incident taught David that his eldest daughter would not be treated like a servant: *Strasheh nicht nit!*<sup>52</sup>, she had shouted back at him. After living in Poland under a matriarchy, Elena didn't like the perspective of willingly putting herself under a patriarchal dictatorship. If her mother chose to submit to "the man of the house," this young girl wasn't interested in imitating her.

Through the relationship with her customers, she kept herself busy practicing and improving her Spanish. She also did the house chores and look after her siblings, but while she kept focused on her life struggles, the German suitor still chased her. He chose the day of the week when David routinely went for his treatment to get into the men's room at the Market. The beauty of the Jewish clerk was easily admired from that spot. The young girl couldn't hide the pleasure she got from the passionate admiration expressed by this gallant man. Anita herself became suspicious of Carlos' repeated visits to the urinal. *Tochter*<sup>53</sup>, don't you think it's unusual how many times today this man has peed?" she asked. "Oh no, mother, maybe it's because you need to urinate much more in the tropics." Her mother wasn't convinced. "I don't know dear daughter, it doesn't seem normal. He should check his kidneys."

On another occasion, the owner of the flower shop brought Elena a bouquet of red roses "from an anonymous customer to you, madam, because he wants to thank you for the excellent quality of the clothes you sell." He winked at Elena as he said these words.

Her mother remained suspicious. "Is there any country in this entire world where they send you flowers simply because they bought clothes from you?" "Well then," said the older woman, "why does no one send me flowers?" "That's because you sell women's clothes and they are less grateful than men," her daughter answered.

The next day, Elena went to see her friend Claudia at the Hotel Costa Rica. The painter wanted to do another portrait, and as they sat in the cafeteria overlooking the street they gossiped and watched the people walking by. The Baroness had found her son, and her affairs had reached a successful outcome. Now that she felt more at ease, she had provided Max with some missing information, and he then realized they could and should forgive each other and reconcile the past.

The noble lady was in turn concerned about the well being of her young shipmate. "How are you doing in this new country?" she enquired. Elena explained the numerous changes she had to undertake and endure, how hard her new life was and difficulties she faced with an authoritarian father.

Engrossed in this serious exchange of experiences, they didn't notice the approaching man. "Good day! I may not proceed until I am able to salute such wonderful ladies." The Baroness turned to see just who had interrupted their conversation. Elena was taken by surprise and turned completely white, red, yellow, and then blue. "My name is Carlos Döning, my lady. It is a pleasure to see two such beauties enjoying a good cup of coffee."

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<sup>52</sup> Don't threaten me!

<sup>53</sup> Daughter

Claudia returned the smile and asked him to sit. "Why are you so pale, Elena?" she asked, unaware just what was going on. "Claudia, please excuse my behavior, but I must leave immediately. I have to return to the store. Tomorrow we can talk some more about the portrait." Before the noble woman could utter another word, her young friend had disappeared running toward Central Avenue.

Disappointment was painted all over the face of Carlos Döning. The Baroness didn't have to guess to realize that he was crazy about the clerk. "My dear countryman, you are in big trouble, I presume. That girl, I must tell you, is Jewish and her parents will not let you woo her. Besides, do you not think that she is too young for a grown man such as yourself?"

Her guest had to agree with these observations. "I realize how embarrassing what has just happened must be for you, and I beg your forgiveness," Carlos said. "I met that girl in the street and since I saw her I cannot get her out of my mind. Tell me all you know about her; in this way at least I would feel that I know her through you." The woman smiled, pitying him, and looking straight into the physician's eyes she noticed that their blue color was completely still, the changes in light had created no variations in them. "Do you know something?" she ventured, "Whenever I try to meet a man and to figure out who he is, I look at his eyes. If they continuously change like those of my former husband, I run a mile, but a good soul is reflected in yours."

The Baroness told him about her own life, the circumstances in which she met Elena and all she knew about the young girl. "She is an excellent girl, wise as a witch with the soul of a healer. She does not cure using plants but with words. If I were a man, I would not let them keep me from seeing her. Nonetheless, she is poor and lacks resources. She is completely dependent on her father, an old fashioned fool."

She then plunged into a more difficult topic, the current persecution of Jews in Germany. "As things go these days," she continued, "it is not the best moment to socialize with them. And this from a woman like me, who has a very close friendship with a Hebrew woman with whom I have jointly endured abuses."

Once the lady had shared a secret with him, Carlos did likewise. "My father, my wife and my best friend are anti-Semites and until a few weeks ago, I must confess, I had similar feelings." "It is a common thing these days," replied the Baroness. "However, it is my belief that Nazism is a poison based on lies, and I also believe that our country has gone insane. I am fed up with the vulgarity of Nazism, its maddening attacks against democracy and its racial intolerance. You and I have a problem, Carlos," she said. "We like our opposites." He had to agree. He couldn't follow in his father's footsteps, his intolerance and his brutality. "He wants to spread at a national level that which he has done to us at home, solve things by blows."

"What can I do?" he painfully asked. The Baroness lit a cigarette and had a sip of coffee. "Wonderful, this Costa Rican beverage!" she commented, but she was not avoiding his question. "It all depends on you. If you want a superficial relationship, I very much doubt

you will have any chance at all. If you wish to know this wonderful girl, then you must do your homework." Carlos did not quite understand. "What homework are you talking about?" The Baroness smiled once more and tasted the exquisite coffee again. "Look young man," she replied, "if you believe that Christians are superior and that all you must do is 'come down' to accept a Jew and wait until she converts to the 'true' faith, then you are on the wrong track. It happened to me before and I soon realized that things were not be that easy."

Claudia explained that behind the beautiful face of Elena, "there is a very ancient tradition, a religion, a moral code, a historical experience," that he was ignoring. "But isn't it true that Jews are exclusive, that they don't want converts, that their religion and their culture is just for themselves?" the troubled suitor asked. "Nonsense!" replied the woman. "That is the attitude of her parents, it is not the attitude of all Jews."

Claudia excused herself. While she returned to her hotel room, Carlos felt that he was the most ignorant man on the planet. "The woman is right," he thought. He could not look for love in ignorance, nor simply go against the wishes of his family. He had made too many wrong decisions already just because he was unwilling to swim against the tide. He had embraced Nazism to please his father and had married a wife he did not love in order to have money. He was meditating on life when the Baroness returned to the table.

"I have something I want you to have," and she gave him a book written in German. "What is it about?" he asked surprised. "It is The Sibylline Oracle," Claudia said. According to her, it was a collection of apocalyptic texts imitating the pagan oracles from antiquity, some of them written by Alexandrine Jews seeking to teach the excellence of the Hebraic religion to the Greek speaking population. "Here you may realize it is a mistake to believe in Judaism as a particular religion exclusive to Hebrews. The Oracle was written to defend monotheism, to teach the history of the people and, above all, to convert the pagans. It says that in the Mosaic religion there is an ancient 'universalistic' tendency, which does not consider that faith is owned by a single people, but that it belongs to all humankind."

The Baroness was an expert in the topic. She was convinced that two currents had developed very early, the "universalistic" and the "particularistic" tendencies. The first evolved from a religion that conceived the Hebrew god as an international deity instead of a national one. Claudia pointed out that the prophet Amos adopted this perspective, around 800 BC, when he argued that God belonged not only to the Israelites, but also to all nations. With the exile from Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC this tendency grew, since Jeremiah concluded that Jews could worship their god outside the temple as well as outside the land of Israel. This, in turn, generated the idea of a "portable" god, not limited to a particular region or nation.

An additional element, she continued, was the idea that God punishes sins. If punishments were accepted, both here on earth and in the life beyond death, then it was necessary to save idolaters from all nationalities. This made Isaiah take the necessary steps to convert gentiles, in his reasoning, if there was but one single God then there must be one single religion for all humanity. In the year 515 BC, Zacharias published his program to convert

pagans. Among the rites were circumcision, immersion in water (baptism) and the offering a sacrifice at the temple. In the times that followed the destruction of the temple, animal sacrifices were substituted by a submission to the law and its interpretations.

Jewish proselytism was so important, Claudia insisted, that it would make Mathew attack them. "Aye, those of you, hypocrite scribes and Pharisees! Because you circle the sea and the land in order to gain a proselyte; for when he is converted, you are turning him into a son of hell, twice as evil as yourselves." According to demographic figures, in the year 586 BC there were only 150,000 Hebrews, while already during the first century of the Christian era their numbers had increased to 8 million. "The most plausible explanation is proselytism," asserted Claudia.

Rabbi Hillel was in favor of converts. According to the Baroness, "everybody knows the story of that foreigner wanting to convert to Judaism on the condition that someone would explain to him the *Torah* while standing on one foot. The strict Rabbi Shamai of unbending principles didn't want anything to do with these novelties. He scolded and threw out the visiting convert, asserting that it was impossible to learn the *Torah* employing such means. To the contrary, Hillel found a solution in a renowned answer: 'What you don't like, don't do it to your neighbor. This is the *Torah*, and the rest are commentaries only. Go study.'

This wise man won, and gained a new Hebrew because his swift answer could be learned standing on one foot."

From its beginnings, added the Baroness, the universalistic tendency had been under attack by the "particularists." They held that the Jews had a special role and a covenant with God, distinct from the rest of humankind. In their view, gentiles only needed to practice the laws given to Noah and the Hebraic mission was to teach only these to the pagans. These laws required everybody to condemn idolatry, incest, adultery, killings, and profanation of the name of God. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, once back from the exile, Ezra and Nehemiah took over as religious leaders and reinstated the particularistic and nationalistic stance of one religion for one people.

Nevertheless, Claudia added, the open arms spirit has persisted ever since and as a way of protesting the nationalistic imposition, two books strongly favoring conversion were included in the Bible: Ruth and Jonas. Both texts underline the universal character of the Hebraic faith and the mercy of God, including in it all men and even animals. The Book of Ruth shows how the most noble house of Israel, that of King David, originated from non-Jews.

According to the Baroness. Christian persecution changed all that. By the first century AD, ten per cent of the population in the Roman Empire was Jewish and Christians were just starting the fight to win over pagan souls. When Paul eliminated the need for circumcision and the following of Jewish laws, it made conversion easier. At the same time, the Roman emperors began their persecution of Jews. Domitian condemned them to death; in 131 AD, Hadrian prohibited circumcision and public teaching of the Judaic religion was banned. Under such oppression, the rabbis started to warn candidates for conversion that their



people were afflicted, that the Christians had imposed punishments and would question the ulterior motives of those joining a persecuted religion.

Antipathy toward new proselytes was then a natural answer to relentless persecution. Still, many such as Rabbi Rashi and the tosafists in France continued to accept converts, Claudia pointed out. Isolationism, strict application of the laws and the hope of vindication by a new Messiah might have become predominant in the Jewish ghettos, "but history will have the last word on that particular point," she said.

Carlos was under a spell. He could not believe that this German Baroness had learned so much because of love.

However, she proved him wrong. The Baroness was seeking conversion, convinced that the Jewish religion was better. "I have never been able to accept the idea of original sin related to sexuality," she commented. Claudia didn't believe that sin had to be removed by the death of the Son of God. She believed that free will was stronger than evil. "We are not helpless creatures needing the Children of God to forgive us. Only those people we have offended may forgive our sins. I certainly do not think you may divide God in pieces or parts, as the idea of the Trinity would have us do. Nor do I believe in heavens or hells, Virgins, or laws that cannot be changed. Or that sexual abstinence is something desirable. Or that only one religion may provide the means of salvation. Or that our sins are cleansed by a simple repentance. Nor do I believe in most of the few things retained of the teachings of Jesus by Christianity."

Finally, Claudia decided that it was time to put an end to the religion lesson. "What would you do, don Carlos?" she asked.

"Find a Talmud," was his answer.

## IX

Just like King Solomon said he would solve the contention between two mothers by dividing the disputed child in two parts, so La Peregrina was divided in two cubicles, one facing the other; a section for "Gentlemen" and another for "Ladies." These "departments", however, consisted only in a few piled-up boxes of *shmates*. At first David had Elena working in the women's section, but soon realized his mistake. An endless line of male peasants waited to buy in her section, all wanting to look at the young girl.

"What can I do for you?" asked Elena. "Give me all the "bras" (brassieres) you have, they are for my wife," said a farmer from the town of Escazú (the Transylvania of Costa Rica). "And what is her size?" the clerk requested. "That I don't know. I haven't seen those tits for a while." A producer of *chayotes* from the town of Naranjo requested bloomers for his wife. "Do you want it made of cotton or of flannel?" asked the girl. "Well, dear angel, just give me the thickest you have available; much better if they are made from the rags of coffee bags, so as not to see a single one of her pubic hairs."

Although business was improving, David realized that in the long run this arrangement was not making sense. The following week there was a similarly long line of customers, but this time made of women returning the merchandise their husbands had bought. One of them was saying, "My husband bought this brassiere; it's so large that I may put both my breasts and those of my two daughters in one of its cups." Another peasant woman was returning the flannel bloomers: "It makes me sweat so much that I smell like an incontinent cow." Given that he had to refund the money, David decided to have Elena work instead at the men's section, selling pants, shirts, socks and shorts. When her father had to visit the doctor, the girl waited on the male customers.

Sales increased. The peasants and even the merchants of the Market were shopping, as they had never done before. For example, the butcher would show up every Friday to buy a new pair of pants or a shirt "to wear this next Sunday." "Elena," he would say, "give me all you have. Don't ever leave me without those shirts that you sell, which make me feel in heaven." The man selling avocados bought dozens of socks. "If I wear them my bunions don't hurt anymore."

Soon rumor spread that a Cherub was working at the Market, able to create with her hands the most marvelous clothing available in this valley of tears. Although some noticed that these were the same clothing offered at stores elsewhere, others noticed peculiar details in the fashions that Elena handled. "No, no", said Paco the shoemaker, "look at this pair of pants. See the hem you get at La Peregrina; it has a perfect seam that no one else may imitate." A trader of leather also found "wonders" in the shoes Elena was selling. "It appears to be the same kind of leather, but hers lasts twice as long as those that I sell." The jeweler argued that his allergy disappeared when he started using her handkerchiefs. "Now, after I blow my nose with this handkerchief, I no longer start coughing. It must be blessed!"

The store became so famous that one day Don José Sanchez, one of the wealthiest men in the country, stepped inside to buy some clothes for his peons. This "*gamonal*"<sup>54</sup> was already a living legend. Notwithstanding his wealth, he "looked after each penny" as any poor man would. "Money is not to be wasted," he would say. He was widely known to both the young and the old and women were particularly attracted to this well-kept fifty-year-old hunk. The oligarch was a tall man, of high bearings, with thick white hair and a moustache. His face looked as fresh as the lettuce sold in the Market; he had a deep and maddening manly voice. A dimpled chin was the final touch of seduction. His eyes were rather small but of clear brown tones.

He held office during the Gonzalez Víquez administration and currently was a personal advisor to President Ricardo Jimenez. Don José enjoyed buying cheap things and avoided luxuries "the likes of which my family couldn't afford earlier," he used to say. At the same time, this coffee baron was always ready to explore new worlds. "I have come because they've told me there's an angel working here," he said to Anita, "but they were wrong, since what I find instead is a divine Phoenician lady."

The woman was not in the mood for such gallantries. "The only Phoenician thing around here in these premises," answered Elena's mother, "is the rent we owe to the landlord." Don José considered carefully his response. He was used to docile, coquettish and submissive women. Her face, nevertheless, did not show any of these qualities, but still, she had an acid sense of humor and an inquisitive way of looking that was unfamiliar to him.

"Aye, lady, I have heard that the Israelites will go directly to heaven, since they are the chosen people. So, why bother about the rent?"

"If what you say is true," answered Anita, "then the door to that heaven must be in the universe's *toches* or rear end, since here on Earth we occupy the last place. Moreover, why don't you tell these things to our landlord? In this way, perhaps, he'll accept that we pay the rent in the afterworld?" She sent him a piercing look.

Don José laughed with an intensity he did not often experience, and less so, with the women he frequented. This was an irreverent woman, just like him, something deliciously new. "My wife and daughter should meet you, perhaps you will make them stop following the priests' skirts," he told Anita. "If I had your fortune," she replied, "I would be following yours." "Oh, I don't think so. You see, I'm a womanizer, an unrepentant sinner to the eyes of my wife and daughter. A woman like you would be too much for me," answered Don José. "Much the better, then," Anita fired back. "I've have enough of dirty old men with my husband."

Elena attentively followed the discussion between these two agnostics. They both agreed that religion is opium of the people. This shared opinion would unite them for many years. Finding it hard to keep her curiosity at bay, young Elena was anxious to find out how the old *gamonal* had acquired his money. Apparently, wealthy people in this country - as in other Latin nations- had not found prosperity in minerals. The conquistadors could not find

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<sup>54</sup> " Large rural landowner

and pillage the gold once promised to Columbus. Elena had left her reading about Costa Rica at the point where the Spaniards had not yet found evidence of precious metals, and the territory therefore became one of the poorest and least colonized of the Iberian empire: the country lacked that which they had come to the New World to obtain.

"Please tell me, where is your family from, Don José and how was it that you became wealthy?" Elena finally asked. Anita was worried for her daughter's lack of tact and tried to change the subject, showing him the khaki pants he wanted to buy instead. Don José was nonetheless flattered by the girl's interest and said he "would be pleased" to tell her his story.

The Sanchez participated in the initial colonial drive in Costa Rica, he told them. The first town, Villa Bruselas, was established in 1524 in the Central Pacific region. It was abandoned following repeated Indian raids, because the colonizers opted for Nicaragua, a nation that promised greater riches in those days. In 1564, he explained, the Spaniards finally established themselves in the Central Valley, creating the city of Cartago, the colonial capital of the country. On the list of its founders, there appeared yet another Sanchez of unknown occupation. Don José traced back his genealogy to that man. "He was from Galicia, the same place where we come from."

Colonial Costa Rica was characteristically poor. Don José told them how his family engaged in subsistence farming, complemented by working on and off in the colonial administration. These posts were not important, "because this colony was too distant from the General Captaincy of Guatemala, the political center of Central America in those times."

Don José kept in his safe a copy of the public land deed granted to Pedro Sanchez, one of his ancestors. These lands were located in Tres Ríos and later were to become the source of his own fortune. "Many believe that Costa Rican poverty helped create a reserved and shy personality among the yeomen struggling to feed their families on a clearing in the midst of this wild forest. They did not like to get involved in Government or Church affairs, he added. "This extended social equality reduced the relevance of dictators and the military. There was no need to repress a socially homogeneous population." According to the coffee oligarch, this would foster the democratic traditions and the liberal thinking prevailing among the members of the Sanchez family.

"But the large fortunes, Don José, where do they come from?" asked Elena once more.

There was no system of large *haciendas* and *latifundia* in Costa Rica, as was the case in the other Latin American countries, according to her interlocutor. "My family owned enough land to feed ourselves and to meet local demand, but nothing was left for export since we lacked the infrastructure to do so. If the local market was small, what would be the use of accumulating land?" he asked as an explanation to the futility of land concentration. The lack of development and integration to the world market would therefore facilitate a more equalitarian society. However, later at school, Elena would find out how this presumed social homogeneity was more myth than reality.

The origin of the Sanchez' fortune would come after Independence, continued the *gamonal*. From 1840 onwards, coffee would become the main source of land and capital accumulation. Among the first peasants that planted this bush was his grandfather, Julio Sanchez. Around 1843, he obtained the saplings from British ships in exchange for part of the salted meat he provided. He decided to give coffee a chance. Given that all the lands he owned in and around the city of Cartago were planted with vegetables and wheat, he grew four hectares of coffee in his lands in Tres Ríos, near San José.

When the bushes were loaded with red fruits, he asked his brother to take them to the port of Puntarenas on the Pacific Ocean using oxcarts. There they would sell them to merchant ships that periodically visited this port. On the way to Puntarenas, near a river, they removed the red and purple skins covering the fruits' seed and later let the strong tropical sun complete the drying process. They also grounded the coffee in Puntarenas, following instructions given to them by the captain of the British ship. The Captain and his crew drank it and loved this sweet and aromatic beverage. From then on, the Sanchez family would add Costa Rica to the British coffee market, and by 1900, coffee represented between 40 and 75 per cent of the country's exports.

At first, this product democratized Costa Rican society, making it possible for new farmers like the Sanchez themselves to benefit from the exporting "boom." Thereafter, it would be the main source of social differentiation and class struggle. Those coffee growers that controlled exports began to build the "*beneficios*" (coffee mills) and expand at the expense of medium and small producers. By 1860, Julio Sanchez owned more than 10,000 coffee hectares.

The British trade not only allowed the Sanchez family to create a fortune, but also to "open their minds." Don José asserted that the British Protestant bankers insisted in changing the laws of Costa Rica. "They would not live in our country and do business with us without religious freedom," he explained. "They wanted to have their own church, their own cemetery and their own confessional schools. Without these institutions, they made it clear that they would not be able to invest in our economy." It was no surprise then to find the Sanchez family advocating the liberal reforms of 1888, which would set the basis for religious freedom in the country.

It was no mystery either why the Catholic Church started to see the Sanchez as its worst enemies. "The priests hated our family. They said we had opened the country's doors to heretics. They would never forgive us for eliminating their monopoly in education." Don José and the Sanchez family, for their part, came to consider Catholic intransigence as the worst obstacle to progress. "The priests were used to living off the communities, they begot illegitimate children and were only concerned with their own well-being, apart from maintaining the population's ignorance."

"Unfortunately," conceded Don José, "my own "romantic adventures" drove my wife and daughter to seek consolation among these same priests."

By the time Elena arrived in Costa Rica, the land was concentrated in the hands of Don José and a few other large coffee barons in much the same manner, as land had been controlled in Poland. The new coffee elite took control of politics. They created institutions to run "the sovereign majesty of the National State." For example, Julio Sanchez soon realized how much his prosperity depended on making the national economy serve the needs of the international market. Instead of stimulating agricultural self-reliance, he considered that capitalist specialization was better.

At the same time, it was necessary to have a large working population, something rather scarce in the country. A labor surplus could be obtained, at least for him, by buying as much land as possible. Taking territory away from the agricultural communities near his farms, he would force peasants to plant, look after, and harvest his coffee. Soon his plantations would expand along the ox cart route to the pacific coast, further and further to the West.

"We moved into what today are San José, Heredia and Alajuela, for in those days they represented the agricultural frontier," Don Julio had said to his son. This colonization resulted in the expulsion of many peasants to the towns or the new frontier. Thanks to the determination of families like theirs, "Costa Rica would be the first country of Central America to establish the classical principles of political Liberalism." This, in turn, helped the coffee factions impose their model of development - boasted Don José.

From an economic point of view, Liberals defended the right to engage in free trade, advocated open doors to immigration and privatization of State and Church public lands. Politically, they supported elections, freedom of conscience, of worship, of the press, of speech, freedom of assembly and, above all, "human rights." Political life would thereafter be characterized by democratic elections, with rather few exceptional periods of authoritarianism. After only one *coup d'état* in 1917, during the 1930s and the 1940s the Government remained in the hands of liberal presidents. One of the most popular leaders in the country was Ricardo Jimenez Oreamuno, a friend of Don José who ruled several times and who authorized the Jewish immigration.

By the 1920s, the Sanchez family had become one of the most powerful in Costa Rica. The father of Don José, Andres Sanchez, had married a Republican woman from Madrid with whom he shared his political views (including a strong opposition to the Catholic Church). Don José, in turn, had tied a new relation with another important family, the Gonzalez Mirtos. He then established new activities, such as exporting sugar to Europe, mainly to Germany. In 1921, he created a society with the Mirkaus family (Germans), to jointly buy sugar mills and increase exports mostly to England and the United States. He begot one daughter, Yadira, the lone heir to his large fortune.

Don José was a typical Costa Rican Liberal. He believed in freedom of the press and of worship and fought to reduce the strong influence of the Catholic Church in daily life. In his view, the country could progress by "...three pillars: better education, foreign capital and open immigration." Don Andres, his father, had been a believer in the idea of

"Progress," and was convinced of the need to educate the "uncultivated people." Due to his arrogance, he and his generation were called "The Olympic Oligarchy."

They thought the masses had to be civilized and encouraged alphabetization by printing thousands of first readers. These primers included texts and images promoting science and nationalism. "Peasants and artisans, however, rejected the onslaught on their traditions and the attack against rural culture, particularly against herbal medicine. They also resented that their beliefs were officially regarded as mere superstitions. "In many cases," explained the *gamonal*, "they refused to educate their children in public schools." In addition, the Church took advantage of this social dissatisfaction with a permanent struggle to regain the monopoly on religion and education.

Terrible working conditions pushed the working classes into radicalism. Because the State promoted general education (education for all, according to the official slogan), a number of children of working class or peasant families would become professionals and would turn against the same system that had "saved them from darkness." It should not surprise us –indicated Don José– that by the 1930s, the Communist Party had become the second largest electoral force in the country and was threatening to put an end to the liberal regime. "The fight against Marxism and Nationalism means that we are being fired at by two irreconcilable forces."

"Thanks to those like us, you have been able to come," he added. "We have always wanted to welcome people with new ideas and new capital to help develop our country." He thought that liberal ideology was less polemic when a people shared the same religion, were racially homogeneous and held similar beliefs.

"But what would happen when such homogeneity decreases and the incoming immigrants are no longer all Christians, investors or fat bankers?" Elena asked irreverently.

"Well then, it would be trying times," Don José answered.

The Sanchez family was not so progressive concerning women. They were concerned with education only for boys. None of the Sanchez' women were granted the opportunity to become a professional or to learn a trade, not even the coffee baron's own daughter, Yadira. Since the University of Saint Thomas had been closed for years and there was no similar institution left in the country, students had to go abroad to college. "We would not allow our young girls to live by themselves in another country," he explained to Elena. The farthest they would go in women's liberation was to let Yadira work as a secretary in the family business, "so that she would have something to do." "The girl is spoiled by excessive luxury," added the proud father.

"I think we spoiled her," continued Don José. "She grew obstinate, hardhearted and selfish." She did not want anyone among the numerous suitors that approached her. "I got worried because Yadira did not like any of the candidates. Because, you see, we do not arrange marriages for our daughters as you Jews do; we advice them and introduce them to several suitors. It is up to the girl to chose whom and whether she wants to marry."

His daughter, however, argued that all men in Costa Rica are womanizers like her father and she "was not about to tolerate infidelities like her mother does." Don José was not pleased with her passion for politics either. The young woman wanted to follow in the steps of her ancestors by becoming a political leader. "Many times I've told her that politics is a man's business," said Don José, "and that her place is at home." Nonetheless, she continued reading avidly about national affairs, but usually got carried away and misled by strong emotions since she lacked knowledge."

According to her father, Yadira had become excessively nationalistic and was always ready to criticize any government wanting to improve relations with other Central American countries. "She is convinced that Costa Rica has nothing in common with the rest of the region, because here we are white and they are Indians," he concluded with irony.

This *gamonal* endured a domestic civil war. The Communists and the Nationalists now contested the liberal ideas so dear to his family. The former pretended to wrest power from the coffee oligarchy and to put an end to the destitute conditions of workers. The latter wanted a stronger State to control these new Marxist and socialist tendencies. Yadira had taken the side of those who argued that democracy was not going to solve the country's deep problems and that to confront the rise of Communism, the Army and the Church were their best weapons. Her mother, a devout Christian, hoped the Church would finally convert her husband and the country as a whole, into "good Christians" and would vaccinate them all against the threatening new ideologies.

When Yadira met Carlos, "she became obsessed with him, immediately announcing he was the man she wanted." "What was it that called her attention?" asked Elena. According to Don José, the German suitor shared her nationalistic and racist ideas. He was under the influence of Nazi ideology that promised to finish with Communists and open doors to foreigners. Germany and Costa Rica –he believed- shared similar problems. "Yadira believes our nation is endangered by the Nicaraguan immigrants. This neighboring country, she says, suffers from permanent instability; many in Costa Rica fear it may invade us, or that thousands of refugees will come to settle here. This is why she is all the more ready to support any xenophobic ideology."

These ideas, according to Don José, had made her adopt extremist positions. "Those women who we do not invite to participate in our political organizations are being lured by right wing movements; they want to use them against us," he worriedly asserted. "These women here, you see Elena, they are not like you or your mother. They are not formally trained to engage in the political game. They do not even realize how difficult it is to run a nation. They are easily deceived by beautiful songs of modern Sirens."

"But why is such a thing happening, Don José? Don't you have any songs to sing anymore that could delight your women?" Elena's question was unexpected.

This time, the coffee baron did not have a quick answer and an embarrassing silence ensued. Anita interrupted the conversation between her daughter and her new customer. She liked his stories but thought that too much conversation might arouse her husbands'



suspicious. He had forbidden her from any social contact with their male customers, and so she quietly wrapped the pants for Don José's workers, and asked him to come back to tell the rest of his story the next day.

When he left, she told Elena, "This man is so attractive that *Tsegait zich in moyl*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> He melts in your mouth

## X

In Costa Rica anti-Semitism was not as strong as in the Old World, resulting in more integration between Jews and Christians. For the first time in her life, Elena developed friendly relations with her classmates. One of her preferred social activities was going to the "*retreta*"<sup>56</sup> at Morazán Park. Each Sunday morning a new band played in the kiosk in Morazán Park, which had a great reputation among the musicians of the country. Bands came from many towns and from all the provinces. While they played, seated or slowly walking groups of five or more girls enjoyed a cool fruit juice in the sunny morning air, watched the cars crusing by, or flirted with the boys. This was the ideal place to fall in love.

Claudia gave "*el Santo*"<sup>57</sup> to Carlos, about Elena's passion for these *retretas*, and so he lost no time at all.

That Sunday morning Elena and her dog *Adolph* were strolling with some of her classmates at the Morazan Park. Carlos approached her carrying two ice creams and a big smile. Again Elena was ready to run, but *Adolph* decided to resist her temptation. In fact, on smelling the ice cream, he strongly began to pull at his leash, dragging the girl towards her suitor. Taking advantage of the situation, Carlos immediately closed all possible means of escape. "According to Isaiah, isn't it the duty of all Jews to help pagans abandon idolatries?" he asked. "Christians aren't pagans; they follow Noah's Laws and therefore they are not in need of our guidance," she replied at once.

"Nonetheless, if God wishes to save a Jew persecuted by the infidels, he would send him a fiery chariot and take him to the heavens like he did with Elias." Still the girl would not budge. "Yet before that event, Elias had to run into the desert of Damask to find someone to replace him. In my particular case, if I were to leave, who would cook lunch at home?"

After this Biblical exchange, bewilderment took hold of them both. They looked into each other's eyes and could not stop laughing this time.

The Physician shared with Elena the pain of growing under the duress of an authoritarian regime at home, and the hand of a religious father unable to show affection. He confessed to having lost faith in organized religion and even more so in the clergy. "All the armies," he said, "have their own priests and chaplains. They all bless their weapons and call upon God to help them in their 'just cause.' But most often it is the case that one side's cause is as just as the other one. They are like two tigers each trying to jump on top of the other."

He held that "if prayers were really effective, then I would be deeply disappointed with God's justice and omniscience. Fortunately for our own good sense, this is not the case. Not one single prayer by innocent and pious children has ever warded off a sword or a murderous bullet. And since praying is ineffective, except of course as mystical expansion or for it's soothing suggestive power alone, then neither can I accept the validity of

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<sup>56</sup> Open-air band music

<sup>57</sup> Confidential information

flattering God, that is the daily 'praising' of his name carried on in Synagogues, Churches and Mosques throughout the world."

Although he had a number of doubts, Carlos was convinced that Judaism, after having read the books Claudia loaned him, had something different. "It is the only religion that deifies ethics, attributing a divine origin to morals. I do not think it is wrong to say that Judaism is a religion centered on man, on his actions, on his relations with others. Despoil the tyrant of his false divinity; deprive the clergy of its pretended intermediation between man and the supernatural forces - these are great Jewish accomplishments."

The girl was not happy: "Some Christians make company to these Jews; they talk about 'men' when they should also include women." Carlos did not agree. "It is just a way of speaking, that is, the masculine gender includes the feminine one." "But one thing is to represent and another quite different to appropriate," she answered. Her suitor learned to respect her independent ideas. She did not want to become a housewife, to depend on her husband, or to raise children. "I have seen the power of money, both in its absence and in its presence. Since moving here, we have lost dignity and my father constantly makes us feel bad for every "*cinco*"<sup>58</sup> he gives us. In Poland, we were poor but independent. Now we are housemaids, unable to say a word."

"Please do not ever think," answered the man, "that I do not understand what you are talking about. My wife owns the money and all our lives I have hated her for that reason. Once I was poor too and I know what it is like. But, like Faust, I sold my soul to the Devil."

"Do not be so hard on yourself," Elena said. "We all must do concessions."

Carlos began telling her of his journey to the New World, his life as a farmer and how he was able to study medicine. She, in turn, talked about her experience as a child-mother in Poland, about anti-Semitism, and the terrible orphan hood she felt. "I know it is hard to believe me, but now I regret the fact that I was an anti-Semite. I know not how such garbage took hold of my mind. The truth is, if I think the matter right, it is like some kind of drug administered to us. In Germany, we have been the first to receive it through the mass media. After us, nobody may pledge ignorance of its persuasive power."

A new silence stirred where forbidden thoughts reveal themselves in a sudden intimate look. Elena broke the suspense. She took a tape measure from her purse. He could not imagine what she would measure. She put the tape around his head. "What are you doing?" inquired Carlos. "I want to make sure that German brains are larger than those of the Jews." He met her challenge, grabbed the tape measure, and wrapped it around her nose: "Now we shall see if Jewish noses are shaped in the guise of a six," he said, and with one hand, he drew an exaggerated figure six in the air.

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<sup>58</sup> Five cents coin

Both felt at ease. "So what do we need to do now to get rid of all stereotypes?" she asked, still laughing. Now she tried to control herself because his fleshy mouth was getting moist and the blond tones of his hair radiated light. Soon the lips were moving towards her and the blue eyes were almost closed. While she indulged in her first real kiss, the band played on, and as her schoolmates looked and elbowed each other, the ice creams fell to the ground and *Adolph* finally got to enjoy them. The popular song playing explained it clearly: When love comes calling to you in such a way, you will hardly notice it..."

From that day on, the lovers started a relation that confronted a number of obstacles. At first Elena's father was the most ferocious. For a traditional man awaiting redemption for the sufferings endured during thousands of years, the idea of having a daughter marrying a non-Jew was maddening.

"If I put up with your witch of a mother instead of marrying some kind woman, like Emilia, who in the world gives you the right to depart from tradition?" he told her.

For her father's part, life's blows had softened him like a piece of meat about to be cooked. One of the decisive incidents that forced him to change was probably the way his brother-in-law was treated. David had always liked Uncle Samuel; he was intelligent and funny. They used to relate while traveling together and when he died, David felt a great loss. They decided to bring his body from Warsaw and bury him at the cemetery in Długosiodło. However, the rabbi and the principle men of the town would not carry out the religious rites for this man.

When fellow Jews quoted the Bible in condemnation of Uncle Samuel, for being a homosexual and committing suicide, David would not tolerate the humiliation or their refusal to bury him in the family vault. In a letter to the rabbi of Długosiodło, David questioned these decisions. Elena saved the letter.

*My honorable Rabbi Holstein:*

*In the name of my wife's family, I want to protest your decision to have Samuel Brum, who died two days ago, buried near the wall of the cemetery instead of with his family. In general terms, the rabbinical literature opposes suicide and estimates that the suicidal person should not participate in the coming world and should not receive funeral services (Sal.R.150; Josephus: Wars III, 8-5). But there are exceptions. The Midrash (Gen.R.34, 13) forgives suicidal Saul as well as the suicide of the priests that jumped into the fire when the first Temple was burnt. To suffer martyrdom, but never to go against the laws of Judaism, became one of the high religious principles. If we take into account that our poor relative killed himself because he could not share his life with whom he loved, his is but another case of avoiding excessive suffering. You have told me that "homosexuality" is also a crime, and that losing the man he loved is no acceptable reason to kill oneself. But your interpretation about the presumed Biblical condemnation of homosexuality is fanciful and unilateral. I have copied below the two texts on which you ground your decision not to grant a proper burial to our relative:*

*Leviticus 18:22:*

*"Do not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination"*

*Leviticus 20:13:*

*"When a man lie with a male as with a woman, both have committed something perverse; they will certainly be put to death; their blood guilt rests upon them."*

*These two texts from Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13), condemning sex between men, are part of the "Code of Sanctity," a section aimed at preventing contamination from neighboring peoples. This section precisely starts with Chapter 18 of Leviticus, which reads: "Do not follow the uses and customs of Canaan, the country where I will take you, do not live according to their laws." Engaging in the uses and customs of this people would signify, for a Jew, to commit "Toebah," meaning something impure and dirty, although not morally wrong. An impurity occurs when the Jewish ritual laws are violated. But impurity does not mean "bad" or "evil." If sex between men had been considered as "morally wrong" in Leviticus, then as you and I know, the correct Hebraic word would be "Zimah," instead of "Toebah."*

*The condemnation of homosexual practices as "impure" seeks to condemn something foreign to this culture. In other words, it is a sin against the Jewish identity. It is not an action deserving punishment in itself. Verse 24 that follows (18:24), says: "...do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations whom I am driving out before you are defiled." Jews considered some gentile practices impure, but this does not mean such practices were sinful or morally wrong.*

*On the other hand, homosexual relations between Jews do appear in the Bible. Jonathan was attracted to David and thereafter shared all with him:*

*"(1) By the time David was through talking with Saul, Jonathan's soul was in unison with David's soul; Jonathan loved him as himself. (2) On that same day, Saul retained him and did not let him return to his father's home. (3) Because he loved him, Jonathan made a covenant with David; (4) he stripped himself of the robe he had and gave it to David; also his amour with sword, bow and belt." (I. Samuel 18: 1-4)*

*When Jonathan finds out that his father wished to kill David, the two friends meet secretly and cry (I Samuel 20: 41-42):*

*"(41) ... as soon as the lad was gone, David came from beside the stone pile and threw himself prone on the ground before Jonathan, bowing down three times. They kissed each other and wept together until David got control of himself, (42) then Jonathan said to David: 'Go in peace! Since we have sworn to each other in the lord's name, the LORD will be the mediator between you and me; also between my descendants and yours forever.' David arose and left, while Jonathan entered the town."*

*II Samuel I: 26: " I am grieving for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."*

*For these reasons, I request that my relative be treated like any other Jew.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*David Sikora*

*Długosiodło, January 3, 1925.*

David lost this battle. Uncle Samuel was buried across the wall of the cemetery. The ire resulting from this unfair treatment generated a rupture with tradition. In the New World, it would increase when he found out that many of his customers came from the homosexual community. Once he started communicating with them, his views could no longer align with those of his fellow peddlers. Moreover, he was a man unwilling to reject a sound argument. If only one soul interested in discussing the Talmud showed up, he would even close the store. Until then, as was to be expected, all his debating adversaries had been Jews. Then, one morning, sales were slow at the Market when a blond German customer came in. David immediately recognized him; he was the man chasing after his daughter. At first, the conversation was tense:

"Good day, Sir. I am here to buy clothes and to request from you a favor, Carlos said nervously. With a handkerchief in the right hand, he mopped his sweating brow. David studied the younger man and could not avoid thinking that Carlos was indeed an impressive, cultivated, and elegant suitor. He was still, however, forbidden to his daughter." "Mister Dönning, do not tell me you are here to buy clothes for your business, because I would not believe it –answered the merchant, shaking the bloomers hanging like chickens in a butcher's shop. What may I do for you?" he asked coldly.

"I am in love with Elena and I want to ask you not to forbid me from visiting her. I realize it must be hard for you to have someone like me asking you this, because I am a Christian and married. But I can't control my feelings and I am ready to try anything. Besides, I need to ask you another favor," added the suitor, now sweating profusely and feeling ready to be hung by the neck like another chicken.

"Will you please tell me what I may do for you?" replied David, overwhelmed by the impudicity of this customer. Perhaps one of his daughters was not enough for him and now he wanted to take both of them with him?

"I want to convert and I want you to tutor me," answered the suitor.

"Something else, Mister Dönning? Perhaps you may want my other daughter, or my wife, or the store, or my Talmudic books?"

"Apart from your eldest daughter, I will be happy to borrow a Talmud while I get my own copy," said Carlos smiling broadly.

"Look, Mister Dönning. Here is the *Torah* and please read what it says in Deuteronomy 7:3: "You must not intermarry with them; neither give your daughters to their sons, nor receive their daughters for your sons." Isn't it clear to you?" David pointed out, expecting the suitor to leave the premises immediately.

"That is one way to interpret the text, David. However, that same *Torah* says that Elena could be mine if I simply cut her nails and shave her lovely head. Would you like something like that?" the German responded slyly.

"I do not know what insanity has come into your mind! Where in the hell have you read such a text?" David argued.

"It is right there in the book of Deuteronomy you mentioned, in Chapter 21, verses 10 to 13. Let me, it will be my pleasure to read it:

'(10) When you go out to war against your foe and the LORD your GOD puts them into your power and takes them captive, (11) and you notice among the captives a beautiful woman who wins your heart and you would take her to be your wife (12) and bring her to your home, then she must shave her head, trim her nails, (13) and lay aside her captives'

dress. After she has bewailed her father and mother a month in your house, you may go marry her and make her your wife."

"I know," the German man continued, "that you assiduously study Rabbi Risha and the *tosafot*<sup>59</sup> to the Talmud. Risha favored proselytism and considered the mission of Jews to convert all those wanting to do so. He said that proselytes joining the Jewish people would precede redemption. The *tosofists* were the first to claim that the law requires the acceptance of converts. Well then, here you have me," Carlos asserted, somehow recovering his bearing.

"Remove her dress and I will remove your balls (*baitzim*)," David roared. If you want to study the Bible with me, that is all right. If you want to convert, that is fine too. And if you want to marry my Elena, you will have to wait seven years like Jacob. Only then will I make up my mind about whether you are worthy of marrying my daughter. And I do not think you will be man enough to do it. But, why would you want to convert?"

"Then it is a deal. I take you at your word," answered the suitor euphorically. I want to convert because I am convinced, like those from Khazar were convinced, that the Jewish religion is the most rational and ethical one."

"Now you do me a favor," David intervened. "Go and tell our agreement to my witch of a wife and thereafter we'll both loose our *baitzim*" the storekeeper concluded, smiling finally.

These two were brave gentlemen, yet neither dared to confront Anita with the matter. Stalin had sealed her disillusionment in Communism; she was becoming more spiritual. Her animosity against religion continued to be nurtured by Don José, the *gamonal* customer of their business.

While Carlos and David studied the Talmud in secret, Anita attended to her Costa Rican aristocrat. "Come on Thursday during the afternoon, Don José. My husband will not be here and we will be able to help you more at ease," she told him. Certainly, she certainly did nothing unbecoming during these meetings. She barely had a coquettish look or smile for him. She was, after all, a modest married lady.

One day a queer man, like Samuel, brought an envelope for her husband. David was away from the shop, relieving himself in the men's room next door. She could not resist the temptation to open the letter, and as she did so, a collection of nude male pictures fell to the floor. "David has become a *feigeleh!*" she screamed, but nobody in the store or the Market understood what she meant.

Anita came to believe that her husband shared a bed with a man nicknamed Susanita, with whom he exchanged male pornography. "The rascal will pay for this!" she promised herself.

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<sup>59</sup> Additions

## XI

"Just as I'm telling you, Elena, messing with the rabbi himself in the middle of this town still locked in the Middle Ages. Do not suppose that it was easy to accept Samuel!" she confessed to her daughter. Once again, she was scared and obsessed because her family was getting involved in sexual scandals. "My brother embraced the city, the quarrels in the streets, the characters of modern Warsaw. That's what destroyed him," she told Elena, who could not understand what was her mother babbling about now.

Since David received the photos from Susanita, Anita seemed to have submerged into a world of reveries and memories. "You begin with a small change and you end up with a whirlwind," she commented laconically. "I shouldn't have accepted Samuel's crazy ideas," she repeated to Elena. "Had I resisted Socialism, which induced me to practice birth control, then I wouldn't have been so easy on him," she added as if going insane. "But mother, what are you talking about?" Elena asked unable to figure out just how the conversation that had started with David's misdeeds was now leading to reproductive matters.

"Elena, you must understand that these modern ideologies, be it Socialism, Nationalism, or Feminism, they are all the same. They offer universal answers that will eventually impose themselves by force. They promote behavioral changes that, in many instances, turn against us," she pointed out, forgetting to mention to whom she was referring. According to Anita, Socialism had brought her to break with a number of traditions, such as ordering women "to bear all the children wished by Thou who is the Highest."

When she decided to practice birth control, she didn't realize that something else was also being challenged - the millennial rules of gender. "I realized it was possible to question men's and women's roles, without having the world coming to its end," she added with satisfaction. "This small internal revolution took me to support my brother and at the end perhaps it was a mistake. I shouldn't have accepted the relationship between Samuel and Lazarus," she painfully added. "Had I questioned more strongly those absurd revolutionary things, perhaps he would still be alive."

Elena asked to be told the entire story of how modernity took away her uncle because she was unable to understand a single word of what her mother was currently saying.

"It all started in England during the 1850s with the second industrial revolution that later reached Poland, although with less force. This time, the new automation process transformed not only the textile industry, but also the chemical and steel plants. Industrial growth changed the face of European cities. Large towns suddenly became centers for millions of dwellers."

To the Christians, according to Anita, the new economy and "modern life" promised a series of conveniences including electricity, automobiles, transoceanic liners, telephones, cinema, toilets and other modern wonders. For the Jews, modernity presented the



opportunity to participate in better educated; more tolerant and competitive societies theoretically open to all.

The Christians who were used to controlling their own destinies regarded these changes as experiments that may be altered or abandoned when they showed no benefits. When the economy turned sour, they dreamed of the good old medieval days. When modern times seemed threatening, the Anti-Semites blamed their sorrows and the problems of modernity on the Jews. According to them, the Enlightenment was a Jewish creation, since it freed the Hebrews, natural iconoclasts. Some fanatics blamed the new disciplines, such as psychiatry, as a "Jewish science." The unconscious, according to an Austrian author, was personality's ghetto, i.e., the place where primitive beings and desires were dumped. For its part, Marxism represented as a Talmudic economy imposed on Christians.

"Can you imagine a bigger folly, Elena?" she asked. "We Jews could not hope, as Christians did, for the good old days since we never had them. No sensible Jew could desire a return to old Poland, full of pogroms and Christian fanaticism. We made a bet for modernization as a new Moses that would redeem us from slavery," she concluded.

According to Anita, modernity reached the town of Długosiodło in many ways. During the postwar years, the *shtetl* benefited from the boom after independence in Poland. "At first we profited from trading with the capital city and as intermediaries to the textile industry in Białystok. This textile trade generated a small but significant economic boom that would last until the middle of the twenties. Since Białystok's industry was in Jewish hands, some large merchants started to hire exclusive agents in the rural areas. In this way, I received contracts that continuously required me to travel to and from the two cities and to see with my own eyes the changes that were taking place," Anita said with pride.

"The *shtetl* was a *shtetl* and if you visited Warsaw or Białystok, then you realized that the world wasn't the same any more." Trade, however, was not the only reason for her travels. She also visited her brother Samuel. Since the start of the century, he had taken a job in Warsaw as an industrial worker at a factory making cardboard boxes.

"Warsaw was the New Jerusalem of the East; one quarter of its population was Jewish," exclaimed Anita. "Nonetheless, it had not been easy for Samuel to establish himself there. *Warszawa*, as it's known in Polish, did not like Jews, and had always been reluctant to accept Jewish settlements. My brother collected evidence of our struggle and resistance, and according to the documents he showed me in his flat, the first exception to the Christian policy of exclusion occurred in 1414, when ten Jewish families were registered as tax paying residents. Then, in 1483, all Jews were expelled and the town acquired the right of *non-tolerandis Judaeis*, which meant that Jews were not allowed to settle there at all. The only valid excuse to visit, explained Samuel, was by means of 'tickets' or passes that allowed you to stay in town for only 14 days.

"My brother told me that Warsaw was taken by Prussia in 1796 and that we Jews were subjected to the so-called *Juden Reglements*. Only those residing in the area prior to the war were allowed to stay, the rest were regarded as temporary guests and, subject to expulsion

at any time. "With the advent of Congressional Poland and industrial development restrictions were slackened and the Jewish community grew until Warsaw became the most important Jewish City in Europe." According to the information collected by Samuel, some 370,000 Jews lived there in 1914. "This was achieved with our blood, since in 1862, residential restrictions were lifted as a reward for Jewish support during the revolt against Russia. But old customs die hard," Anita added sadly. "Soon the Poles forgot our help, and in 1881, there was a Pogrom in Warsaw."

"According to my brother, Warsaw Jews turned first to the *Haskalá*<sup>60</sup> arriving from Germany in order to put an end to anti-Semitism and to become full-fledged citizens with all due rights.

"Trying to appear more Polish than the Christian Poles, Jews played an active role in the cultural life of the city and filled its theatres and music halls. They embraced Polish culture as if it was a new religion. At every concert played by Chopin, Jews pretended ecstasies and orgasms, so that everybody would recognize their high level of nationalism."

"Just like in Germany," continued Anita, "the 'integration' was defined and understood as 'assimilation.' "But conversion wasn't the only way to struggle against prejudice. Immigrants like Samuel didn't want to lose their tradition. They started dreaming of modern liberation projects. My brother was of the opinion that Jews need not change as a requirement for acceptance in Polish society, but rather that Polish society itself was in need of change.

One modern thought that promised heaven on earth and that enthused Samuel was Socialism.

"During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and under the direction of Leo Goldman and others, some workers' groups established the *Bund*, a socialist Jewish party in Vilnius. It advocated a more realistic alternative to taking three million people to Palestine to grow potatoes! In 1915, my brother was one of the founders of the party in Poland. The *Bund* conducted its activities among the Jewish proletariat and organized strikes and demonstrations on the first of May."

"Socialists opposed speaking Hebrew, promoted Yiddish culture and Jewish emancipation by changing the Polish capitalist system. For years, Samuel combined his job at the factory with political meetings, socialist speeches and lectures and discussions about the party's program. He even persuaded some Jews to eat pork."

"He met, Fruncha, his future wife at the party while both had already abandoned a host of traditions, including courting without the knowledge or approval of their families who would not tolerate socialist relatives. Once married, they decided to raise one child. As a modern Jewish woman, Fruncha thought that she couldn't go on having babies because they would tie her down to home and poverty. When they visited us in Długosiodło, she tried to convince me to follow in her footsteps. 'You must not get pregnant every year as your

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<sup>60</sup> Enlightenment

mother did,' she warned. But since my first husband was a birth control device in himself, I didn't need the advice, and I wasn't as convinced about going against tradition as she was."

"In those days, I believed in the teachings of our religion," Elena's mother added. "Thus, birth control was, for me, one of the depraved practices that brought upon us the Deluge. How can you evade childbearing, I told my sister-in-law, if the only reference to birth control in the Bible is a negative one? Don't you realize that when Onan wasted his seed on the ground in order to avoid impregnating his sister-in-law, Tamar, as the *Leviticus* law required, God was so angry that He punished him with death?"

"I was convinced that the *Torah* was categorical, back then: 'Be fruitful and multiply' because birth control is understood by the book as a deadly sin. I used to tell Fruncha it is a *skandal* that while you avoid pregnancy, I'm unable to get pregnant. Perhaps God is punishing me for your acts and has made us both sterile."

But Fruncha was a shrewd interpreter of the Talmud and could read whatever she wanted from the text. She taught me the many tricks of literary interpretation, Anita continued with a languid sigh. "The matter isn't as you think it is," she would say. "The Talmud explicitly approves the use of sanitary pads by minor girls and by pregnant women, since it was believed that intercourse would endanger their lives. This was then an exception that was commonly accepted and once you make room for one you make room for others," she would argue.

"I would not budge," continued Anita, "because my first husband was birth control in the flesh." With your father, things would change, as he was more fertile than a rabbit. After you and your brother were born, and the economic situation worsened, I had no choice but to follow Fruncha's advice."

"We were barely able to feed four hungry mouths, one more would have meant our total ruin. At a meeting of the *Bund's* feminist wing, I was told that using a condom was the best way to avoid pregnancy. I nearly fell of my seat when I heard, because the *Talmud* was more strict about male contraception, and I had a difficult time convincing your father." Elena wanted to know all the details. "But how did you do it?" she demanded. "Well, I told your father that I overheard the rabbi saying that when you want to find answers to the problems found in the *Talmud*, drinking semen improves the mind. If he drank his own semen with good mint tea for breakfast, he would wise up," I told him.

The two women could barely stop laughing, and Anita had to admit that although "this trick made me accept the first modern idea; I would pay dearly for them later."

"Practicing birth control gave me a better understanding of my brother's struggle. Slowly, I became interested in socialist literature. I realized how poor Jews became the victims of a merciless capitalist system. I attended some Marxist lectures and learned about the utopias that promised to put an end to hateful social differences."

"I realized that capitalism was not only deteriorating the workers' condition, but that it promoted crime and prostitution. I became a Marxist, notwithstanding the fact that the founder of the movement was a repentant Jew and a furious anti-Semite."

"Anonymity and 'overpopulation' in the capital city, had consequences on the behavior of its dwellers," added the mother. Like never before, Warsaw suffered from prostitution and crime networks developed. It was not a secret that thousands of young and poor Jewish girls were recruited by unscrupulous merchants and then were forced to become prostitutes, either in Western Europe or in Argentina. "Crime was becoming more rampant even in Długosiodło. The situation in Warsaw was even worse. With the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Jews to the United States, criminal bands emerged to exploit them. Many Jews went on appointments to buy a visa and ended up with a pistol to the head, and forced to give up their money and other personal possessions."

"If Warsaw had taught me the beauty and the ugliness of modernity, then there was an event that confronted me with something I had never expected," Elena added.

"Samuel had mentioned that not only had there been a growth in prostitution and criminality, but that homosexual activities were also on the increase. The presence of large numbers of young single men working away from home in large factories in Warsaw promoted an environment of greater sexual freedom. What was unthinkable in a formerly rural Europe was now becoming possible in a new urban setting as a small homosexual subculture emerged. Young Hebrew men now searched for comfort with each other in the city's taverns and other public places."

"Some men regularly visited the toilets at the central railroad station, where under the cover of darkness they could enjoy anonymous sex with other men. Still some others frequented small shady bars visited by sailors, soldiers and the odd foreign diplomat. In these bars the men sort something new - a passionate relationship. In the *Kozła Club* located near the Jewish neighborhood, on *Zamenhof* Street, there was a section at the bar for men seeking men. As you may realize,' my brother said, 'I had to visit this place to deliver our socialist propaganda.'"

"I sensed something odd in his story," she looked at Elena then, and realizing that nothing could shock her young daughter, she continued. "I felt he was trying to tell me something and that he was awaiting my questions. I could not forget, of course, that when we were children he had some peculiar gestures that seemed to disappear with time."

"Little Samuel was a 'fine' boy, a word used for male children who disliked typical boyish activities. He did not practice aggressive sports and, on the contrary, he loved to organize doll's contests. For example, our cousin Leon used to ridiculed Samuel for the way he spoke."

"I do not like this at all," I said to him one day. "Why don't you go and look for a clown instead? On several other occasions I had to rescue my brother when other boys tried to beat him up to 'make a man of him.' I quickly learned to kick and break noses. Nobody is

going to hurt my little Samuel!" I would tell them, clenching my fists hard. At other times, I would find him covered in blood and crying in shame. I thought he had a problem but he was my family and *mishpoche* is *mishpoche*<sup>61</sup>. For good or for bad, no one interferes in *mishpoche-zachen*<sup>62</sup>," she seemed to be reminding her young daughter.

"Things changed after he left for Warsaw to become a Socialist and married Fruncha. When he told me of his 'political' trips to that bar for those men, I dared not inquire any further. Samuel had said that the socialist revolution meant changing the rules of the game on interpersonal relations, and he wanted to start these changes 'at home.' It didn't take long to find out exactly what he meant. During one of his visits, I found him kissing none other than our beloved rabbi of Długosiodło."

"Yes, you're hearing correctly, Elena. Messing with the very rabbi and in this town still locked in the Middle Ages!"

"I ran home immediately, locked myself in my bedroom and cried. He followed me home, got in the room and confessed that he was the kind of man who loved other men. He told me that he had a relationship in Warsaw and that nothing would make him change."

"You have no idea how much I have struggled against this desire that until recently I lacked even a name for," he said, sobbing. Then one night at the *Koźła Club*, while discussing Socialism with a religious man, he looked at me in a way that no one else had done before. He invited me to stay in his guesthouse, and I found nothing strange in this, since it is common for men to sleep together in the same bed. When night fell on freezing winters in Warsaw, it was often difficult to return to the suburbs, and on several occasions I spent the night with relatives. As we undressed that evening, the Hasidim boy took advantage of my situation and kissed me on the mouth. I had never felt such a beautiful feeling, and thereafter we met at every opportunity."

"His name was Lazarus, a religious fanatic who wanted to take my brother with him to Chicago," explained Anita. "Although he was an Orthodox man, he made an exception about sexuality, arguing that life was too short to waste."

"Samuel had fallen in love like a teenager experiencing the most exquisite pleasure on earth." "Do not be intimidated by prejudice," he scolded me. "If you have been able to break with capitalism, you can also question sexuality."

"At first, I felt like listening to Samuel who was feared as the demon. "What you do is not natural!" I shouted back at him. "Using condoms is not natural either," was his response. But you see, Elena, *mishpoche* is *mishpoche* and I ended up accepting his double life. I met his friend Lazarus, the most handsome Hasidim on earth."

"Samuel and David had long ago made peace between themselves. If I had complained about Samuel's sentimental relationship, your father would have defended him, and advised

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<sup>61</sup> Family is family

<sup>62</sup> Family affairs

me not to interfere in my brother's personal life. Socialists are all *Traifener bein*<sup>63</sup>, he would say. Since he used to eat pork at the socialist meetings, he was also prone to taste forbidden flesh..."

"We simply looked the other way concerning Samuel's private affairs, hoping Fruncha would never find out since she was only outwardly liberal in politics, and not at all liberal in sexual matters or anything else, she might very well do something crazy."

The members of *Bund* considered themselves progressive on political matters but were highly conservative around issues of sexuality. "Sexual liberation was regarded as a capitalist trick to distract people's attention from the important issues of the day. If they agreed to accept birth control, it was only to allow workers the extra time needed to conduct the social revolution. In other words, Elena, they did not care about the rights of women and were merely a bunch of hypocrites."

"Despite our best efforts to keep Samuel's secret, Fruncha found a love letter which not only made her realized that Lazarus was her rival, but that he also had plans to take her husband to the United States. The woman felt the deluge approaching, and became convinced that she was Lot reincarnated."

"Her attempts to 'save' Samuel, made him recognize that he could not give up, and asked that she be understanding enough let him elope with his beloved."

"Over my dead body!" Fruncha shouted. If God was not going to send lightning and fire against this Sodom and Gomorrah - then she certainly would. "A deceived soul – whispered Anita - makes an overwhelming enemy."

"But Fruncha, the Socialist, held one last card: Like threats pending over the Canaanite cities, the U.S. immigration laws denied sexual 'perverts' the right to enter the United States. The wicked woman waited until Lazarus had departed according to plan, and once he was out of the way, she took his love letter to the American Embassy."

"My husband is a sexual pervert," she told the surprised immigration secretary, handing him the note. "You should not grant him a visa."

"Using terrorist tactics, Fruncha defended what she believed belonged to her. As if following the suggestions of a vindictive God, she saw her actions as correct, and just like Lot's wife, she should not look back. Yet her plan backfired. When he found out what she had done, my brother locked himself in his room vowing never to come out again. Day after day, he cried, inconsolable, and eating only bread and water. He never spoke to his wife again."

"One winter night, cold as the heart of Pharaoh, your uncle shot himself. I never thought he would kill himself for love. Once Fruncha realized just what she had done, she went mad

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<sup>63</sup> Jews that don't respect the *Kosher* food

and became unemployable. The poor wretch ended up renting rooms in her house and blaming herself for the tragedy."

"There is nothing pitiful about her," Elena intervened. "She was not right, nor did she have any excuse to make such vile treason."

"Now you should understand why your father's affairs make me desperate," Anita confessed. "If David is following in Samuel's footsteps with this Susanita, then he will end up with a bullet in his head too."

"Come on mother!" Elena laughed, "Dad is just a friend of the homosexuals. He gives them the support he could not give Uncle Samuel, but he is far from liking other men. Remember what you said about how Samuel was mistreated for being suicidal. That enraged my dad. Whether alive or dead, he did not want Samuel to be discriminated against, and besides, the problem is not homosexuality but prejudice. Homosexuals are treated like Jews: They may be accepted once they convert. Anyway, Mom, if you used contraceptives, how is it that you got pregnant?"

The question surprised Anita. She could only answer it with another question: "Who told you to trust modern times?"

## XII

Ricardo Jimenez had been President of Costa Rica three times. He was now over eighty years old and tired of politics. He had decided not to run for the 1936 elections, but would support another candidate from his Liberal party instead, the young Leon Cortés, his Secretary of Public Works. Yet one of the issues disturbing the ex-president was the accusation leveled against him by some members of the new president's entourage. It was said that during his past administrations, Don Ricardo had opened the door to "a Jewish invasion." In order to defend himself, the ex-president decided to ask his advisor, Don José Sanchez, to collect information on the migration patterns of Jews in Costa Rica.

"You know, Don José, I am an fervent defender of free immigration. This country is as yet unpopulated and we require foreign workers and investments. Besides, I am a firm believer in opportunities for all. I would not otherwise be engaged in a scandalous relationship with a great woman despised by the native aristocracy. They want to do the same to the Jews and I will not have it. These people have suffered enough, and we have a lot to learn from them, especially the need for tolerance. However," he added, "given that each new administration blames all problems on the former one, let us prepare to defend ourselves."

His personal adviser promised that he would not fail him. For some months now, he had been collecting information about the Jews, "for personal reasons," he advised the President. Don Ricardo wanted to know if this had anything to do with his daughter's adventures with the local merchants. "Absolutely not, Don Ricardo, absolutely not. My daughter is as mad as a March hare and I will have nothing to do with her." Like the good Liberals they were, both men trusted reason and despised passionate feelings. "Yadira will eventually come to her senses," he remarked before leaving.

Don José was not bothered by the presidential assignment. He had befriended Anita last year, and she would be his contact with the Jewish community. Taking advantage of her husband's illness allowed her to be alone in the store, and the oligarch enjoyed her anticlerical conversations. When he visited this time, he came to buy some shirts for the hacienda's employees, and to ask her about the number of Jews in Costa Rica.

Anita began to worry about the anti Jewish campaign in the newspapers and was longing to ask Don José's opinion. He rejected all calls to close the doors to new immigrants, and told her in confidence that the President was in fact upset with the opposition for accusing him of "flooding the country with Poles." Accordingly, he was now in need of all the available information he could get about the real number of Jews in the country: "We need much more information than is officially available, which by the way, is not a lot. As a personal favor to me, will you ask your husband about the most recent Jewish immigrants and collect the information needed to help President Jimenez?"

Anita was dumbstruck. "I will make sure the Administration does not change policy, remaining supportive of you Poles..." Don José continued. "Oh no, Don José, you do not!" interrupted Anita. Don José was confused because she was smiling. Anita said "I mean, not



Poles but Jews, Don José; you in Costa Rica have identified the Jews with the Poles simply because we Polish Jews are the overwhelming majority in the most recent immigration. In any case, I thank you for looking after our interests," Don José. David will surely appreciate it and, through him, our community. I understand perfectly well the need to support President Jimenez."

"Yes," concluded Don José, "in this way we will not contradict each other," he smiled coyly, happy to see her involved in secret deals with the full knowledge and cooperation of her husband!" Combining official and love affairs excited him enormously and today he had proven to Anita what a shrewd politician and suitor he was." By saying that they were not to contradict each other, he meant her nation and his nation, but the phrase also implied something about the secrecy of their private meetings together, and he was sure that she knew it."

Anita assured him she would talk to David immediately, "and he will arrange a meeting with representatives of the Costa Rican Jewish Community. We are well aware that we are under attack, Don José, David will meet with a group organized to respond to and challenge the accusations made by Otilio Ulate (owner of *El Diario de Costa Rica*) and other noted anti-Semites."

Don José was much elated by his handling of the affair. He thrived on critical situations and as a way to Anita's heart, he had embarked on an explanation that went something like this: "Since Independence, Costa Rican rulers have encouraged the establishment of foreign agricultural colonies by providing land to immigrants who must promise to engage solely in agricultural activities and to dwell forever in the area to which they have been allocated. One such area was located on the slopes of the Miravalles volcano and composed exclusively of Germans. These Germans from Miravalles and many other Germans, Italians, and French, abandoned the harsh conditions of rural Costa Rica for the towns, largely the capital and the main cities of the Central Valley. Numerous European immigrants ended up creating stores, restaurants, hotels, movie theatres, bars, pharmacies, banks and so on. At that time, no one said a word against them, or threatened to withdraw their status as residents."

"But as you can probably imagine, Anita," Don José continued, "the Jews came to Costa Rica early. They actually started coming from 1502 when Columbus landed in Puerto Limón and thereafter throughout Colonial times. These were '*marrano*'<sup>64</sup> Jews, as they were called in Spain, whom the Catholic Church and the State persecuted. It seems that several of these '*Marranos*' hid in Costa Rica and created a sort of refuge for threatened or destitute Jews, arriving both from Europe and from our hemisphere. You see Anita, Costa Rica was the poorest and most remote corner of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, that is, Mexico, where the Inquisition was based. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church had to order the towns of Alajuela and Heredia to build their Christian temples. Some say that these towns had not built such temples before because many of their inhabitants were Jewish."

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<sup>64</sup> Pig, literally in Spanish. Pejorative term for converted Jews.

"Some even argued that our peaceful and anti militaristic way of life was, to a large degree, due to the Jewish blood running in our veins." He said this almost as if screaming a memorandum to President Jimenez. "That is quite probable," Anita said.

"In Costa Rica we may all share the same blood, even Don Otilio," Don José continued.

Then Anita came even closer to the coffee baron and whispered: "Beware, Don José, you will do better if you never repeat those words to anyone else. You could get in trouble. That argument would only increase their hatred against both you and I. The worst anti-Semites are the converts and those who fear that they may have Jewish blood."

Don José promised not to mention the issue again, but he could not avoid thinking how ironic it was that the very people who attacked the Jews were themselves members of other nations living in Costa Rica, the recently arrived Britons, Germans, Italians, Austro-Hungarians, French and other immigrants, for example. "Are these groups fomenting hate and discord among us Costa Ricans?" he asked rhetorically, before paying some attention to the woman's argument: "Are those currently harassing the Jews, actually converted Jews? Perhaps their parents or grandparents were Jews but not from Poland?"

A moment's silence was broken by an exclamation, "Indeed, my dear Anita! There are probably some old converted Jews among those attacking you these days, but not all are converts, nor are all the converts attacking you. On the contrary, many among them support you, and, as a matter of fact, they are also on the side of President Jimenez."

"You see," he continued, "the first immigrant Jews that came here were Sephardim, and while some of them 'create trouble' for their fellow countrymen, others do not. Take the Pazos family, for example. Alfredo Pazos Robles created various enterprises and ran for president at the Chamber of Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce. He was actually a member of the Costa Rican Chamber of Commerce for many years. In 1930, he ran for Congress under the banner of the National Renovation Party. Moisés Mas Duro who arrived from Saint Thomas although his homeland was Denmark, was nationalized in 1882 and headed another of these notable families. These are now powerful families, Anita. They will not see the poor Jews expelled."

Anita was not so sure. In her opinion, the Sephardim families integrated easily in Costa Rican society because they converted to Catholicism and tended to intermarry and created joint business ventures with Costa Ricans. "Many among them want nothing to do with the Jews," she moaned. "Thus, the elite here regards these Sephardim as '*Ticos*'<sup>65</sup>, but they consider us foreigners. Ladies such as Sophie Fishel de Pazo and Techa Pazo de Cardoza, are featured in leading national newspapers as the 'most beautiful women of the country.' After them, no other Jew would ever be included in that list. And although my Elena's beauty brings traffic to a stop around this Market, she would only ever be reported about in the accidents and crime section of the *El Diario de Costa Rica*. Otilio Ulate will regard my dear beautiful child as a bandit, the most common criminal of our days," Anita asserted.

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<sup>65</sup> Costa Ricans

"But why would you want to live in Costa Rica?" asked Don José.

"We, and many other Jews, have come here simply because we could not get into the U.S.A. In 1921, those opposing free immigration obtained their first victory in that country. The new legislation erased dreams, the dreams of David and of myself, the dreams of my deceased brother and that of hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews. We simply could not get a visa. It is that simple." "Thus, Eastern European Jews migrated to different countries with more favorable policies, including Argentina, Canada, Brazil and Palestine. Argentina has now closed her doors and Polish Jews have had to move into countries like Colombia or Costa Rica."

"The contents of that pamphlet distributed at my daughter's store are false then," said Don José. "It says that Jews were committed to engage in agriculture only while staying in Costa Rica, but the truth is that the Costa Rican immigration laws were much more liberal. Until the first of March 1931, our doors practically remained opened to everyone. We had a policy of free admission. The first Jews arriving between 1925 and 1930 did not have to show any money whatsoever. The President himself declared that the only thing required to come to live in Costa Rica and become a citizen was the desire to improve one's own life, I can assure you. After all, I have been advising President Jimenez on these matters."

It was her turn now: "Well, you know, Don José, most of our friends will tell you just what I am telling you. We all came here not really knowing where we would end up. We were fools. Many of us, including my husband David, thought it would be easy to enter the U.S.A. from 'neighboring' Costa Rica. We firmly believed the two countries shared a border." For a moment Don José almost laughed, but then controlled himself and simply said, "Is that so, Anita? Is that so indeed?"

That brought to an end their conversation. Each wanted to leave... but only to meet again later, hopefully well armed with more information to share. However, four weeks passed before Don José and Anita had another opportunity to talk. They had collected important news and both the Government and the Jewish community were now organizing to challenge the accusations made by their adversaries.

Don José started first: "Look, Anita, these are clips from the newspaper *La Tribuna*, a publication with views similar to those of the Government, and that is also known to be supportive of Jewish immigration. These reports fully rebuke the accusations leveled by *El Diario de Costa Rica*, concerning a supposedly massive Jewish immigration here. Let me read it to you:

*'According to official records from customs, we have had two waves of Jewish immigration in Costa Rica: One from 1917 to 1929 saw only 30 Polish Jews arriving in the country from a total of 556 immigrant Jews; and the second one began in 1930, and has lasted until today, provoking anger with the friends of Fascists and the Nazis among us. Until 1935, this wave included 526 persons, of which perhaps half came from Poland, and can be considered Polish Jews. Anger*

*against these Jews has emerged from the fact that they are Polish and are being persecuted, and not because too many of them have entered our country. The truth is that in Costa Rica we have plenty of room and are in need of skilled European immigrants, not only to work and develop our country, but also to improve our trade with the outside world, and help to develop our finances, and in particular, our national industries and culture.'*

This is the exact reality, Anita! Some established businessmen are trying to prevent or reduce increasing competition from Jewish peddlers. They are natural allies of those that follow the creed of racism and argue against the Jews because the Catholic Church makes them Christ's murderers, or because their Arian ancestry of white supremacist pushes them to 'eliminate or dominate those they consider to be inferior races', Jews, Indians, Blacks, Arabs or Orientals."

"Yes indeed, Don José. But let's keep it quiet, you don't need to shout."

"Oh, please forgive me, dear Lady, I get carried away sometimes. Just let me tell you one last thought. We need to work these matters out now while President Jimenez is in office. Once he is replaced, who knows what might happen?"

Anita felt frightened by these last words: "Let me tell you what I have found", she said eagerly. "After our previous conversation, I immediately talked with David who got in touch with the leaders of our community. I cannot say what they are going to do; they will get in touch with you directly, I hope... For my part, I contacted the women of several Jewish families with the help of my older daughter. We met right here to discuss the matter in this very spot where we now stand.

Each of us was put in charge of finding out about other immigrants. In two weeks, we gathered practically all the information required and this is it: About 210 immigrants have settled in Costa Rica since 1933. Most are merchants or artisans and most migrated either because they were poor or because they were persecuted, or both. Not one among us is a farmer, including the Sikora, as you see," she said, opening her arms to show him the store. "Most of us come from Central Poland, from the area around Warsaw, Lublin, Kielce and Radom. Many come from about 25 small rural towns much the same size of those you might find here in Costa Rica, Don José, including Zellochow (about the size of Heredia), although some others come from Ostrowiec, which is larger."

"Zellochow, you see, is located in the province of Lublin and its main activity is the leather industry, mostly shoemaking. The founders of the Costa Rican Jewish Community came from these two towns of Zellochow and Ostrowiec. Marcos Aizemer first arrived in 1929 and he created a stir in Poland with his letters, convincing many to follow him. A 'chain' was thus created."

"A chain? What do you mean by a chain?" interrupted Don José. Anita laughed, and then continued. "Oh, it is just an expression, my friend! Marcos' messages got around, that Costa Rica was a nice and welcoming place for immigrant Jews. And then one after the

other, encouraged by the news received from their friends or relatives already living in this country many other families decided to come."

A customer interrupted their conversation and Anita stopped to find out what he needed. Don José, meanwhile, looked at the shirts he was buying and then studied other merchandise before standing finally in front of the large mirror on the back wall. It was an excellent spot to look at Anita doing her work. It made him invisible. His eyes were not looking directly at her; his eyes were apparently simply looking at his reflection in the mirror.

Still, Anita felt something, and their eyes met in the mirror momentarily. She said, "Give me a minute, Don José! I will be back with you in a second!" The new customer understood the need to go about his business as quickly as possible, because a member of the holy oligarchy was present and in need of immediate attention. The peasant meekly bowed to Don José, who spoke to him familiarly, as one speaks with a child. After he had left, Don José and Anita continued their conversation.

"The immigration to Costa Rica is very different to that taking part in the United States," she said. "There large entrepreneurs arrived as many workers abandoned the large industrial cities of Poland and Europe, while here, we immigrating Jews are all small merchants coming from small rural towns in Poland. Those arriving in the U.S.A. were closer to the ports as well as to the embassies and consulates. They were used to cities and modern life. We, on the other hand, had to learn the ways of the city first before trying to get to the United States."

"Those lacking the means to get into the United States had only one alternative, and that was to come to countries such as this one. Costa Rica has a population, economy, and social life rather similar to that which we knew in our small Polish towns. This is why José Rocer, Marcos Aizemer, and those of us who followed after them, immediately took to you, your people, and this country," Anita concluded blushing unexpectedly.

Don José smiled a mischievous smile, realizing that she was embarrassed. Anita could not understand why she should blush while mentioning the simple fact that the Jews liked Don José...the implication was that **she** liked him too.

"The Sikoras and most other immigrants," she continued, "lived only one day of their life in a large European city."

Again Don José smiled his mischievous smile:

"All right! I gather that the Sikora and most of the other immigrants did not know about large capitalist industries, but you were not peasants either. What did you do for living in your small rural towns?"

"Not at all, Don José. Not at all," she answered immediately. "We are not peasants. You must realize that we have an old tradition among us. I do not know for how many generations we have been small merchants, craftsmen, religious men and scholars. No one,

and I mean nobody in my family, has ever tilled the land or cared for an orchard. It is the same with the rest of us. The only land I have had to deal with is the one accumulating on these floors that I have to sweep several times a day!"

Don José had to leave, although Anita had been of great help to him and to the Administration. She had promised to help David write a draft report that would be used by the leaders of their community to publicly answer the accusations leveled against them. Don José continued advising President Jimenez using much of the information this woman had provided. Their different ways converged around a shared view of history and both were apprehensive about political right-wingers.

"I will take these shirts," he said. "I am giving them as a present to the President." Anita understood perfectly well that he not only the shirts to the Government but also the information she had provided. Why he should like to engage in such childish games of hide-and-seek she did not know, but it amused nonetheless, and she felt an excitement at the thought of sharing secrets with him. Another preoccupation soon came to her mind, and as he was about to leave, she asked one last question:

"Elena told me where she found that pamphlet, Don José. She claims that your daughter Yadira gave it to her. Is that true?"

"Yes," he answered, still trying to leave. "Don José, how is such a thing possible?" she asked, raising her voice to try and stop him.

He remained silent for a moment before continuing: "The problem with my daughter is very simple, Anita, and it is all my fault. She has never forgiven my infidelities to her mother. You see, my wife has carefully trained our daughter to hate me and to always be on her side. Yadira constantly tells me how much suffering she has had to endure because of my affairs with other women. She is just like a second wife! However, her mother is more traditional and has succumbed to the charms of the Church. Yadira, for her part, is young and possessed by a profound rage against me, and everything I love and care for. You should know that she is now a member of the Nazi Party and the leader of this dirty smear campaign against President Jimenez, the Jews, and me her own father."

His heart was hurting as he stepped back into the store to relieve his feelings. "Every time my wife heard of one of my affairs, she would lock herself in her room for days and cry, refusing food and threatening to commit suicide as a way of punishing me. She began suffering from hysteria attacks and would stay in bed for weeks on end. Witnessing all this, Yadira developed a strong identification with her mother."

"But why do you need to cheat, Don José? Why are you unfaithful to your wife?" asked Anita innocently. "As a Latin male I am naturally promiscuous and simply cannot live without the novelty and the thrill of different sexual partners. I have spent a good deal of money on my lovers, but my wife has no grounds to complain either. She gets all she wants in bed as well as everything money can buy. I know she suffers because of the way I am. But I cannot help it. I am that way. We men are that way."

As a Jew, Anita was not used to listening to this kind of confession. She decided to react with tact, and asked Don José, "What are you looking for in these women? Have you found whatever it is you want from these affairs, Don José?"

"I do not know. I do not think I've ever found anything useful. There is a void in my heart," said the shrewd Latin lover. "Something is hurting that no one has been able to heal, until now... Perhaps I miss my twin soul."

He was a man in distress and he let his head fall against his chest in despair. Anita wanted to know how he managed his relations with his daughter, Yadira. "We have had many quarrels. I have told her how ridiculous it is that she should support the German cause and spread the Anti-Semitic poison distilled by the likes of her hero, Otilio Ulate. She calls me a hypocrite, like all the other Liberals who say one thing in public and do another in private. She blames me for my inconsistency to the vows I made to her mother, and to her as my daughter. She ends all our conversations with 'I hate the hypocrisy displayed by all members of the Olympus.'"

"Poor Don José! Never think I do not sympathize with you! I understand you because I myself have similar woes. Our daughter is seeing a married German and neither threats nor punishments are enough to stop her. She has drastically endangered herself. I know not what to do. We are desperate to find a solution."

Don José felt relieved by her sympathy, and the unexpected information about the beautiful Elena surprised him.

"Can you believe it, Don José? We ran away from Poland because we were being treated like animals, and now here in Costa Rica my daughter has found her twin soul in the arms of our enemy. We are a people who have endured terrible persecutions. Every one of us needs to marry within the faith or else be erased from the face of this earth. If the life of a Jew were easy, I would not worry for my daughter Elena. But it is not easy, and you know it, do you not?"

"Yes, yes," answered the coffee baron, but please continue."

"We are chased and expelled from everywhere we go. Look what is happening even in this country. Have I come to the New World to lose my daughter? She is the love of my life, with my husband things have never really worked out, and now our relationship is even worse. Since I arrived, he is always grumbling and ill tempered. He barely talks to me... He complains about me, Don José, perhaps in the same way your wife complains about you, but not because I fool around with other men. No, it is because I remain free and independent within myself, in my consciousness. He cannot accept that, he wants to control me, as if I were a slave or a thing of his sole and total possession. He brought me here just to punish me, I feel. And now the scoundrel is even having relationships with men... I seem I came to Costa Rica only to pay for the sin of struggling to achieve a better life for my children."

She could not hold back the tears and was soon crying uncontrollably. It was a much-needed release, which she should have tried the moment she had first set foot in this strange and distant land. She should have duly mourned the life and freedom she had left behind, but there were so many changes and a new language to learn that she simply had no time to think of her own well-being. Now the jug had broken in the middle of the Market, and in the most inappropriate place, standing here before the important and imposing figure of this elegant man, Don José...

He hugged and consoled her tenderly. He felt responsible for the path his own daughter Yadira was taking and did not want her actions to harm this woman, Anita, who just could not stop crying in his arms. He tried to calm her, employing irony: "If they kick you out of Costa Rica, with whom will I trash religion?"

Smiling, he looked into her eyes, and she could not help smiling back. They laughed then. They both loved to talk their hearts away found a fast confidant in each other's gaze. His workers were happily surprised with the endless gifts of new shirts and pants that their boss purchased from the Sikora store in the Market. Others noticed that he also bought new clothes from this same store for the housemaids, but that was less of a surprise since some of the maids also shared his bed now and then, depending on his fancy.

The poor girls and women in charge of his luxurious household even began to sell some of the presents their boss now showered on them. He was giving them dozens of underwear all of which they could not possibly wear, and so they sold most of them to other maids in the neighborhood. His wife Lupita complained: "Why do you buy so many of those things?" Obviously they're for the maids. No elegant and self-respecting floozy would wear such rough and cheap undergarments."

What surprised her most was the fact that José was neither molesting the maids any more, nor was he seeing any other women. She had her spies. Instead, he locked himself in his studio to read. "This man is blunting his horns," she began repeating aloud at every opportunity. One day, she actually caught him reading, and he tried to hide the book. "What is it?" she said. "What is the strange scribbling on the cover of that book? Is it perhaps a book forbidden by the Church?" His wits returned to him in a flash, and although he was now furious, he simply replied: "It is the Talmud, and I do not give a damn if the Catholic Church, or you, for that matter, considers it unsuitable!"

As he completed these words, his mood radically changed. He was no longer sad. In fact, lust was taking hold of him. For the last few months his libido had been decreasing, but only now as he confessed his interest to his wife had the matter entered his consciousness. His lovers had been complaining about his lack of interest. "Perhaps I am getting old," he thought. Maybe it is time for me to be a grandfather, although neither Yadira or Carlos seem interested in providing my first grandson..."

Now here he was looking into Anita's eyes, and as she raised her head and looked him straight in the face, neither of them uttered a word. As if their silence had brought in an



angel, as the Costa Rican folklore would have it, or rather a *dybbuk*, Don José moved his head towards hers until his lips slowly touched her mouth. They realized what they were doing only because of the intense lust provoked by their caressing tongues.

It seemed as if the entire Market had collapsed. A purring dismay spread rapidly among the merchants. All were astonished to see Don José and Anita kissing in front of everybody. Those trading in medicinal herbs opened ammonia flasks to help the fainting women. The woman who owned the store next door slipped and fell and crushed several tomatoes with her large buttocks. The woman managing the public toilets lost the only roll of toilet paper left while her customers shouted from the stalls demanding more paper. The three men relieving themselves at the urinals came out running, their members still hanging. "Is it an earthquake?" they asked in terror trying to zip up their wet pants. Occupying center stage, Don José felt responsible and ashamed for causing all this commotion. He could not understand what in the world had caused him to make such a terrible disgrace of himself, such an unexpected slip.

"Anita, please, forgive me! Forgive me!" he began. He knew he could not continue for this kind of thing was forbidden.

"Had I known a kiss like this earlier, what a real kiss feels like, I would never have depended on a matchmaker!" said Anita as she fainted, pulling down dozens of reinforced brassieres as she fell.

### XIII

Carlos Dönning, Yadira's husband, moved from Germany to Costa Rica in 1921. With only a small amount of capital, his wealthy wife was crucial to the setting up of the first fine clothing store in San José. It was called "La Veronica." Sales increased rapidly during the 1920s with the flourishing coffee elite and the ensuing urbanization of the capital city. This allowed him to buy the bakery shop next-door in 1928. Carlos imported clothes from Germany and France, which took months to arrive since it was carried on banana boats.

At the same time, he began wooing the emerging middle classes. These citizens were engaged in governmental or private administrative jobs and had started to grow in numbers and influence during recent years. Carlos was therefore able to sell them clothes on "more favorable" terms. He requested the help of Don José's daughter, his wife, Yadira, to help him purchase the type of quality goods demanded by the local middle classes. In 1929, she traveled to the United States to buy dresses.

A gentleman's suit imported from Germany cost up to 200 *colones* each, but Yadira was able to bring a simpler line from New York that could be sold for just 80 *colones*. A French blouse costing 75 *colones* could be bought in Philadelphia for 30 *colones* only. In this way, she started a cheaper branch of La Veronica and the increased sales allowed her to open a brand new store in 1930. It was called The Inexpensive.

Yadira liked to help the customers personally. One such client was Gloria, a young girl working as a translator for the Banana Company. Gloria had a good salary, 300 *colones* a month, and given that a skilled worker made around 120 *colones* each month, this was a virtual fortune. The young girl spent all her money on clothes. She already considered herself a spinster at 24, but her designs on Mike, the Company lawyer, kept her vein. "Americans are good husbands," she would say, "and they don't only pay attention to fifteen year old girls like the Costa Rican men." She would wear the best clothes she could afford in order to get him.

"If I could, Yadira, I would buy these two dresses they are divine!" Gloria said one day painfully. "I cannot afford to appear ugly this week. Mike will escort me to my sister's graduation ball at the Colegio de Señoritas." She had just 100 *colones* to buy a new dress for the occasion because she also had to get new shoes and cosmetics, "and they are extremely expensive these days." Although Yadira liked the translator a lot, there was nothing she could do to help her. "You know how strict my husband is about sales," she said conclusively.

Gloria decided to buy the shoes and the perfume "because I will be dancing cheek to cheek with my *gringo* and I'd rather look good close up," she said. The ball represented her main opportunity. She said goodbye to Yadira, who would meet her later at the party since one of her cousins had also graduated and was attending the ball.

El Sesteo, the well-known social center in San José, looked splendid that evening under the glow of the setting sun. It was the largest ballroom in town. Yadira arrived escorted by her handsome husband and wearing an exquisite black dress with a single string of giant pearls around her delicate neck. On her head she wore a geese feather hat half a meter high. This made her the star of the ball as she looked like the statue of liberty. While trying to locate their table, Yadira suddenly saw her friend Gloria.

She did not notice Gloria's embarrassment at first until she realized that her customer was wearing a dress even more stunning than her own, and horror of horrors, it certainly was not from her store.

"Where in the world did you get such a lovely dress?" she demanded of Gloria who was wearing an impressive green suit stamped with yellow daisies that called everybody's attention. She looked so pretty that her escort would propose during the evening. "This dress has brought me a lot of luck," she later confessed to Yadira. "I bought it in installments from David, the Pole, since I could not afford to pay cash, as you already know. "Besides," she concluded, "the price was a real steal!"

Yadira could hardly hold back her ire. She had never heard such a thing as a dress bought in installments! "Is the world going mad?" she asked herself. "Who would be so low as to go about collecting weekly or monthly payments?" She could not understand the behaviour of this girl whom she regarded as a friend. How could Gloria buy from who knows where? "Who did you say sold it to you?" Yadira asked. She almost fainted when Gloria explained that David was a peddler. "This is really outrageous!" yelled Yadira as she walked off to sit with her husband.

"Did you hear, Carlos, what Gloria just told me? She bought a dress on 'installments, from a Polish Jew!'"

"Oh, come on, woman, that is the new fashion here in Costa Rica."

"Why? We must do something about it then. Are we going to remain with our arms folded and do nothing?"

Yadira had reasons to feel bad, her husband was an extremely handsome man but he had no money. It was his marriage to her that made it possible for him to secure a bank loan to open the first store, and he in fact compensated for his vulnerability by treating her disparagingly: "You Costa Ricans are all a bunch of lazybones," he often said whenever he felt annoyed.

The treatment she received at the German Club was much the same. Her husband's friends made sure she understood the backwardness of her country and its lack of culture. "The Costa Ricans do not read nor educate themselves. They would starve in Germany," she heard them saying when they thought no *mestizo*<sup>66</sup> was around.

Yadira made a strong effort to fit in. She attended all the meetings once the Nazi Party was organized, and she encouraged their Anti-Semitic drive. "What is the difference between a Jew and a cow both eating grass. "Cows are more intelligent," she replied. Then a man

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<sup>66</sup> Not white Costa Rican

followed her with yet another joke, "What did the Jews ask God when He offered them the Bible?" "How much is it worth?" everybody shouted back in unison. By now Yadira was splitting her sides with hysterical laughter, and almost drowned on her saliva as she recognized the joker's voice. It was the Nazi Party President, Max Gerffin.

But she did not laugh at all about the sales by installment being offered by David and his fellow Jewish merchants and peddlers. This was exactly the task for the wife of a German. It was surely much more than a simple commercial duel. Her reputation was at stake; hers had to remain "The Cheapest" store in town. What would her German friends think, if her business got ruined by a bunch of miserable Jews?

The ball ended at about one in the morning, but she did not go to sleep. In the ensuing days of frenzied activity she did not sleep well at all. Nightmares woke her constantly. A group of men with long tails were running away with her clothes; she felt her nakedness and saw the emptiness of her store. These demons came from the "caricatures" of Jewish men shown on the pages of *El Diario de Costa Rica*. She woke from her dreams sweating and screaming, "I must do something about it!"

She first approached her cousin Luis Gamboa, an accountant at a store importing dresses. She learned that these days "retail sales in San José are in the hands of several foreign groups established here throughout history, these include the German, Italian, Chinese and the Lebanese and Spanish communities in particular. Since peddlers pay neither taxes or rent, they will get in trouble with the established importers," she was told. "Selling by installments is causing a revolution in our economy. They are making innovations, we are not," concluded her bright but powerless relative. "If my boss does nothing, soon nobody will buy his expensive dresses," he said, sweating, overwhelmed, and deeply angry.

"Some Jews have already started small clothes factories to reduce costs and sell cheaper to the masses," he continued.

"Yes," she said, "for example José Shadowisk and Jacobo Maimaré, they have set up La Industria Nacional de Tejidos to produce wool; today they have at least 30 workers."

"Certainly", answered Luis, smiling now: "Manuel and José Estembes produce sweaters and shirts. There is also Yudai Rupítin, owner of the Fábrica el Águila, where they make all those popular materials. The European Taylors, owned by Benjamín Feisjand, make men's suits. Jaime Kokol recently opened his coat factory. All of these companies are trying to serve the needs of the mass market, those who cannot afford expensive imported clothes. Dear cousin, if we do not do something soon, all the businesses importing goods will go down the drain."

Yadira could not stay still, "I shall not adapt to these new circumstances," she told her cousin, "I shall fight them."

A few days after the ball at which Yadira claimed that "I was bored to death", she called her uncle, Alberto Sanchez, Vice-President of the Costa Rican Chamber of Commerce.

"Uncle Beto, why have you not done something about the unfair competition from the Jews? You must fight them, or else we will all go broke."

Her Uncle Alberto recognized that the Chamber lacked action and policy on the issue. "But maybe," he said, "given the number of complaints we get, we could present our case to the Government. However, remember that your father is a very close associate of Don Ricardo and has always favored an open door immigration policy."

Yadira disregarded this advice. "It is one thing to promote the arrival of Christians and quite another to promote the Jewish rabble. Daddy would never allow such a thing. I trust that you will help us, dear uncle Beto. We cannot stand this plague.

"Dear child," said the seasoned uncle, "remember that he is their friend and even buys clothes from them." She jumped at this: "Then that is the reason for this thing! That man is a complete and utter disgrace to our country. If I could, I would overthrow him. I will insist that my father leave this disgusting administration... Do you have any idea what these Jews are charging Jimenez? Or maybe he doesn't have to pay them?"

Don Alberto fulfilled his niece's desires. He became the main promoter of the anti Jewish campaign. Thanks to his dedication, numerous critiques and communiqués on immigration policies and the need to regulate against unfair commercial competition were published. The Government, however, dismissed their claims and complaints; the Executive was a good friend of the Jews.

Uncle Alberto was finally able to meet Jimenez personally. He had agreed to talk without witnesses, according to the wishes of the commander in chief. They met in March of 1936, a few months before the end of his third and last administration. Smiling, the President accepted that he had indeed purchased clothes from Jewish merchants, and was very careful to let Don Alberto know what he had paid for every item bought, even showing him the receipts.

"I have had things made at the Feingenblatt tailors, the last but one receipt is this. My chauffeur picked up the merchandise on February 12 and I paid 150 *colones*. Then this is the most recent receipt, Don Alberto, for two pairs of khaki pants. I paid with a check dated March 4."

"Stop, stop," said Don Alberto, "I believe you. I believe you. You are embarrassing me, Don Ricardo, please."

But the Costa Rican leader was now on a roll and immediately launched his reply: "I am sorry, Don Alberto, but if we believe in free trade, both nationally and internationally, as you and I do, then you must realize how beneficial this kind of trade is. The merchandise is very inexpensive and they use selling techniques that European merchants consider improper. But this business is not actually improper because it is a legal and common procedure in banking. That is, the customer takes delivery of the goods and the seller receives payment by installments. It is just like what they do in the coffee *haciendas* and

the banana plantations. Don't your peons at the banana plantations receive credit in their own *'comisariato'*<sup>67</sup>?" asked Don Ricardo.

"Well, yes... they do," conceded Don Alberto.

"Then the Banana Company is doing exactly what these Jewish peddlers are doing," continued Jimenez, "do you not see it?"

"Yes, yes," said Don Alberto humbly.

"They do something that is good for their customers, they sell cheap and they get paid long term," concluded the President.

Don Alberto did not dare present any other arguments as if they were his own. "And what about those, Don Ricardo, that regard this issue as a matter of race and nationality? You know, for example, the current legislation of Argentina and the United States concerning the immigration of Jews."

"Yes, I know that, Don Alberto. But I am a full-blooded Liberal and Costa Rica is neither Argentina nor the United States. Freedom must always be our preferred choice. And besides, we are different here, you see? We still have plenty of land and Costa Rica is in great need of skilled, cultivated and laborers. I am able to see the good side of the Jews, Don Alberto. After all, they are the people of Christ himself, and of a number of other men I admire profoundly such as Espinoza the philosopher; Heinrich Heine, the highest peak of the German lyric poetry; Disraeli, Queen Victoria's Prime Minister; Ballin, who invented the hamburger; Nordau the postwar German minister. Or Einstein, the mathematician."

"That miserable scoundrel, the stingy lawyer from Cartago has been bought by the low prices offered by the Poles," Don Alberto fumed as he hugged Don Ricardo in farewell. Once outside the presidential house, he exploded in rage, trying too late now to react to the President's mastery of the situation. "Thank god we were alone...!" he thought. The most humiliating part of it all was being forced to thank the Chief for his discretion. "I swear to fight him and his despicable Jews!" he vowed. Unfortunately, and perhaps partly due to the irritation this even provoked in him, Don Alberto suffered a heart attack and died a few days later unable to fulfill his desires. His niece and political heir, Yadira, promised to carry his banner to the end. "Dear uncle", she sobbed as the first shovel of earth fell over his casket, "these miserable Poles are responsible for your death and they will pay for it."

That afternoon in the midst of her sorrow, Yadira held a meeting with other merchants.

"We will pressure the Government to fulfill my uncle's wish," she said shedding an abundance of crocodile tears. He wanted a Christian Costa Rica where our merchandise can be respected and not offered for sale by installments but in cash, as our Lord Jesus Christ paid when He died for our sins on the cross."

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<sup>67</sup> Employee's store within the *haciendas*

Don Paco, a humorous Spaniard, reprimanded her: "But Yadira, our Lord Jesus spent three days hanging on the cross, surely Don Ricardo and his friends will argue that this in no way paying in cash."

"All right then," she replied furiously, "let us not discuss the banal...let us concentrate on what brings us here today."

The merchants all agreed to hire Pepino and Lelino Tacio, two lawyers to prepare their arguments and to organize the pressure needed to gain the approval of a Congressional Commission directed at prohibiting the Polish trade, but all this they did to no avail. The different commissions that were eventually created by Congress to study "the problem," as well as the officials from the Secretary of the Interior, all basically recommended charging patents to peddlers, and a special tax to compensate those paying rent or loans.

Yadira knew perfectly well that agreeing to the creation of taxes meant the official sanctioning of peddling. Thus this woman, together with tens of other importers, began following rather crooked paths. They took their complaints to the newspapers and then, directly, to the county municipalities. Their first attack was publicly accusing the Polish, Czech and Russian peddlers of being Communist propagandists. "Together with their cheap goods they are bringing into our country the ideology of social division."

Yadira herself conducted the attack. Disguised as a public clerk and accompanied by a male friend posing as her boyfriend (he actually was a journalist from the Anti-Semitic *El Diario de Costa Rica*), she asked David to show her the dresses and the materials he sold. While he was taking these dresses from his bag, Yadira called the attention of the journalist to the colors of the fabrics.

"Look," she whispered in his ear, "look how much red caftan he has! They are probably going to make Communist flags with it."

"But milady," said the journalist intrigued, "does the Communist flag have those large yellow *ayote* flowers?"

"Exactly," replied Yadira. "The *ayote* is the symbol of the party in Costa Rica."

However, the accusation of Communism still did not bring the population to their side, and so the merchants started a new campaign based around the supposed illegality of recent Jewish immigration. The Anti-Semitic press argued that Jews had come to Costa Rica under false promises, since they had committed themselves to till the land and not to be traders or industrialists. "We have been deceived," was the title of an editorial. Yadira would repeat this same phrase at the Soda Palace, a meeting center for traditional importers.

"The Poles always said they would work the land and instead they came to San José and are selling fabrics," she pointed out.

"Well, that is not a good argument, my dear lady," answered Alonso Queerillini, an Italian that owned the Almacén Centauro. "At first we Italians also came to engage in agriculture but we have also ended up as merchants."

"But at least you did all you possibly could to advance the country's agriculture, whereas these Jews do not even try."

"Your accusation, replied the Italian, is not difficult to rebuke, Yadira. We must drop it."

Alonso reminded them that the Jews were admitted using an "open door" immigration policy. They were only required to show one thousand *colones* as a warrant that they would never become a burden on the state. Certainly, many of them wrote 'farmer' under 'occupation' on their residence permits, but this was probably just to please the immigration officials. Now we merchants are using this bias argument against their current occupation status, when it is easy for the Government to claim that one thousand *colones* was the sole official requirement requested from these Jews. Moreover, the President himself thought this requirement unnecessary. In most cases, relatives already living here and already full Costa Rican citizens backed these immigrants. These people paid the deposits required and signed declarations of trustworthiness."

"Debating the reasons for the immigration of these people is irrelevant and will lead us nowhere," continued Alonso. "We must force them to pay patents. This is the kernel of the issue."

The strategy proposed by Alonso soon became successful. A number of municipalities established tariffs on the peddlers. The municipal councils of La Unión (Tres Ríos), Cartago and Paraíso, charged 75, 50 and 40 *colones* per trimester, respectively. In Heredia the tariff was set at 50 *colones* and when a 400 *colones* tariff was proposed for the largest market, that of San José, the Secretary of the Interior intervened to forbid it.

The traditional importers also faced opposition in San José, where other merchant groups supported the Jews. Yadira proclaimed President Jimenez the sole advocate of the Jews in Costa Rica. For his part, Alonso thought this was a mistake. In his opinion, some old and new merchants were also profiting from this "Polish revolution."

Yadira would realize her mistake when she visited the Pay Less Warehouse and tried to get a contribution from Don Otto Odio, the owner, for the press campaign against "the Polish plague affecting our national commerce."

"We want to protect all the established businesses in San José from the scourge of this unfair competition; especially people like yourself who duly pay rent and patent charges," she rapped.

"Dona Yadira, you are putting me in a difficult position. Some of these Jews and peddlers are my customers. You know sales have dropped this year and they are selling my clothes in the countryside," answered Don Otto.

"But do you not realize that lending them merchandise will ruin us all, the Christian merchants? I have already lost many customers to them. How can I compete if they do not pay either rent or their employees?"

"Sincerely, I must say no, Dona Yadira. It is good for my business if they go about the countryside selling the merchandise I cannot sell here in San José. Perhaps you could do



like me. I am almost sure you have goods that do not sell. Why don't you give them to one of these Poles?"

"I cannot believe you are making such a proposition! How can you be a member of the Chamber of Commerce and betraying us at the same time like a new Judas?"

"And whom do you mean by "we" may I ask?"

"The Costa Rican Christians, of course. But it seems that religion is of no concern to you these days."

"I did not know we were talking about religion, Mrs. Dönning. I thought you were talking about business and profits."

"The war is going to be tough," Alonso said, when Yadira told him about this conversation. "The pro Government press says that not all merchants are on our side. Some members of traditionally Anti-Semitic families engage in commercial affairs with Jews, and even boast that they have 'friendly' relations while we continue to demand nationalization," he added, angrily. "Among them are the big importers of the country, like Barzuna, Feoli, Yamuni, Saprisa, Carboni, Fiat, Maury, Terán and others."

"They are a pack of traitors," said Yadira, and notwithstanding a series of temporary setbacks, she and her allied merchants continued their attacks on the Government and their views slowly influenced Costa Rican body politic.

Given the continued stream of accusations leveled by Yadira about the illegal immigration of Poles, Ricardo Jimenez requested several investigations and established migratory controls.

The Jewish lobby answered this adverse campaign by paying for editorial spaces in the newspapers. They claimed, "We have been respectfully following the laws of this country and working honestly to provide important services for the poor." However, this was not enough to stop the attacks. The pressure from Yadira's merchants continued unabated. A presidential decree required new revision to identification and migratory documents "for all Poles residing in Costa Rica." This revision was never completed, apparently, since the Government claimed that the immigration in question had been rather small, and was simply a matter of "a number of residents leaving temporarily and then returning to the country."

"Still," said Yadira to her chums, "we are now making progress."

She would blush angrily every time the official newspaper claimed "the opposition to the Jews comes from a small group of merchants resentful over the new competition they are being faced with." The common folk, argued the press, align themselves with Don Ricardo, "but are largely in support of these peddlers with whom they identify; they are thankful for the services they provide." Once she had confronted her friend Gloria, Yadira realized that this was not a lie:

"Dear Dona Yadira," said Gloria entering the store, "I need to ask you a favor."

"Sure, whatever it might be. What can I do for you?" Yadira asked, trying to look and sound like a saint.

"I wish you would stop this campaign against the Poles. I think you do not know how difficult their situation is and how much in need they are. I know several of them, and I may assure you that they are not Communists, as the newspapers claim."

"Surely they sent you here to intercede in their name. Are they selling you dresses at lower prices?"

"Do not be so ungrateful, Yadira. I thought you and I were friends and I never expected you would say such a nasty thing. If I have come to beg you on their behalf, it is simply because I know they are honest, harmless people."

"But they are hurting Costa Rica and we Costa Ricans must defend ourselves instead of handing all our commerce over to them."

"Who in the world has told you that our trade is in the hands of Costa Ricans? Your husband is not originally from Costa Rica and most merchants are Spaniards, Italians, Germans or Lebanese."

"Well, you are not exactly the national flag yourself, either. Are you not about to marry an American?"

"Yes, I certainly am, no thanks to you. You have never offered me credit from your store although I am supposed to be your friend and one of your good customers. You have always charged me four times the real price of the garments I buy."

With those words, Gloria left the store feeling dazzled. Her thoughts were confused, both about her former friend Yadira, and also about the things happening in the country.

**XIV**

Carlos and Max had met at the agricultural community of Miraflores. They were kindred spirits who ended up in a distant country both running away from their homes. They both had terrible relationships with their fathers. Max's father educated him using an extremely strict and hard discipline, beyond even that which was commonly used in their country. He had endured a sentimental disappointment but was able to tear the boy away from his mother. "I want you to become a real man," he would say to the young Max, every time he forced the boy to undergo extreme military training.

Carlos was the son of yet another ferocious man. He endured a similar fate. One hot night in the valley of the Reventazón River, both men sat down to smoke a marihuana joint. The drug made the tropical loneliness bearable; each started pouring out his heart to the other about childhood and the reasons that had brought him to this strange land. Both men had been working in a failing agricultural colony; one helping to build a road, while the other struggled to harvest the land. But this business was going nowhere, and both men made a radical decision the next day. This was not the first time they chatted or smoked a joint together, but now the failure of the agricultural enterprise created a sort of community between these two men anxious to live better lives.

Carlos was the first to tell his story. Born in Baden, Germany, he was the seventh and last child of Peter, a Lutheran minister, and Mary, a simple housewife. His education was, in his own words, "cold and strict." His father lacked emotion and was extremely rigid. He showed no affection to his son, but tried to control all his movements instead. They prayed several times every day. All the children had to attend three daily meals, duly cleaned and properly dressed. No one was allowed to take any food before thanking God. The family met again in the evenings, before going to bed, to pray once more. If any of the children missed these prayers, their father would beat them. An even stricter control was exercised over his sisters. They were neither allowed to use foul language, nor to wear dresses opened below the neck. "My mother was quiet and also very religious." She worked all day long doing house chores, while her husband worked at the church. "I must confess that I hated that irrational religion where everything is based on rules and nothing gets analyzed," said Carlos.

His family started to have links with Costa Rica when his grandfather, Alfred Dönning, arrived in 1853 to establish an agricultural colony there. It would be called "The Angostura."

The colony produced coffee, cocoa and wood. Aboard the "Antoinette" (a brigantine capable of carrying about 100 passengers), Alfred Dönning left Bremen on October 24, 1853 and arrived in Greytown, Nicaragua, on December 14 of that same year. From there, he continued traveling by land and arrived in San José three weeks later. He worked the land very hard, but the lack of infrastructure and the terrible sanitary conditions forced his return to Germany within two years. Like many other Germans, he became infected with

yellow fever and suffered from "*calenturas*"<sup>68</sup> in this region, known as "the birthplace of tropical death." Luckily he did not die but made it safely to his homeland, where he married and begot eight children, Carlos's father among them.

Carlos's life was similar to that of many other sons of Lutheran ministers, but for a particular problem - the violence. Since a small boy, he would watch his mother and his elder brothers being victimized by the irate attacks and the strict discipline exercised by an authoritarian father. It was normal to reprimand children in Germany, but the level of violence in this house was uncommon. One day his father beat his mother unconscious simply because she visited the town without his permission. "The minister's wife cannot go around in the streets visiting strangers!" he shouted latching at her with the "*chillo*."<sup>69</sup> Carlos was not exempted from these punishments. When he failed a math test, his father slapped him hard in the face, repeatedly, and then sent him to his room without food for 48 hours.

The family worked around this shared terror in different ways, some members pretended indifference, while others carefully noted every small change in their father's mood. Carlos followed this second path. He studied his father meticulously, in particular the "bad weather signals." When the minister was distracted, Carlos would use the mirrors to keep an eye on him. Warnings of an impending storms were a tense face, difficulty in breathing, lips too tightly shut. In any one or all of these scenarios, young Carlos would immediately launch "first aid" and "preventive" actions.

"Father, would you like a cup of tea?" "Oh, your church really looks nice this week!" "Do you need me to run an errand, father?" Sometimes these interventions prevented a disaster. At other times the forecast failed, and they all got wet.

The sensitivity required to study his father increased Carlos's obligations to the well being of his mother and siblings. He became a father substitute and the main support for the victims of this domestic warfare. Carlos had in his heart a profound sadness. Sometimes he considered himself the world's loneliest young man, burdened by an overwhelming sense of responsibility. He wanted to find someone with whom he could talk, reasonably, and not simply do things under orders or following conventions. During his youth he never found such a person. He dreamt of a less rigid and more rational religion, one that would explain and convince him instead of being an imposition. Such a religion was not practiced in his home.

His father, the minister, suffered from two manias. One consisted in the strict control of the body and the second was a profound hatred for Jews. About the first, he believed emotions were harmful and evil. He could not accept crying or laughing. He was even intolerant of eating and drinking in his presence. He placed mirrors on the walls of the corridors to make sure no one in his house would ever violate his rules. In this way he could exercise complete control, from facial expressions to preventing any excessive use of the toilet facilities.

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<sup>68</sup> Fever

<sup>69</sup> Stick whip

Carlos shared his father's second obsession. They both found Jewish conspiracies everywhere. After the German defeat in World War I, the minister blamed the Jews for betraying the homeland and for provoking defeat. He was a believer in the *Dolchstoss von hinten*, that is, the legend of the backstabbing. "The damned *Juden*, allied with the Marxists, betrayed us in order to establish a German Jewish republic which would then be the foundation of their quest for world domination."

One night, when Carlos was 12 years old, his father, Peter, returned home late. It was a cold and windy, the house squeaked as the cypress trees scratched the walls and the roof. The boy was in bed, it was already ten at night, and they were constantly under the patriarch's threat: "Everybody must be in bed at nine o'clock sharp, not one minute earlier, not one minute after."

The boy had been awake. The noise of the wind on the trees frightened him. He imagined gnomes, fairies and ghosts running from the cold forest and creeping under his bed. He felt relieved when his father came home, went into his room, and closed the door. Or rather, he tried to close the door because soon the wind slowly opened it. Minutes later, through one of the mirrors, young Carlos could see his father undressing, showing his behind. Mother was already lying in bed, shadows from the night lamplight caressing her face. The minister, Peter, removed all his clothes. Carlos had never seen him naked, much less "naked with her." He turned, and the boy could see his erect penis, a gigantic tool compared to his still tender member.

He saw when his father took off the blanket from the bed and waited until his mother removed her own clothes. If contemplating his father naked had been a major impression, the impact was even greater when he saw his mother in the nude. Peter started kissing her breasts, large and round like exotic fruits, and she moaning. It was a disconcerting noise. The young boy spy felt a new emotion, a combination of delight, disgust, anger, fear and excitement. He had never before seen his parents kissing and this was somehow an extreme shock. In fact, he had come to believe that his parents lived two lives, one in the mirror, and the other away from it. As we know, objects and people contemplated through reflections always seem so much more fascinating than in real life.

"I developed a passion for mirrors and medicine. I wanted to be a psychiatrist, but my father would never let me study this 'Jewish science.' Being a surgeon represented a way to study the body with the purpose of healing. I love to look at the flesh as it is, be it that of a man or a woman. I particularly like the female body, since I adore beautiful rounded breasts. While removing a tumor I feel cleansed, and at the same time I know I'm doing something useful and good."

Max thought that Carlos' large hands must have touched many bodies. In reality, his patients, as well as those that later surrendered to his charms, were first enticed by his beauty. At 25, Carlos was an impressive man: eyes the color of avocado skin, his hair the golden shade of a ripe plantain, a fleshy symmetrical mouth like the sweetest of watermelons, and his smile as refreshing as orange juice on a glorious morning.

"I want to eat this man," Max thought, but to get rid of such lusty thoughts, he asked, "And what about the mirrors?"

"Although we Lutherans do not practice a confessional religion, I must say I love them. Mirrors are the doors to the soul. When I see my reflection in a mirror, the reflection seems to be the reality. It is more real. At least, the father and mother I watched making love in the mirror over many nights were more human than the parents I saw face to face each day. When I meet people, I always first consider how he or she might look in my mirrors. If possible, I actually try to see them reflected in a mirror. Some look better than others. If someone appears uglier, or more dangerous than in real life, I run for my life."

At first, Carlos shared another of his father's fervors. "I had never seen a Jew at close quarters because in my community they were extremely rare. Early in the century, they had left for Prussia or Saxony and mostly dwelled in the cities, not in small towns like mine. In 1919, when my father told us that Kurt Eisner, a pacifist Jew and Bavarian prime minister and promoter of the Zionist cause had been killed, I experienced a profound satisfaction. It was one of the few occasions that I can remember when my father and I happily embraced, overwhelmed with joy.

"One less Jew!" we laughed in unison. The few times we shared something it was a common hate for the Jews. I believe my anti-Semitism has to do with wanting to have strong emotions. I was not interested in the Jews, what I wanted was to have a good relationship with my father... and if hate was the way to his heart, then I welcomed it."

"That same year a friend of my father's, Anton Drexler, created the German Workers' Party. He invited my father to be part of the initial group. Peter received the identification card number 9 among the founders. The owner of card number 7 in the small group was a former corporal of the German army and an unemployed painter named Adolph Hitler."

"Congratulations for starting a movement directed at creating order in this country, Anton," said Peter to his friend.

"And who is this handsome young man?" asked Anton.

"He is my youngest son."

"Well, this young man is a real German, Peter. We should all look like him, Drexler said."

"That May, after the fall of the Soviet Republic in Munich, their leaders, Gustav Landauer and Eugen Levine, were shot without a trial by the right wing soldiers. Peter was ecstatic. He said to me, "The process to bring to an end this Jewish plague currently destroying our homeland is beginning." In his Sunday sermon he told the parishioners the story of Judas and Jesus, as an analogy between Jews and Germans. "Jesus knew his disciple would betray and sell him for a handful of coins. But He was the Son of God and expected to die in order to redeem humanity. However, a nation may not let itself be killed or die. It must protect its children from threatening dangers.

"One of the town clerks came to me and said, "Your father's sermon was wonderful. It is the most profound service he has ever given and it's an inspiration for us all. You must be very proud of him." "I am, my lady, I am," I answered.

"But you must know, Max, I had a number of doubts. On the one hand Peter preached love, but on the other he passionately hated Jews. Besides, his sexual life was becoming more brutal every night. One night I saw him forcing my mother and covering her mouth with his hand to prevent her from screaming. She was hurting. Another time, he hit her when she admitted visiting a Jewish doctor. Later that night, he interrogated her about the visit to this "Semite" physician.

"The same physician also came up in one of our conversations." "Now that you have completed high school, son, what are your plans?" he asked me. "I do not know," I said. "I think I would like to be a physician, like the one helping my mother. I have talked with him. His name is Leopold von Dittel, he is prodigious with the scalpel and I would like to become his assistant."

"But is von Dittel not a Jew?" asked my father, alarmed.

"Yes father," I replied. "But he is one of the good ones. He is not a merchant, nor a banker, nor a Communist."

"Carlos," he said, "there are no good Jews much less a good Jewish physician. They are all infamous. Now I understand why your mother has consulted him."

"I felt like a cold dagger cutting my throat. I had talked with von Dittel and at first did not realize he was a Jew. When I found out I had already applied to work as his assistant while studying at the university. I needed his support. Thus I told my father, 'I do not like them either, dad. I hate them as much as you do. But it is a fact that they are very influential in medicine school. It is my only chance.' My father would not yield."

"Since 1918," Carlos continued, "prices in Germany increased rapidly and a minister's salary was barely enough to sustain our family. The middle sectors suffered the most by this inflationary trend and many blamed it on the Jewish *Finanzkapital*. Peter became even more radical. He would say: "They are creating huge monopolies at our expense." My friends at the Nazi Party would never forgive me for having any contact whatsoever with Jews. But my dreams were to become a physician rather than a Jew-hunter, and I insisted on making a compromise that my father, albeit, would not accept.

"I would rather see you dead,' he warned me, 'than working for a *Juden*.' This was the end of our talks about medical school."

"I was totally disappointed. I understood anti-Semitism, but wanted my father to think first of me and then of the Hebrews. Things would not be this way, though. Peter chose selfishly and from then on I did not know what I hated more, Jews or insane anti-Semites. I began questioning the idea of Arian supremacy proclaimed by people like my father and soon I lost interest in the Arian cause. I'd had enough of so much passion and negative feelings. I realized that they demanded the sacrifice of all your dreams, notwithstanding the

consequences. There was a lack of ethics in the whole affair. It was impossible to have a calmed and cool discussion about what was good and what was bad."

"Given my father's refusal to let me study medicine from a Jew, I had to look around, trying my luck. In the town's newspaper there appeared an article about farming colonies in Latin America for enterprising young Germans. One of these establishments was in Costa Rica and promised a great future for those taking the risk. The article read: "These primitive countries need German intelligence and skills to get rid of poverty and laziness. Their natives are naturally vagabonds, backward and useless in all areas of development. If you are Arian, manly and strong, and would like to make a fortune, please give us a call at Intercontinental Agricultural Enterprises."

"The president of this company added that the Costa Rican government offered a number of attractive conditions. Among these were that you could acquire a good chunk of land, loans to buy machinery and opportunities for quick and easy residency and nationality status. The founders of these farming colonies had to pay a certain amount to the company who, in turn, would take care of all the paperwork. You were only required to have 'a strong desire to win and to bring civilization to the most primitive places in the world.' In contrast to what had happened to my grandfather, this time the infrastructure seemed much better."

"At 22, I decided to emigrate. At first Peter opposed my decision. 'You will fail just like my father failed there,' but in the end he had to give in. Life in Germany did not offer me any better alternative, what with the huge number of unemployed, and thousands of *hungerstudent*<sup>70</sup> and bankrupt practitioners of the liberal arts. Peter could not pay for my university education and my expectations did not look bright. However, he gave me 50 dollars to pay Intercontinental Agricultural Enterprises and I embarked on a boat leaving for Costa Rica. The ship was called *Colombia*. A third class ticket amounted to 70 dollars and I was left with only 50 dollars to start my farming adventure in the New World. 'Be very careful, son,' said my father in farewell, 'always keep very high the name of your fatherland and do not mix your blood with those Indians over there.'"

"During the voyage I realized that I had more important capital beyond the 50 dollars in my pocket. My new wealth was my good looks. In my religious high school I never had a girlfriend, but I had sexual adventures with the town's peasant women. Only a few years prior, I had publicly recognized my sexual relations as an adolescent in Germany, because, you see, in those days it was not common for young men to engage in sexual practices before marriage.

"While traveling aboard the *Colombia* I noticed a number of women looking at me. Many European and Latin ladies were on board. The ship had a capacity for 500 passengers and our first stop would be Curacao, then Puerto Limón where I would disembark and the ship would make a final stop at Barranquilla. The entire trip lasted three weeks and there was plenty of social action, if you know what I mean. The ballroom was quite large, and to my delight, its walls were completely covered with mirrors! In each mirror I found a pair of

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<sup>70</sup> Starved students without any future



eyes staring at me and making me feel nervous, since I did not realize the reason for their interest."

"Perhaps there is something wrong with my face? I thought. Then as the band played a *conga* and everybody started to dance frantically, I looked at myself in one of the mirrors..."

"And what did you see?" asked Max.

"I saw a frightened face belonging to someone completely ignorant about where he was going, a young man who had failed because of the Jews. That is all I could see."

"But was it not your father who prevented you from undertaking medical studies at the university?" asked Max.

"Yes. And in the back of my mind I knew that, but did not quite realize it then. Now I know it for sure. But in 1922 I did not."

"Life at the Colonia Miraflores would be yet another setback for me. The German immigrants arriving with me were not used to working in tropical weather, removed from the urban centers lacking infrastructure. They were even less knowledgeable about the soil here, the agricultural products characteristic of this place, the market, or the labor force. Once in the country, and after taking our money, Intercontinental Agricultural Enterprises simply disappeared from the horizon. Thus there was no representative of the company to whom we could file a complaint. The only option left was the Costa Rican government, but they were unable to make the company fulfill its promises."

"We are very sorry," said the President's secretary to the German immigrants. "We did not sign any contract stating that we would provide you with houses, running water and electricity. Nor can we commit ourselves to providing you with medical services in such a distant and dangerous region. In San José, half the households lack basic services. Do you think we could provide you with them in the middle of the jungle?" They gave us seeds and some fertilizers to start plantations, but that was all. They neither built the houses or the roads; nor did they provide us with irrigation for the planted fields. How in the world were we to survive?"

"I worked planting coffee trees, but soon realized the northern lands we had received were not good for this crop. Given the failure of the 'golden grain,' I decided to grow vegetables instead. Half the first harvest ended up in the stomachs of hungry wild mice that suddenly descended on the community. A drought completely destroyed the second harvest. Next, I planted maize, but my dreams were broken when locusts ate it all. Some other colonizers started moving to the towns, but I was not yet ready to give up. I would ask for a loan from fellow Germans living in San José, the owners of large sugar mills."

"I do not know what you are going to do," he said to Max. "But I will stay here until this land feeds me."

## XV

Max smoked another marihuana joint and continued to tell his life story. The night was fresh and it seemed as if he had all the time in the world to talk. He told Carlos of how he was born in Berlin, in the Brandenburg region. His house had been built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was on the historic Unter den Linden Street. From its windows you can see the Brandenburg Gate, the German Triumphal Arch. He was involved in the best circles of Berlin society from early childhood. His father was Army General Gustav Gerffin, well regarded among the highest political and social spheres and his mother came from an aristocratic Bavarian family. "But I keep only few memories of her," he confessed.

The German intelligentsia gathered at receptions held at his house, including a number of Jews from the Humboldt University. "My father was an old guard General of the Army. He was not a furious anti-Semite as yours, Carlos, but nonetheless he did not like them. I had some Jewish classmates in my school, in part because it was close to the *Oranienburger Strasse*, the center of their community."

His father had separated from his mother and then divorced her in a much publicized and scandalous judicial trial. Gustav took his wife to court accusing her of infidelity and of something much more serious, "living in sin with her History teacher, Henny Sherman." However, the judge declared it impossible to condemn her for such a "crime," since Article 175 of the Penal Code referred only to male homosexuality. Thus she was accused of prostitution instead, a charge entailing years in prison and losing custody of her only child.

"I was just a boy of six when this happened," said Max. "Thereafter, living with The General (as he always called his father) became my private hell. The General was obsessed with World War I and he was devastated when Germany surrendered and signed the armistice putting an end to the conflagration. As a result of the armistice, the country accepted to pay an enormous debt for "war reparations," under "humiliating conditions."

For the General, his son, Max, was his other major concern. He was sent to study at military elementary and high schools; where he lived constrained under the strictest discipline. His father feared that his son would follow in the scandalous footsteps of his mother, Claudia. Gustav's goals in life was therefore the struggle to rearm Germany and to have another opportunity to get even with the French, this time in the hands of the new German youth of his son's generation.

A report from the athletic trainer at the military school created an irreparable crisis as Gustav received a note asking for an immediate meeting. The General came to the school expecting the worst. It was a dark fall afternoon and they met in the Principal's office:

"Thank you for attending this meeting, General Gerffin. It is difficult for me to call you away from the many important activities you must have. It is also very difficult for me to tell you this sad story. To go straight to the point, I must inform you that last week your son Max was found engaging in unbecoming activities in his dormitory."

"Professor Jensen, please be more precise!" the General exclaimed.

"General, I feel ashamed of having to be more explicit. The boy was found engaging in discreditable behaviour with another student younger than himself. Max is twelve years old, but is already quite developed for his age."

The other students found out about this scandal and now several parents have complained, demanding that Max be expelled from the school. Given your professional prestige and your much deserved military honors, General, I would advise you to seek help for your son and to take him to another school, without making much noise about the entire affair. I would suggest that Max could perhaps attend a less strict school.

At this, the General was only able to say thank you. A black cloud settled over his head and racketed his electric circuits. His offspring, whom he had tried to shape employing Prussian discipline, repeated his mother's terrible aberration. "How is it possible" he thought, "that my child could also become a sodomite? After all, to prevent her evil influence, he was separated from his wicked mother and has been trained to become a warrior. The military man had hoped that sending his son to the strictest schools would prevent inversion..."

"Something crooked must have been inherited by the boy from the Köner family," the General concluded.

While almost sleepwalking, he went to fetch Max from his room. Perhaps his son had sucked immorality along with his mother's milk, he thought. He came into the room and launched himself against the defenseless child and did not stop beating and kicking him until the boy had lost consciousness. When Max woke up, he was at home.

"That same week The General took me to see doctor Magnus Hirschfeld. This physician was famous throughout Germany and abroad for his research on the "Uranian" type of human beings, those people that would later become known as "homosexuals."

The psychiatrist argued that this was an inherited disease, and the General thought he was a good doctor because this was exactly what he believed. According to Hirschfeld's vast studies, the Uranians were *zwischenstufen*, that is, somewhere between male and female. Against the opinions of many other scholars, Hirschfeld argued that homosexuality was provoked by a hormonal developmental disorder and was not an immoral or criminal act. For this reason, he had created the Humanitarian Scientific Committee, a group to inform the general public about this topic and to prevent persecution against the Uranians. The General had read a letter published by this Committee in one of Berlin's newspapers and it convinced him Hirschfeld was the right doctor to cure my disease. He came into Hirschfeld's Institute as a meek kitty. I suppose all he really wanted was to be exonerated for the way I was and to discharge all blame onto my mother's evil tendencies."

To get to Hirschfeld's bureau you first had to walk through a huge library. The walls in his office were also covered with books from the ceiling to the floor. For once in his life, The General felt small and ignorant.

"Doctor Hirschfeld: I have come here with my son Max because we have a serious problem. I must confess that the boy's mother was a homosexual and I therefore wrested from her his custody in the courts. Last week, I found out that he is following in her footsteps. I cannot find any explanation for this deviation other than something inherited from my former wife's family. I am here to ask you to save my child."

"It is a pleasure to have you here in my office and in my Institute, General Gerffin. As you know, for many years now I have struggled to repeal Article 175 of the Penal Code, precisely because I regard sexual inversion as something inherited that may not be blamed on those that suffer or practice it. My theory considers sexual inversion as the result of hormonal disorders and there is little we may do to change such a condition. However, there are cases of inverts that are manly enough and that may easily abandon their predicament. It all depends on the amount of feminine hormones in their bodies."

"I presume that, in the case of Max, he inherited the disease from his mother. But then, do you think it would be possible to turn him into a normal man?"

"I cannot promise you anything. At least not until I thoroughly examining him, in order to determine how "intermediate" his body and his mind are."

"Going into Hirschfeld's office was one of the worst moments in my life," said Max. "The doctor asked me if I knew why my father had brought me there. I simply moved my head up and down, because I would not utter the ominous word... Hirschfeld would not let you use euphemisms.

"Your father, he said, suspects you are an invert and wants me to help you."

"It is not what you think, Sir, I replied. If I am here because of what happened at school, then I must tell you it was all an innocent affair."

I was paralyzed and no other words would come out of my mouth. For a number of years I have been living confused. The General had taken away my mother from me and every time he got mad he would start shouting that both she and I were a pair of *degenerates*. I never dared to cross that invisible barrier preventing me from further inquiries. On the other hand, I felt a special attraction towards boys, since I was seven, I think. This attraction induced me to engage in mutual masturbations with them and later to engage in 'more mature' practices..."

In contrast with Carlos, who as a youngster had never seen a Jew and who had developed a hatred for them adopting it from his father, Max was very close to Jewish people. His anti-Semitism was not nurtured by his father but developed from his hostility towards Hirschfeld. He was a Jew and he humiliated him. "I endured a real torture in his Institute and he made me hate all members of that race."

"Since I could not speak, paralyzed with fear, Hirschfeld asked me to undress. He wanted to study my body in order to discover hormonal anomalies. The chances for my recovery depended on the amount of feminine traits I had, he told me. He would not let me keep my underwear. The first thing he looked at and touched was my genitals.

"You have a member larger than the average," he said.

"Is that a defect, doctor?" I asked.

"Not at all, boy. Instead, it is a good sign."

He then examined my pectorals, neck, arms and legs. He even measured the size of my feet. I noticed his breathing becoming agitated, as if he could not hold back a desire. He finally asked me to turn and show him my ass. He asked if any man had fucked me.

"Never!" I replied with indignation.

"Are you sure you do not want to be possessed by a man?" he insisted.

"No, doctor! Not at all! I have never had such a desire."

At this point, Max had to stop his story. The marihuana made him fearful and the conversation had got hot. After all, he did not know how his friend would react to his confession.

"Do you think I am abusing your confidence with this sort of confessions?" he finally asked Carlos.

"Not at all, man. I do not have a problem with the topic. It must have been hard to go through that kind of examination. Believe me, I understand you because my father was also a man burdened by sexuality and I never liked how he always hid it. I think it is a topic that one must talk about and on which no one has the right to judge anyone else, if they are not wearing his shoes."

According to Max, the ensuing visits to Hirschfeld became a nightmare. The doctor would tell him stories of a number of inverters that wanted to become women. "Something that had never crossed my mind," said Max: "Once he told me he would like to do it. I could not believe it. He was an old man, in his mid fifties and respectable. I could not imagine him in woman's clothes.

"And why do you want to do that?" I asked.

"Well, because I believe I have more feminine hormones than you. Look at my waist and my hips. Do you not see them as lacking masculinity?"

I looked at them but all I could see were two fat and flaccid hips. I could not imagine any man wanting to make love to Hirschfeld."

"After several appointments, the specialist considered that I had a good chance of 'abandoning' my inversion. He had shown me pictures of naked men and women and had 'measured' the reaction of my member to these images. In a 'scientific' way he wrote down his observations and data on my clinical file."

"Like what?" asked Carlos. "Give me an example."

"Well, let me see. I remember one that said: Today the patient saw an attractive woman's body in a picture and the patient had a good erection..."

"But I received my biggest surprise when surreptitiously (while Hirschfeld talked on the phone) I read something else he had written on the sheet: 'The patient is the son of a female Uranian.' At that moment, I felt astonished and wanted to burn down the entire Institute with my doctor in it. I finally understood the reason why my parents had divorced, why my

father had completely separated from my mother, and why The General was obsessed with me. They all thought I had inherited the disease."

Because the young man got excited looking at pictures of nude women, Hirschfeld determined that he should visit the district's house of call. According to the physician's advice, Max should get initiated with a prostitute in order to leave behind his sexual inversion. I liked the whore; she was a mulatto girl from Algiers who had been living in the Rhine area for some time. Algerians had established themselves there during World War I."

Max deeply inhaled more of the excellent marihuana and began to describe his first sexual encounter with a woman. "She had enormous breasts and her hips were incredible. In that whorehouse they consumed opium, although not as good as that you may get at El Paso de la Vaca in San José. A tremendous horniness took hold of me once I was alone with her. I wanted to possess this woman, but I wanted to do it just like I used to do it with my classmates in school. I jumped upon her back and had my evil way with her, punching her from start to finish. It was an exciting night, her blood and her screams excited me more and more."

"I felt cured. After that night I started a long chain of love affairs with different women. I was mainly attracted to dark skinned girls, exactly my opposites. You know, Carlos," he continued with a laugh, "opposites attract, as they say."

"For his part, Hirschfeld was convinced I was not an invert. He would say to The General: 'Your son is too virile a man to be an invert.' Still, he recommended that my father should not tempt fate by sending me to 'the army or to any all-male academies since this could be an obstacle to full recovery.' My return to a 'normal' sex drive had to be stimulated by a permanent exposure to women, the doctor said.

The General felt disappointed and did not know whether to feel relieved or betrayed. If I could not follow a career in the Army, what kind of healing had Hirschfeld attained? From that moment on, my father lost all interest in my future. I was sent to complete high school far away from him in Munich. There I attended the Geisela High School where I considered that Hirschfeld had completely ruined my life."

"However, I had renewed relationships with men long before even I expected. In that High School, you see, one of my mentors was Peter Granniger. This teacher could not hide his predilection for me. He enrolled me in the *Wandervogel*, the German youth movement, similar to the Boy Scouts in England or the United States.

This organization had many things that I liked. In the first place, it was very similar to what I had experienced in my former boarding school, young men alone camping and sleeping together. There I found a homosexual world completely different to the one described by Hirschfeld. And finally, in 1922, at a party organized by Wilhelm Janzen, one of the Movement's patrons, I met Ernst Roehm. This man would teach me the other side of the coin..."

"At 35 years old, besides being a passionate anti-Semite, Ernst was a misogynist. He believed women could not attempt to reach masculine intellectual development, since they lacked intelligence. Their single function was reproductive. He held the idea that Jews and other inferior races were "feminine," incomparable with the manliness and the valor of the Teutonic nation. The future leader of the German S.A. was very manly and hated affectation. For a number of years he had been a member of the "manly" homosexual movement associated with Benedict Friedlander and with Wilhelm Janzen himself. In 1902, these two men created the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*,<sup>71</sup> an organization opposing Ulrichs and then also Hirschfeld, on the homosexual issue."

"In their view, homosexuality was not a gender inversion and those practicing it were more manly than heterosexual men. They wanted to return to the Greek times, where male lovers in Thebes, Crete and Sparta, were always together fighting and dying as members of their respective armies. Christians, with their 'infatuated and Jewish' religion, had castrated and produced the degeneration of the Teutonic nations. By means of these youth organizations, Janzen hoped to recruit young men to his cause."

"Ernst Roehm was Peter Granning's lover. Soon the man would turn him into a procurer of new youths. Roehm was not attractive: he was overweight, with a small neck and tiny swinish eyes, and his face was pockmarked. Nonetheless, he had vast power and important connections. Ernst had been "recruited" and "sodomized" by no less a character than Gerhard Rossbach, the founding hero of the youth movement and the link between the Nazi Party and the *Wandervogel*. Rossbach helped Roehm create yet another youth organization, the *Schilljugen*. Its members, wearing kaki shirts, would become the famous assault troops *Sturmabteilung*, later known by the acronym 'S.A.'

Ernst joined the terrorist group Iron Fist and there he attempted a coup d'état. For that reason, he would later be forced to flee to Bolivia. But, before running away, in 1921, he helped transform the German Workers' Party into the National Socialist Workers Party (the Nazi Party). At the same time, he discovered and promoted a young man called Adolph Hitler. According to Ernst, from 1907 to 1912, this Adolph was a prostitute in Vienna. Still, he could not present any evidence to prove this claim."

"The soldier would not confess his intimacies with Hitler, although he told Max he helped him because 'he was very attractive.' After all, the Nazi leader could not be a Uranian, since he also had relations with women, although they all ended in failure. Ernst believed Hitler was a cropophile and that he also enjoyed sadomasochism. But he needed a demagogue to attract the masses to the Nazi Party and Hitler not only knew how to talk in public, his speeches had the power to mesmerize an audience.

"In my opinion," said Max, "there were probably some other things, I am not sure."

"What do you mean?" asked Carlos.

"Perhaps esoteric, perhaps wild debauched sex, perhaps violent terrorist rampages against the inferiors, above all against the Jews and the Communists. Hitler thought the more

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<sup>71</sup> The Community of the Special Ones

powerful Christians were also our enemies; after all, it is the religion of the slaves. In his opinion Jews, Communists and Christians currently hold World Power and are the archenemies of the superior German, Italian and Japanese nations. And then, there was probably something more between Hitler and Roehm and the other fellows, something related to lust and love."

"Again you are being inscrutable, dear Max," said Carlos.

"Hitler's private legal councilor, continued The General's son, Hans Frank, was homosexual, as well as Walter Funk, the current Minister of Economy and Herman Goering, second only to Hitler in the line of command. Ernst was crucial for Hitler's election to the presidency of the Nazi Party in 1921. He had the money and the contact with the industrialists, not Hitler, and this I fancy, is a major source of quarrels and jealousies."

"When I first met Ernst, I could not believe that a Captain of the army was 'interested' in me. He invited me to his apartment to talk about the future of Germany. We agreed to meet the next evening at around eight, when Ernst could leave his office. We drank a lot and took several doses of heroin. It did not take me a long time to realize there would be more, much more. Ernst got up from the chair he occupied and excused himself. 'Please, allow me to have a shower. I am all dirty from a long day of work. Besides, I must leave Berlin later tonight. And, most of all, added Ernst, I should not be near you smelling like a pig... Ha! Ha! Ha!!'

"Sure, sure, Ernst," I said. "Take your time." While he was gone, I looked around his weird place and then sat down again to have another brandy. At that moment he returned, wearing only a pair of tight shorts. I was an innocent lad in those days, indeed! I became somehow suspicious but continued drinking, unaltered. He sat at my side. Then I felt his hand caressing my sex.

"You know what I want, do you not?" he asked while rhythmically squeezing my virility.

"No, I do not know what is it that you want. Why do you not tell me?" I answered.

"I want to take you to my bed," was all he said.

He hugged and kissed me then. I had never done such things before... "A man's kiss is a very powerful thing, Carlos," said Max. "The saliva is saltier, the weight and the size superior and the penetration is powerful."

"But the surprises were only starting. The bedroom was littered with Nazi paraphernalia and photos of nude Nazi comrades. I was surprised and impressed. Here there were all these well-known National Socialist leaders, smiling while posing without any clothing and showing their 'weapons' to the camera.

Each picture had an inscription, some written by the models themselves, some scribbled by Ernst. S.A. official Karl Ernst's picture read: 'May this rifle remind you our happy moments. I currently have a quarter of a million men at my disposal.' There were other pictures. Ernst called my attention to one portraying Captain Rohrbein. He said he was his former 'companion.' The picture depicted an insolent naked rogue and on his head Rohrbein had written: 'I shall never forget the bloodbath.' 'Sit on this chair, it will fit you nicely,' was written across Herman Goering's erect member. 'This one is dressed like a woman.' I said of



Goering. Then he showed me another one. 'Is he not Hitler's chauffeur?' I asked, astounded by a picture of a fellow with a huge member, smiling while another man practiced fellatio on it. 'Yes! Exactly! That is him!' said Ernst. There were still other pictures, showing party members engaging in group sex."

"From an old and tall armoire, Ernst produced a black leather whip, steel handcuffs and two small bags of pure cocaine. I had never tried Cocaine before. He put it on my tongue, asking me to note how it became numbed. He said: 'Imagine its retarding effects were I to rub it on what you have down there...' I did not answer. I had seen enough photos to know what was expected of me. Blinded by lust, I started whipping him endlessly. I could not stop, he moaned and begged for more, his blood poured from both his back and his buttocks."

Max stopped to see Carlos' reaction. They looked into each other's eyes; both were shocked but ready to continue.

"We went on and on until sunrise.... Maybe I have talked too much," said Max.  
 "No, no!" answered Carlos. "Tell me, what else did you do?" Then Max said, "You know nobody touches my ass, do you not, Carlos? That is all I can tell you, at this time, about that night. So, let us move on and let me tell you some other things."

"The homosexual world of Munich introduced me to a culture I never thought could exist, hyper masculine sadomasochism. Many times I went with Ernst to a bar called *Bratwurstglockl*. A table was always ready for him at the place. 'Queers,' the way to refer to a feminine homosexual, were not allowed. I felt Hirschfeld, that fucking Jew, had deceived me, making me believe all homosexuals were effeminate. From then on I would blame him for presenting me a false homosexual world. Side by side with those inverters who liked to dress like women and considered themselves 'feminine souls' trapped in men's bodies, there was a Paradise of virile men. They even published a journal, *Der Eigene*, with pictures of powerful and well-endowed men. Hirschfeld presented the homosexuals as soft inverters, because he wanted to win over the German population to his cause."

"But a problem soon developed in my relation with Ernst. I fell in love with him, but he was not faithful to me. He argued there were too many men ready to be enjoyed and, besides, life was too short a miracle and may end at any moment. In the twenties, Berlin was a homosexual paradise, including numerous bars such as one called *Eldorado*, where every night you could find a new sexual partner. Those were years of absolute and mad lust, thousands of men paraded through my bed."

"However, things got difficult in 1923. On May first, Ernst used the S.A. troops in Bavaria against the workers. The army defeated him and he was forced to resign. If Ernst remained in Germany, Hitler feared the Nazis would not be supported by the army's right wing. Thus he suggested Ernst to go to Bolivia and to take me to Costa Rica, a meaningless country for the German diplomacy, but a good springboard for my future. When I arrived in San José in 1925, it only had about 50,000 people, but nonetheless I found a secret underworld to satisfy my many appetites."

"One of them was my addiction to heroin. In order to obtain it, I helped several German pharmaceutical businesses bring it into the country. I came to supply 23 pharmacies, mostly in the working neighborhoods of Barrio Mexico and Hospital San Juan de Dios. I also exported large quantities to Panama. Notwithstanding several campaigns to reduce its use, the business prospered thanks to the presence of other importers and pharmacists. A bag containing a quarter of a gram would cost one colón, whereas the worker's daily wage was four *colones*. It was expensive, but my customers amounted to about 10 per cent of the working class in San José."

"And what about women?" Carlos, whose interests leaned that way, asked.

"In Puerto Limón," replied Max, "I was able to find an almost perfect replica of my first relation. Lady was her name. She was a mulatto woman with huge boobies and buttocks. She was my lover during my first period in Costa Rica. She was also my partner in the drug trade. Unfortunately one day I found out she had been robbing me in order to run away with a black lover. I, thus, kicked her out of my house. I then got a job to hide my drug dealings, working with the Costa Rican government in the Secretary of Transportation, on matters related to road construction and maintenance. That is what brought me here to Colonia Miraflores."

"Tell me more about your homosexual life in Costa Rica," said Carlos. "I am curious to know what goes on here."

"Costa Rica is not as backward as one might think. I have found some bars in the Paso de la Vaca area, a working class section of the town. But here most homosexuals belong to the inverted type. It is difficult to find manly men, as I like to call them. Only effeminate homosexuals openly display themselves around here. At these bars you may find office clerks, hairdressers, make-up assistants, warehouse clerks. All of them use female nicknames. Once the doors are closed, they dress like women. There I started a relation with a homosexual man nicknamed Susanita. He was of the kind Hirschfeld would love to meet. She is a real lady and I treat her like a woman because I do believe these guys indeed suffer from hormonal disorders. Although this social life is important in San José, it, of course, never compares with that of Germany. That is why I try to visit Berlin from time to time."

"But are not you afraid of being seen in such dens of iniquity?" asked Carlos.

"Actually and honestly? No," said Max. "Many people belonging to the high society may be found there. In those bars I have encountered governmental officials, including the assistant to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs. When the police raid the place, they "tip" the cops and the harassment instantly stops. Some other authorities are also frequent customers."

When Max concluded his story, Carlos was ecstatic. He never imagined the intrigues of the most powerful nation over the planet could reach this remote place in the midst of the tropical jungles. He smoked a final marihuana joint and told his friend, "I wish you the best, man. But be very careful."

Their paths would separate the next morning. Carlos went to ask for a loan and Max returned to the German legation in San José.

## XVI

One sunny morning Carlos showed up at Marco Mikaus' offices, a wealthy German that made his fortune exporting sugar. By 1920, the small group of German merchants controlled about half of the national sugar production. Mikaus also owned coffee farms and a bank. Carlos requested a loan of 500 dollars, an important amount during those days.

"I know you will not be disappointed with me. I am telling you sincerely, don Marco. I am the son of a Lutheran minister and I am an honest and laborious man. My problem is very simple. Neither the Government nor the company fulfilled their commitments," Carlos said beggarly, while anxiously looking into the eyes of the sugar cane baron.

"I am very sorry, Carlos, but many fellow countrymen have come to ask for loans and not even one of them has paid me back. Now I no longer have enough resources to continue with such charities, even though, of course, I realize you are not like them. Concerning these other fellows, I have heard rumors they drank it all! I realize this land is not like ours; it is terribly hot, but that is not a reasonable excuse to end up drinking like the Latino men," Marcos answered.

Carlos was about to leave the premises when a young lady came into the small office carrying two cups of coffee.

"Let me introduce you to Yadira Sanchez; she is my partner's daughter," Marco said.

Carlos felt a pair of eyes staring at him just like those hungry female eyes had regarded him through the mirrors on board of the Colombia. Since living in the agricultural colony, he had reduced his sexual activities to sporadic encounters with peasant women. The Germans owned a bar attended by the community members; there they would share some beers, good music and some conversation. Occasionally there would be something more. Carlos had barely time for fun or flirting. Still, many girls in the colony did not hide their desires to marry him. Moreover, during the first year of his stay, a line of children with clear eyes and blond hair were born in the colony. "The Lord is blessing us, sending here his heavenly angels," claimed the local priest. The town's physician, for his part, was more pessimistic: "The Devil is transforming all our girls into whores!"

Don José Sanchez's daughter manifested an intense interest through her tiny eyes. She was white, with black hair, small and coquettish. "A woman like her will not call anyone's attention in the street," thought Carlos.

"Pleased to meet you, Carlos. What are you doing here?" she asked slyly.

"I have come from Miraflores," he answered, looking directly into her eyes.

"I have heard it is a very *"guarero"* place, where you people drink a lot, according to my sources at the local grapevine..." she said, smiling broadly.

"Please do not believe those stories..." he answered in excellent Spanish: We are hard workers but unfortunately lacking good luck."

"And what may be the reason of your visit here?" she wondered, interested.

"I have come to request a loan," Carlos said, lowering his eyes.

"Well, don Marco is not a moneylender and I do not know what he said about your request. But let me invite you to visit my dad and me before you leave. I know daddy will like to meet you. In any case, it was my pleasure to find you here..." declared Yadira while, at the same time saying goodbye and leaving the small room.

"As I was telling you," continued don Marco, "we do not lend money. My advice to you is to go and meet with my partner, as his daughter suggests. He is a much more daring businessman." At the same time, he got up from his chair and showed him the door. "I did not even have time enough to drink that coffee!" thought Carlos.

At Yadira's home things would be different. She was interested in Carlos and he was interested in her money. In turn, her father was interested in having her married.

"Mommy, I like that man, he is so handsome!" exclaimed Yadira when Carlos knocked at the door.

"Remedios, please go and see who it is and then let me know. Take him to the living room," said Yadira to the maid.

"Do you really think he would like me?" she asked Lupita, her mother. "Oh, certainly, dear daughter. You are a lovely girl from an excellent family. How could he not like you?"

Yadira was running around the room, looking for the best clothes to wear. She put on a white cotton dress and a small hat made with the same fabric and of the same color. She looked at the mirror, painted her lips using a stronger red color and added some more rouge to her cheeks. The maid returned to announce her visitor had arrived and waited in the living room.

"Oh, my lady, he resembles a beautiful angel," the maid said. "I had never seen such a handsome man in my entire life. How lucky you are!"

"Do not say nonsense, Remedios, you are behaving like a broody hen. Get me that perfume from that small table and the shawl that is under the bed, below the mosquito net," Yadira said impatiently.

The maid did as requested and then left to tell the cook, the gardener and the other two maids, that Archangel Gabriel had arrived to visit the young missus.

Carlos only felt a light and almost weightless attraction for Yadira. Notwithstanding her lineage, she seemed to be an uncultured woman. He was irritated by the easy way she had to express her feelings, both happy and sad. In a matter of seconds she could pass, from the most beautiful to the most horrible mood.

"Do you think, Remedios, this man loves me?" Yadira asked her maid, insecure.

"Most surely, ma'am. Who would not fall in love with such a good *señorita*?" was the answer. Meanwhile, the maid thought: "Oh, what a dumb bitch! Does she not realize this man is too much for her? He is going to be unfaithful to her with every woman in the world!"

For his part, Carlos remembered the last words his father had told him. "Do not mix your blood with any Indian blood." But his needs and his interests were more powerful. Carlos and Yadira married at the Cathedral in San José, on January 24, 1927.

Carlos looked impressive in his black smoking suit, with a gray tie around his neck and a shiny black top hat, strongly contrasting with his blond hair, bright like the morning sun. Those passing by the nearby park could not stop looking at him. When he smiled, the girls elbowed and pinched each other like fools. "The one marrying that stud is really going to be happy!" could be heard among the invited guests cramming the church. Then Yadira appeared, wearing a beautiful French white silk and cotton dress, with a long skirt inlaid with real pearls. All the commentaries went to the dress; little was said about her. "What a divine dress!" exclaimed her friends and enviously added: "They brought it from Panama because you cannot get anything that beautiful here."

It was a hot event. It was a torrid summer day. The groom wished the ceremony would be over soon, so as to put an end to its pomposity. As they were coming out of the church, sweating like a madman, Carlos could not help noticing two strange men talking in the park. Both were dressed in dark suits and showed long beards.

"It cannot be possible that the Jews have already arrived in this country!" he thought.

"Father, who are those two men?" he asked the priest.

"They are Poles, son," he answered.

Carlos looked at them and lost his bearings: "Damned you!" he shouted to everybody's surprise.

Carlos believed he and Yadira were not made for each other. "I should have never married her. It would have been better if I had waited a little bit more. I did what I did only because I was in need..." he later would say to Max. His marriage was of much help to get the needed money, although it was not invested in his farm. Instead, he opened a business to import clothes in San José. "The only good thing I got from that wedding of mine," added Carlos to Max, "was to realize the need existing in San José for a good store where women may buy fine imported clothes. This is a much-needed business, particularly for the wealthy classes of Costa Rica. Importing Yadira's bride dress from Panama cost a real fortune! However, I must tell you something, Max. At that moment I did not know anything whatsoever about fine clothes. I came from rural Germany and did not know anything about tastes and fashions. However, the nice customers I have and they are really good looking ladies, Max, are teaching me what the high society women of Costa Rica like and dislike."

"My department store started with the wrong foot, since the first clothes I ordered were actually too 'masculine' that is, dresses in pastel or rigid colors. At that time in Europe, jackets and ties following the Greta Garbo style were fashionable. I did not sell even one of these. When Dona Paquita Elizondo tried one of these dresses, she taught me the lesson of my life," he confessed, smiling, to his chum.

"She was over forty and, during those days, already a matron. She had married a *gamonal* (rural political boss) who also was a Lieutenant of the Army, twice her age. A number of rumors soon spread about her affairs with young peons at their coffee farm. During the popular coffee "*cogidas*"<sup>72</sup>, Paquita did not miss any opportunity... if you know what I mean," Carlos said smiling mischievously. "She would say to her husband: 'Honey, I am leaving to go to the farm, to supervise the work.' On such occasions she would disappear for two or three days. She frequently traveled to New York or Paris, to buy the latest fashionable garments. The evil tongues argued she never wore those dresses while abroad, but instead spend all her time in bed with the hotel bellboys. Still, she was a very wealthy woman and in San José everybody followed her lead concerning fashions. When she attended the National Theatre, the rich young girls would eagerly regard her, to copy the models she was wearing and to imitate her manners, asking their parents to buy them dresses, 'just like those worn by Paquita': 'Daddy, take a good look at her and bring me one model exactly like that one she is wearing, now that you are going to visit London'"

"But let me tell you what happened the day she visited my store. She came in and began examining the clothes, tried several dresses but did not like any of them. She then asked for a purse and the clerk showed her one made of "wild crocodile" skin. 'The only wild thing around here are the prices you ask for these things!' she said loudly. The merchandise did not call her attention. But something else did. At a given moment when the clerk went to fetch her a cup of coffee, Paquita called me from the dressing room."

"Since you are unaware of it, Carlos, I would like to show you the Costa Rican woman's fancy," she said.

"Certainly, Dona Paquita!" I answered, looking into the cubicle and then realizing she was naked in there. Although she no longer was a young girl, her breasts looked round and erect, she had firm and ample legs and a mouth as hot as a volcano.

"Come on in, don Carlos, this is your house!" she invited me. There was nothing I could do but smile and get inside, cramming the place. She then closed and locked the narrow door.

"What do you want me to do, Dona Paquita? I am at your service. Teach me what the *Ticas*<sup>73</sup> fancy the most," I said while beginning to caress her breasts.

"Oh, don Carlos! We here are born coquettish and we like the feminine stuff. Stop buying jacket dresses and ties and knickerbockers. And now kiss me because I am dying to make you mine..." At the same time she held me tightly in her arms.

"After a while I saw myself in the mirror, naked and hugging a woman that could very well be my mother! From that day on she would make periodical visits to my store, always buying something and always demanding my personal attention..." Carlos and Max could not avoid laughing.

"And then, her visits made my business prosperous, since many other women, as I said before, tried to imitate her in all she did. Of course, I did not engage in similar 'personal' relations with other customers, with some exceptions. On the other hand, my wife was not pleased with Paquita's visits to the store at all."

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<sup>72</sup> Harvests

<sup>73</sup> Costa Rican women

"I do not buy anything without the previous approval of Paquita. She is an expert in the latest fashions and her advice is always excellent," said Carlos to his wife Yadira.

"And what else is she giving you?" she retorted, sarcastically.

"Nothing. It is me who is giving her good presents," he angrily answered. "By the way, one of them is my support in her desires to open the cheapest clothing store in town... something just like what you want to open yourself," added Carlos.

"I am sure Paquita is more knowledgeable than anybody else in this country. The rumors are that she is teaching all she knows to a number of peons at her coffee farm," Yadira said ironically.

"Still, I am sure these lads' appreciation is not as large as mine," Carlos answered, trying to make her mad.

Carlos started to make a fortune selling women's dresses. But his relationship with Yadira was not as good. She would drive him mad; she was a complete bore. Thus he decided to study medicine in Mexico. He left Costa Rica in 1930, leaving both Paquita and Yadira in charge of the stores. The two women would finally make peace with each other and even work together in the Committee for the Nationalization of Trade. In 1934, Carlos returned from Mexico and again met with his old friend Max.

Drinking a beer at the German Club, Carlos confessed to Max: "Staying away from her four years in Mexico was a major relief." For his part, Max had traveled to Germany to visit with his chums and recently had returned to Costa Rica. "Your father would be proud of you," Max said to Carlos. "We need physicians in Costa Rica and our German community requires support during these difficult times. Come to the meetings of our Nazi group. I know your father will approve it wholeheartedly. In this country we are confronting a major invasion of Polish Jews and we must do something about it," he said.

Max Gerffin had become a loyal servant of Nazi Germany. Costa Rica was relatively significant for the Third Reich, given its strategic position near the Panama Canal. In case of a conflict, the Germans could count on several friendly communities in Costa Rica to sabotage communications. Some even speculated that this little country could become a beachhead to take over this fundamental transoceanic passage. Thus, Gerffin had returned carrying specific orders to neutralize the current position adopted by the Costa Rican government in the case of an eventual confrontation between Germany and the United States.

During that same evening the two old pals jointly attended the first Nazi meeting at the German Club (their communal social center since 1890). Among those sharing a table there were distinguished businessmen: owners of bookstores, sugar mills, banks and insurance companies. Max introduced Carlos as a convinced National Socialist and a personal friend of Hitler: "Carlos and his father don Pedro were among the original founders of our Party in Germany." Carlos appreciated the invitation and admitted not having heard much recently about his father: "I am terrible with writing letters," he said. "But I am sure he will wholeheartedly support this Nazi group here in Costa Rica." He was asked to offer a toast



and, while dedicating it to Hitler, he looked at the reflection of their table on the wall mirror behind the bar: It seemed to him a shadow was hugging Max.

Several topics were discussed during that meeting. The Nazi group was to give first priority to the struggle against the Jewish immigration, including a drive to have them expelled from Costa Rica. At the same time, they should support those groups opposing Ricardo Jimenez's liberalism. Particularly, they were to help León Cortés, a real friend of Germany. A very important task was to continue sponsoring *El Diario de Costa Rica*, "a truthful ally of us Germans and a staunch enemy of the Jews." Max then said, "We must make sure Otilio Ulate, its director, is not fickle and does not change to a pro U.S. position. Ulate knows very well what kind of danger the Jews represent and the need to fight them." Finally, they would also try to establish alliances with the Spanish and the Italian communities in Costa Rica, to support General Franco and to exercise pressure, so that the Costa Rican government, together with other Central American governments, would cut their relations with the Spanish Republic and instead recognize the Nationalist government.

Given the large amount of work to be done, Gerffin suggested the creation of a feminine wing. "They could prepare coffees and meals for the Committee; they could write the letters and the pamphlets." Yadira was unanimously elected to coordinate them.

"Thank you very much. This is one of the happiest days in my life! I am about to start crying," she said. However, a withering look from her husband made her realize no one there approved of such affectations. Nonetheless, she would not be prevented from making a small speech:

*"As a Costa Rican, it will be an honor to administer the feminine wing of the National Socialist Party in our country. I believe we all here share the divine mandate to have a community built on the foundations of race and religion. We have been blessed for lacking a large Indian population in Costa Rica and for having a largely white and European population. This distinguishes us from the rest of Central America. We do, indeed, have similar problems to those confronting our other homeland, Germany. Side by side with us live wild mestizo populations such as the Nicaraguans, which, for us Costa Ricans, are similar to what the Jews are for the Germans. I do believe, nonetheless, that we must base our action on peaceful and non-violent principles, since this is a sign of civilization.*

Carlos realized some members of the group elbowed each other when Yadira said that Costa Ricans were "white and Europeans." But he did not do or say anything about it. Although the local population was "more white and European" than those in the rest of Central America, it was not a secret these had mixed with Indians and Blacks and that, therefore, to the eyes of the Arian Germans, they were not quite "pure."

Notwithstanding their mutual solidarity, Carlos was, nonetheless, not at ease around Max. Just like his father, Max had two faces. On the one hand, he ranted on against the *mestizo* population and those "crossed with monkeys" as he would call them. But on the other, it was well known he lived with a mulatto girl from Puerto Limón. He would not take her to

the Club meetings, but you could see them together in such public places like the Cinema Adela, somewhat distant from downtown.

There were other rumors about him, mentioning the fact that "he was all the time in the warehouses of San José," and that he enjoyed all kinds of weird sexual practices. One of these was precisely to pick up homosexuals from the bars located around the El Paso de la Vaca neighborhood. According to a female friend of Carlos, you could see Max with Susanita, a homosexual working as a clerk in a clothes store. There was some truth in all this gossip because Carlos could feel how the local Nazi boss had a special interest in him. Sometimes, when they bathed at the Club's swimming pool, Max's eyes followed his private parts. Then, in the dressing rooms, Carlos could notice through the mirrors, how Max observed his nakedness.

For all these reasons Carlos did not care much for his political life. His activities were divided between his medical practice, business and occasional meetings at the German Club. He supported policies and initiatives against the Jews, but let Yadira represent him. "I do not have much time available," was his usual excuse. As of late he was also absent from his store.

Not so the morning of May 1934. He personally opened the doors, feeling that "something is going to happen."

At three o'clock in the afternoon, "not one minute after, not one minute before," a young woman accompanied by a small girl stopped to look at the dresses shown in the glass cases. Carlos did not notice the pair for a long while. They were poorly dressed and could be confused with the many peasant women stopping for hours in front of the windows, without ever buying anything. He was busy studying the orders he had to send to New York. He had to be very careful. A number of businesses were going bankrupt in that city and you could also get tramped if, for example, you were to transfer some funds, only to find out, too late, that your bank had gone bankrupt. But he was not able to concentrate. He left his desk and looked outside again, an almost mechanical reflex on the part of any warehouse owner. The two women were still looking at the dresses exhibited in the glass cases. When the young girl turned her head, she saw him through the mirror located behind the dresses. Their eyes met for a few moments.

He shivered. "No one, ever, had looked at me like that," he would later write in a letter. He came out of the store agitated:

"Miss, is there anything I may do for you? May I help you?" he said nervously. The girls did not understand him.

"May I do something for you?" he inquired, this time in English, but there was not any answer either. "Where in the world is this girl from?" he thought: "She has the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen."

"Do you understand German?" he insisted.

"A little," she answered in Yiddish.

"What is your name and where do you come from?" he asked.

"I come from Poland and my name is Elena, Sir. We arrived in this country only yesterday," she said, while raising her eyes to meet his.

"And what are you doing here?" he sweetly inquired.

"We will live here; my father has been living in Costa Rica for a number of years now. I suppose we will stay for a long time," answered Elena while the little girl felt ill at ease with the situation. She wanted to continue with their excursion and pulled Elena's skirt.

"The clothes you are showing in the glass cases are very beautiful, Sir. In my hometown I also sold dresses," she said. But he was not listening anymore. His mind wandered far away, in a place located in the empty spaces between the words. He hid behind the syllables and the musical spaces created when she opened her mouth.

"What dresses?" he said, bewildered, looking in ecstasy at her face. "It is a face no man may look at for more than a few seconds at a time; it makes you fall prey to its charms," he thought. He did not find anything else to ask or say. What was happening to him was something unfair. For once in his life he did not know what to do next.

"May I escort you to your house?" he anxiously asked.

"Oh, do not bother. We are going to the Central Market where my dad has a store," was the answer. But he would not obey her.

He escorted her, unable to remove his eyes from her. He had no control over his eyes. To avoid becoming conspicuous he started looking at her, using the reflections on the glasses and the mirrors along the street; he even contemplated her reflections on metal objects and on the puddles from yesterday's rain. Some days later he would send her a note, saying how during the walk from his store to the Market, the notion of time had completely evaporated. They walked seven blocks, in a journey also representing the passage from the coffee oligarchy to the populace. That day "time became more extensive."

In the street, men and women looked at him with the corner of their eyes. Suddenly, the Parisian clothes and the imported articles disappeared from his mind. The stores they passed by now were more popular. "Good morning, don Carlos," said Pepe, the Spaniard owner of a drug store. "Say hello to your father in law!" said the Italian lady owner of the shoe store. But Carlos was oblivious to their calls. He was only concerned with the stories Elena was telling, about mulberries in the forests of Poland.

They arrived at the Central Market. There were hundreds of cheap "*chinamos*"<sup>74</sup> selling everything demanded by the poor: toys, domestic animals, coffee bags, a large number of brooms, white candles for the night and colored candles for the saints and virgins, food for pigs and for chickens, lavender to attract good luck, rose petals and apple roots to entice lovers, honeysuckle to fight depressions, jasmine to increase your self-esteem, "Artemis" to get inspiration, coffee and fruits like watermelon, pineapple, guava, mulberries, "*nances*," and "*jocotes*." And then there were all sorts of meats, beef, pork, fish and poultry. The smells were very intense. Cinnamon, vanilla, ginger, lemon and fishes competed with one another to capture the noses of the hundreds and hundreds of customers ambulating through the narrow corridors separating lines of stalls.

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<sup>74</sup> Stalls

"May I help you? What are you looking for? What do you want? See what we have and come in." You could hear everywhere the Phoenician market anthem. Women and men were selling all sorts of goods. Merchants like them, sharing the second most ancient trade of the world.

"Good heavens! Where in the world does this stud come from?" shouted a woman selling chickens. "These are the best eggs you have ever seen!" she would add, as a compliment to Carlos. For his part, a man selling cheeses addressed Elena: "Darling, your mother certainly fed you with the purest of milk!" A man selling avocados would not stay quiet either. "I have a bone as stiff as that of the fruit." "Pepe, take a look at the girl escorted by that gringo," shouted a man selling brown "*tapa de dulce*"<sup>75</sup> to his pal selling "*chayotes*." As they passed by, the merchant offered Elena his eternal love: "My heart is like this *chayote*, hard outside and tender inside." But the most daring was the woman selling bananas. "Blondie" she said to Carlos, "where did you buy that bunch of bananas you are carrying in your pocket?" The stall proprietors came out to find out the reason for the uproar; it was like Jesus himself coming into the temple.

"What in the hell is going on?" asked a woman selling children's clothes to her friend, who sold umbrellas. "A couple just went by. They were so handsome all these degenerates around here went completely berserk!"

The smells filling the sinuous paths of the Market soon deteriorated. They were near the urinals and the toilets. Customers relieved themselves in simple holes dug in the earth, without any other sanitation than a weekly layer of lime over the excrements. This barely attenuated the smells. "35 cents for a toilet and 10 cents for the paper," read a sign posted on the wall. A woman using one of these toilets was screaming: "For God's sake, someone help me! My purse fell in the hole and I need help! I need help, please, someone!"

The stores nearby were the poorest and the least favored by the customers. But their owners were no less flowery than the others. "*Mamacita*"<sup>76</sup>, with you around all I can smell is perfumes," said the owner of the butchery store to Elena. A woman at the fishery would not keep quiet either: " "*Papacito*"<sup>77</sup> of my life, delicious blond, come inside and I will peel you all." David's store was located exactly diagonal from the urinals and across the stall selling incense and natural remedies.

Carlos should not get closer. Nonetheless, Elena's father noticed the man escorting his daughter. Carlos had escaped being noticed, but could not hold back his emotions: "Miss, I must see you again. Do not tell me no because I will not be able to resist it." All this was new to him: A desire pouring uncontrollably, for the first time in his life putting his heart at the mercy of a kid of fourteen. It was a completely unusual event.

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<sup>75</sup> Sugar bars

<sup>76</sup> Dear little mother

<sup>77</sup> Dear small daddy

"I must say no. My father is watching me and he is horrified. If I were to see you again he would kick me out of my home and of the country. He would say the *quadish*<sup>78</sup> in my memory and would never forgive me."

"Why call the demons at this perfect moment?" Carlos answered.

"The hell with all!" he added.

When he returned to his store, away from the Market and the poor, no longer smelling those terrible and wonderful smells, Carlos was like in a trance and in the midst of a terrible inner conflict. The girl could not be older than fourteen, although she looked more mature. Carlos thought she was a woman reincarnated, coming from a very distant land, so distant that no one could know her origins. "But, why am I feeling we have met before, why do I feel we have always been twin souls?" Carlos thought. She would not let him visit her but it did not matter. Now he knew where to find her, at her father's store. "I will go there every day until it all explodes, like a volcano. Most probably, our love will be like an overflowed river, like the earthquake of 1910."

"But, damn!" he repeated once and again in his mind. "Why did God send me a Jewess?"

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<sup>78</sup> Prayers for the dead

## XVII

As expected, that Monday evening the phone rang exactly at ten o'clock. It was the usual call from La Paz. Max had taken care to be alone at the German Consulate; no one should know about these conversations. His partner at the other end of the line had warned him there would be spies behind every door: "Our dealings must be kept absolutely private."

Their main concern those days was tallying the figures. The cocaine shipment sent to Panama arrived there weighing less than what it originally did in San José. Ernest suspected someone had kept part of the revenues. Since the drug was sent from Bolivia to Puerto Limón, apparently the problem occurred in this last place. "They report to San José a smaller quantity than what I originally sent. Somebody is keeping between 10 to 15 per cent of the stuff in Puerto Limón," said Ernest. Max was not so sure. "Sometimes we must give some to the customs officers, to make sure they let the merchandise get in," was his response. Still, he promised to look into it.

Max also wanted to know how did the talks with Hitler develop. "He wants me back in Germany. I said I will think about it," answered Ernest. He was making a fortune with the Bolivian cocaine crop. Via Costa Rica, he exported it to Panama, where he bought opium and heroin, in turn to be distributed throughout the region. Thus, he was not sure returning to Germany was such a good idea. Besides, the drug business was "politically correct," since he had abated the costs and now the drug was available to the working classes, both in the United States and in Latin America. "It is a way of fighting Communism," he used to claim. Before hanging up the phone, Max warned him about the Costa Rican press. Incited by the United States, almost every day the local newspapers made a big fuss about the heroin addiction among the local working classes. "Thus, we need to be covered," concluded the German diplomat stationed in San José.

The only person with access to Max's accounts was Lady, his mulatto lover. As was usual for both Max and Ernest, there was not a clear-cut division between business and sex. Ernest had taught him no trustworthy man would reach the highest levels of the S.A. without first passing "the inspection." Besides, the former Captain of the German Army had found a major ally in the 20<sup>th</sup> century technology, namely, the photographic camera. Thanks to this device, he owned the largest pornographic photo collection depicting the most powerful men in the Nazi Party. They all posed for him buck-naked.

It was not surprising, therefore, to find a very large number of handsome young men occupying powerful positions in the S.A., even if they did not have any military experience whatsoever. They were thankful and eventually bribable by the voracious Ernest. Max did likewise in the tropics. Since he returned to San José, once the road construction in Miraflores was abandoned, this woman, Lady, had helped him, both in bed and in the business, to make many of his dreams come true. The young woman was a veritable exponent of her race's beauty, attractive to both men and women.

Bad schemes, when effective, are passed from teacher to pupil, as if in the best ancient Greek scholarly tradition. Thus, Max had started his own photographic collection of Costa

Rican politicians and "*gamonales*"<sup>79</sup>. He had lured them with the help of Lady's accountant William to the most memorable bacchanals. On such occasions, he was able to take many compromising and candid photographs, once these characters were under the heavy effects of cocaine, marihuana and heroin, the drugs of choice during the 1920s in San José and Limón.

Lady was good bait for heterosexual men, while William Pop, her accountant, served a similar purpose for bisexuals. This young man was able not only to keep the books, but also to take to bed dozens of men. In turn, these sexual partners would help him smuggle in the country as much drugs as possible. Lady trusted William with her bed and her checking account, since the two of them maintained a secret relationship. For his part, every time Max visited Puerto Limón he had intimate relations with this "beautiful exemplar of manhood." But he had never suspected William was madly in love with Lady and, moreover, was actually making plans to run away with her.

But it did not take long for Max to figure out William was stealing from him, with Lady's full knowledge and participation. Questioning a friendly customs officer in Limón, Max found the exact amount of drugs actually arriving from South America on the German ships, as well as the tiny amounts used for bribes. The difference between the actual figures and those reported to him, he inferred, was deposited in Panamanian banks in the accounts of "Pop & Company." Moreover, together with William Pop, Lady was the only other person allowed to deposit or withdraw funds from that account. "Ah, but I swear these two scoundrels will pay dearly for this!" he said to himself.

Two weeks later Max and Ernest again talked on the phone. They decided to "put an end" to this issue during Ernest's coming trip to Germany. Hitler had insisted on Ernest's return to his homeland and, for his part, Roehm was willing to abandon his lucrative businesses, provided these could be managed through trustworthy employees. If things went wrong in Germany, Ernest needed a place to return, as well as a business to make a living. Bolivia produced plenty of cocaine and its rough landscape offered secure refuge in case of persecution. Therefore, it was an ideal place for the kind of operation Ernest was engaged in. For its part, Costa Rica was very close to Panama and had not fallen under direct United States control, making it an excellent "bridge" to access the North American market. Both men agreed to "solve" the issue with Lady and William in December 1930.

A few weeks before his trip, Ernest told Max that Hitler had offered him the top position at the head of the S.A again. Max was supposed to travel back with him, but Ernest decided not to take him since he wanted him to stay and oversee their Latin American operations. In this way, they would both have a refuge in case things went sour in Germany. Using his diplomatic immunity, Max could travel from San José to La Paz to look after their cocaine plantations. He could also travel to Berlin any time he wanted. Nevertheless, before initiating this new business adventure they had to put their house in order, "settling" the affair in Puerto Limón.

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<sup>79</sup> Local economic-political bosses

Neither Ernest nor Max used to start or to complete a transaction without sex. Ernest believed being discreet was a characteristic of cowardice among inverts and effeminate men, unbecoming to virile men like themselves. When meeting with Party members, whether in Munich or in Berlin, he usually took them to homosexual bars, publicly displaying himself and his comrades. It was not a secret that important Nazi elite meetings took place at the Bratwurstglockl bar. Thus, to solve the problem with their partners in Costa Rica, the best Ernest and Max could think was to organize a "farewell" orgy.

In contrast with previous occasions, this time it would be just the four of them. As usual, the place for the event would be the popular Wellington Hotel in Puerto Limón. Its owners were absolutely discreet and the employees knew perfectly well they were supposed to look the other way, and then clean the rooms. "Silence is a golden rule," read a sign posted behind the reception desk. Any employee making comments about the parade of underage girls and boys coming in and out of the place, or about the strange noises heard in the rooms, or about the syringes on the floors, would not remain much longer on the payroll. Moreover, some indiscreet employees ended their days in the jungle nearby the port, devoured by coyotes, wild dogs or cats.

Lady asked why this time they were not to invite young boys and girls. Although she did not suspect her boss had found out about her and her secret lover, nonetheless she was suspicious of changes. Max's answer was that Ernest had had a long journey from Bolivia and was tired. Moreover, added her boss, Ernest could only stay for two days in town. "Besides," said Max, "you know I am terribly attracted by William's huge member and I want to enjoy it fully one last time, before leaving for Berlin."

William's spirits were flying very high that evening, given the "excellent" quality of the merchandise he was pushing those days, guaranteeing him fat revenues. If things continued like this, he would soon be able to return to his native Jamaica. He had promised this to his brother Miguel, a young man working in the banana plantations: "One of these days I will take you to our homeland. There you will work your own land where the miserable United Fruit Company will not exploit you any more."

At first, the night went like any previous ones. They started drinking some good Old Scotch preferred by Ernest. Then they aspired a few cocaine lines, "to awaken desires." At first, Ernest was just an onlooker, playing with his camera as a frustrated professional.

"Come on, William, show to the camera how much you have," he ordered. "Lady, give that wonderful tool a good French kiss." For his part, Max moved back and forth, in and out of the room, bringing all sorts of things, "to stimulate the passions," including whips and scrubbing brushes, the latter ones much appreciated by the German soldier. "Excellent! Give me a back rub with it!" Ernest ordered Lady. One hour later the four of them got more heroin shots and lighted their first marihuana "*puro*"<sup>80</sup> "We brought this hashish directly from Kingston, just for you," said Lady. Ernest inhaled several times and then withdrew into the bathroom. Max told William to make love to the woman "as if it was the last time."

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<sup>80</sup> Cigar



His partner returned to complete his photographic session, carrying a bottle of champagne shrouded on a towel, to celebrate William's "coming."

Probably Lady suspected something when Ernest told her, sarcastically, that her loyalty to him was one of nature's main "gifts." But she was so high with the drugs that she could not pay much attention to the remark. She knew the German soldier was a strange and temperamental man who sometimes would speak stupidities. Nonetheless, she was fully convinced Ernest had been "bewitched" by her partner's loving skills and that he would never kill "the hen of the golden eggs." "Besides," she thought, "since he has been hanging out with a sodomite from San José, I have lost interest... Oh well, that is probably the best that can happen! I am tired of sadomasochism in our relations."

She was not surprised that she and William would be the only ones to play the "theatrical scene" of the evening. This was usual when they had these orgies with her boss. Sometimes he just wanted to take pictures. Max seemed uncomfortable but, again, he was always anxious. Rather than becoming suspicious, Lady chose to fully concentrate in the theatricals of their sexual performance.

When the two were reaching or faking an orgasm, Ernest pulled a long knife from the towel. William could not see it because he had his back turned. But Lady did see it coming. She shouted, combining a rising terror with the tremendous pleasure she was experiencing: "No! No! Please! No!" was all she could utter. William continued his joyful ride, not reacting to the scream, unaware of the knife entering him from behind.

"Coming is a way of dying! Coming is, in a way, dying!" said Max. At the same time, he pulled one other knife from under the bed and used it to cut Lady's throat. Almost in unison Ernest was stabbing William's strong and wide back. The big man was barely able to softly complain about the first thrust. His executioner pulled out the weapon and used it again and again, one, two, three, four, five times. At the same time he shouted: "No one steals money from me and remains alive to tell about it!"

The two victims died falling one on top of the other, bleeding and suffering for some minutes. "Please have mercy," said Lady before expiring, "push the knife through my heart!"

But the two Germans were not merciful. "Take pictures of the bodies and then use them to warn the next son of a bitch wanting to rip us off," concluded Ernest. "Now call our men and the confidential employees to clean this mess," he ordered.

Four of their trusted men took the bodies wrapped in canvas bags to the jungle, some twenty miles south from Limón, to the Bananito River. There, the bodies were taken out of the bags and thrown into the murky crocodile plagued waters. The evidence disappeared in a few minutes.

Once they arrived in Germany, Ernest again occupied his former position at the head of the S.A., transforming it into a military force larger than the Army itself. By 1933, these storm

troops included two and a half million men. Most of the *Vikingkorps* (the Official Command) cadres, recruited personally by Ernest, were homosexuals, friends and acquaintances from the Turkish baths or private orgies. The Führer knew about this but apparently did not mind it. "After all, he had spent some time alone with another homosexual, Rudolf Hess, imprisoned at the Landsberg jail," boasted Ernest. "They became intimate, to the point that when Hitler was released he used Austrian pet names to complain because Hess had to remain behind bars: *Ach mein Rudy, mein Hesserl* (It is terrible that he is still there!)"

"Their relation became so close," Ernest continued telling Max, "that every time the Nazi supreme leader received a present he liked, or the scale model of a building, he would rush to show it to Rudolf. Hess was known as *Freulein Ana*.<sup>81</sup> Sometimes the two of them looked like a pair of transvestites." Max also learned Hitler kept as a major treasure, a love letter sent by King Ludwig II of Bavaria to his lover and squire. "I do not know if Hitler practices homosexuality," added Ernest. "But in any case, he is surrounded by queers and will not persecute us because of it."

Notwithstanding this favorable outlook, Hitler and Roehm started to fall apart. Max would later find out a reason for this in Jorg Lanz's and Guido Von List's intrigues. Lanz was once a Cistercian monk, expelled from his monastery due to homosexual practices. He then created an occult organization, *Ordo Novi Templi*<sup>82</sup> where Tantric sexual rites were practiced. Lanz warned Hitler about Roehm's rival power, adding Ernest had crossed the boundary separating virile homosexuality from pure degeneration. "It is one thing to pursue the love between two men according to the ancient Greek tradition," he would tell Hitler, "but it is something quite different to offer his ass to each and all the S.A. soldiers."

Something else was even more worrying to Hitler. After all, for a number of years he had known about Roehm's "degenerate" practices. But Lanz added: "Roehm has the potential power to control the entire German Army and the military are ready to give you a coup d'état to prevent it." Hitler came out from this "spiritual" session more worried than relieved.

Max himself was anxious concerning Ernest's indiscretions. During a party at the house of the Nazi propaganda chief, Goebbels, Ernest organized an orgy, inviting Hitler's bodyguards to participate. Later, Heinrich Himmler complained to the Führer: "It is *vox populi* that positions in the S.A. are granted on the basis of sexual favors. What determines whether someone will get a good position is not loyalty, manliness, or skills, but the size of his sexual organ." According to Himmler, Ernest took to bed many of his own trusted men, in order later to have proof against them. "My adored Führer," added Himmler, "you must do something now. In the Army they claim the only widening German territory is the sphincter..."

Max had warned Ernest to stop visiting the Turkish baths and to destroy his photographic collection. "Your position is similar to Hirschfeld's," said Max, "since you own sensitive

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<sup>81</sup> Miss Anna

<sup>82</sup> Order of the New Temples

and explosive information." But Ernest would not pay attention. His appetite for Arian boys from high schools in Munich was insatiable. He once asked his old classmate, Peter Granninger, to bring him eleven beardless high school students. Moreover, Granninger was added to the payroll with a monthly salary of 200 Marks. His sole task was providing Ernest with "fresh meat." One of these "meals" was held at the apartment he shared with Max.

When Max returned home, he found Ernest totally naked taking pictures of young men, some of them children of high-ranking Army officials. This time Max was beyond himself and created a major scandal. He started hitting the terrified boys and threatened to send them naked to the street. He then turned to Ernest. "Heroin is making you mad. All you do these days is search for boys and men to fuck you. And the worst part of it all is that now you cannot stop taking photographs, because you have become completely numbed. Do you not realize some of these shit boys are the scions of well known Party politicians and Army officials and their fathers, sooner or later will want to take revenge?"

The S.A. chief was not in the mood to quietly accept jealous reprimands from his lover and at that very moment kicked Max out of the apartment together with all his belongings.

Escalating his rivalry with Roehm, Hitler determined to implement a particular "final solution" for him. In February 1933, he prohibited all homosexual pornography in the Reich, closed the Turkish baths, the bars and the organizations promoting the rights of the homosexuals, like Hirschfeld's Scientific Committee. On May 6, the Nazi Party troops broke into the Sexuality Institute and destroyed its library, burning thousands of books and documents and almost beating the secretary to death.

The S.A. leader did not see this move as directed, in the last resort, against him. In his opinion, all the evidence against homosexuality of thousands of Nazis, including his and Max's, was erased when all those files, books and films were burnt. "Hitler is doing this to protect us," Ernest would claim. Moreover, the fact that "masculine" homosexual organizations like the Society for Human Rights (SR) had not been affected, assured him in his belief. "This is a purge against effeminate queers, not against virile homosexuals," he argued.

Early in 1934, Max left for Costa Rica to look after their business. He was worried by the Jewish immigration into the country. He did not want to be accused of being "soft" regarding the archenemies of the German nation. The Jewish presence in Costa Rica demanded more energetic policies from the part of the Nazi Party he had helped to organize. One of these tasks would be to create a common front together with the merchants affected by the peddler's competition. Besides, it would be good for him to breathe different air. His relation with the S.A. leader had deteriorated since their last quarrel. Moreover, Ernest had dozens of new boys to console himself with since his departure. "The only thing he now wants from me is that I take care of his lucrative drug trafficking," thought Max.

He would receive the biggest surprise of his life in May 1934, in the bucolic town of San José. A German woman had requested an urgent appointment with him, in his capacity as Chargé d'Affairs at the German Legation. She would not disclose in advance the issues to be discussed and asked the appointment be held "in absolute privacy." She only gave her first name, Claudia, but did not want to say her last name. The next day, at three o'clock in the afternoon, this lady came into his office.

"Welcome, Ma'am. I have been told yours is a very urgent business and so dangerous that you would not even tell us your last name. What may I do for you?" asked a curious Max.

"Your name is Max Gerffin, right?" she answered with another question.

"That is correct," Max responded, now more intrigued and noticing something familiar in the lady's face.

"Max, I would have liked to do this in a more gradual fashion and not in this rush. I have come from Hamburg just to meet you. I have trusted neither letters nor telegrams nor any other means of communication. What I must say is strictly private. May I trust you will keep confidential what I have to say?"

Max was even more surprised now. His mind was frantically trying to relate the woman's face to his memories of German ladies he had met among the Nazi elite. Max wondered if she was bringing him some secret news from Ernest. "Is she his messenger?" Meanwhile she got up from her chair and came closer to his desk. Max said:

"Absolutely, ma'am, you may tell me anything, knowing I will never betray your trust." He now got worried, anticipating bad news.

"Well, you see," continued Claudia, "some of my friends are officials close to my former husband. He is a retired General still maintaining numerous connections in the political and the military spheres. In some parties and gatherings I have heard that in certain powerful groups there exists a strong animosity against your friend, Ernest Roehm. The rumors say Herr Roehm wants to take control of the Army and that Hitler fears a coup by the armed forces and wants to prevent it from happening. In order to win over the officials, I have been told, Hitler is planning something against the S.A. leader," confessed the mysterious woman. She lit a cigarette and proceeded to smoke it slowly and with rare intensity.

"What you are saying is very serious," Claudia. "But, how can I know you are telling the truth if I do not know anything about you?" he said.

"Oh, but you do know me, dear Max. And please forgive me for disclosing this to you in the midst of such difficult circumstances. I am your mother..."

This explained the feeling of familiarity he had been experiencing in her presence. He then felt shocked by the realization of what was meant. Unable to say a word, Max got up from his chair and went to the window, as if the blue sky outside and the green trees over the street could calm him down. The news was so overwhelming he could barely breathe.

Was this woman really the mother he had not seen since he was five? Is she the degenerate his father had forbidden him ever to see or talk to? Could she be lying? Could all this be a trap organized by Hitler's secret agents? Or perhaps she was a British or a Jewish agent?

While these and many other thoughts passed by his troubled mind in a matter of seconds, she continued talking:

"I realize it must be terrible for you to hear this in the present circumstances. I suppose your father has told you terrible things about me. But I want to tell you that I never abandoned you willingly and that, if now I have come to help you, it is simply because I do not want you to get hurt." While she was saying this she put her right hand over his and looked straight into his eyes.

"This is all so sudden... I do not know what to say," Max answered, practically speechless. "Let me convince you," she added. "Do you remember the lullaby I used to sing in the evenings when you were about to fall asleep? Let me sing it and in this way you will know I am who I say I am."

Her voice was very sweet and the lullaby made Max shiver with forgotten warm memories. He did not know what to do, whether to hug or to slap her. The feelings were too strong and he decided to express them.

Max started talking business.

"Who gave you the information concerning Hitler's plans?" he anxiously asked.

"That I am not in a position to tell you, Max. I promised I would never disclose my source," Claudia answered.

"But then, how do I know it is not a lie?" he insisted.

"The only way for you to find out is by paying attention at how events unfold. Hitler is holding a meeting with Mussolini in Venice this month, exactly on the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup>. Mussolini has requested Roehm's presence there. My source claims Ernest's fate will be decided at that time. Apparently, Mussolini will provide Hitler with military support in the case of an attempted coup. And, of course, in such a case, the Italian leader will demand Ernest's head. Mussolini does not like homosexuals and does not trust Roehm," she warned, while studying the changing expressions appearing on her son's face.

"But if Mussolini does not like Ernest, why in the world would he want him to attend the meeting?"

"To set him a trap," Claudia answered.

Max did all he could to obtain further information from his mother, but she would not budge. Nonetheless, she added:

"Please listen carefully to what I must tell you. There is nothing you can do for that man. The dice has been cast over his head. Hitler has decided to remove him from his path. I do not know when or where it is going to happen. But I am certain he will do it. The only thing you may do is save yourself. Do not return to Germany and take out all your stuff from your friend's house.

She felt their conversation was about to end and extinguished the cigarette. Max continued:

"Well, that will not be a problem. Ernest kicked me out of his place and that included all my belongings."

"Well then," said Claudia, "thank God you are so lucky. And one more thing, added the Baroness, if anyone knows you and I have talked or even that I have visited Costa Rica, our heads will also roll. I have used a false passport and nobody is to know I visited you here. If my identity was disclosed, Hitler would immediately know you were warned. He would eventually find out who gave me the information and we all would die. It's that simple. Take advantage of these weeks or months to finalize all the businesses you have with Roehm."

These were her last words. She then got up and went to the door. Before leaving, though, Claudia invited her son to her hotel, to talk family matters.

The next day, when he arrived she showed him some of her best paintings. He was not impressed by the quality of the geometrical figures and the tropical tones. Still, Claudia gave him one painting as a present. "Hang it in your office. Tell everybody I gave it to you in Germany," she added.

They talked about their lives, both complaining about how difficult it had been living with a soldier. The Baroness confessed she had run away with a woman, Henny Sherman, her companion. "Your father will never forgive me for this," she pointed out. She also admitted her concern about Nazi intolerance towards the Jews. "You must know Henny is Jewish."

Max chose not to advance any opinion on the matter, although he found hers objectionable. "I do not mind if my mother's companion is a woman, but I do mind her being a Jewess." Thus they changed the conversation to other topics where they could agree more. Claudia assured him she had found out about Max's relations with Ernest "through the grapevine," in the homosexual bars of Berlin. She occasionally visited Eldorado and there she had heard about Ernest's new romantic affairs. "The man is insatiable. You must be careful with him." With this last sentence they parted. During the weeks she stayed in San José, they met again a few more times.

The German diplomat fell ill for some days. He had been rather blunt with his mother and now he did not know how he had been able to restrain his strong feelings.

On May 13, Roehm called him to confirm he would be attending the meeting in Venice. Max told him to be sure their names did not appear on any business documents. Ernest answered that Max could be assured he would never "make such a beginner's mistake." After he returned from Venice, Ernest informed Max the journey had been "splendid." He had had a tremendous orgy at the hotel together with several Italian officials. "You will not believe the photos I took and all the outrageous things we did..." These would be the last words passing between the two of them.

On June 28, 1934, the leader of the S.A. had planned a "party" with those same Italian officials he had met while in Venice. The best the S.A. could offer on these matters would

also attend. The fateful evening would later be known as "The Night of the Long Knives," because Hitler had Roehm killed, together with more than 200 of his cronies.

The Führer would explain it as a "purge of degenerates." However, the heads that rolled were those of Ernest and his close associates, not those of the many homosexuals in the S.A. Several of the murderers were homosexuals themselves, like Wagner, Esser, Maurice, Weber and Buch. Reinhard Heydrich was one of the officials that planned the "cleansing of homosexuals." Heydrich was also a lover of men; four years later he planned yet another manhunt, this time against the Jews: *Kristallnacht*.<sup>83</sup>

Max was forever indebted to his mother. Thanks to her timely advice, he had saved his skin. He thus decided to remain in Costa Rica and never to return to Germany. From his new homeland he would prove his loyalty to the Führer, supporting the German foreign policy and, at the same time, preserving the lucrative business he had started with his now deceased companion.

*A mentsh on glik is a toyter mensh*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The Night of the Broken Glass

<sup>84</sup> An unlucky man is a dead man

## XVIII

A new Costa Rican political personality appeared during the 1940 elections: Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, a physician and an oligarch. He had secured León Cortés' administration (1936-1940) support, as well as that of the large coffee barons and the influential Catholic Church. Cortés backed Calderón Guardia as a way to prevent Ricardo Jiménez from running for the presidency. The Church wanted to be the official religion of the State again. And the coffee barons wished to preserve their political hegemony. These three tendencies developed such a strong unity that only the Communist Party dared to challenge them at the polls, as well as a small regional alliance in the province of Guanacaste. Calderón won by a landslide and Costa Rica seemed to continue with its elitist governments.

In May 1940, León Cortés called his friend Max, asking him not to miss the inauguration party offered to the incoming president. Although you could say the new administration would continue with his policies, he said, "you may never know what a new administration is going to do." The now former president was worried Costa Rica could change his stance of absolute neutrality regarding the war in Europe. In his own words, Cortés had remained, "neutral" during the Spanish Civil War, notwithstanding the many "pressures" he had received.

The Center for the Spanish Republic was created in 1936 and in 1937 - the Traditionalist Spanish Phalange Society. Both organizations implemented propaganda campaigns for their respective and opposite goals. Thousands marched through the streets in San José protesting the country's neutrality on the Spanish Civil War: some supported the Republic, but the majority was behind General Franco. Unlike other Central American countries, Costa Rica did not sever its diplomatic ties with the Republic until April 1939, when Franco had already won.

Former President Cortés expected Calderón to remain firm against the US pressures in case the great North American nation entered the European fray and that Costa Rica would not take sides in such confrontation. After all, he told Max, "we cannot lose the German coffee market; it would be our ruin." The German diplomat reminded Cortés about the large German, Italian and Spanish communities living in Costa Rica and supporting Hitler: "It would be foolish to go against them." Max promised he would be at the inauguration party, together with some members of the local Nazi Party, in order to "demonstrate our presence and influence in the Costa Rican society." Since he could not ask Susanita to come along, he invited Yadira. Carlos had disappeared from the German Club and was not going out with her anywhere. Therefore, Max did not anticipate troubles from that quarter.

Yadira rushed to buy a new dress to attend the elegant ball at the Union Club, the main social center of the oligarchy. She was so mad at her husband that she chose to buy the dress from his competition. Apart from La Verónica, the only other store importing fancy clothes was The Fine Lady, owned by Mánser Vignon, a French man living in Costa Rica since the beginning of the century. To Vignon's surprise, his main competitor's wife wanted to buy clothes at his store.



"She has probably come to compare prices," whispered Vignon to his assistant, José Carraspero, none other than Susanita. Instead of helping her himself, the French asked José to do it, so as "not to give her any information they could use against me." For his part, the salesman was not pleased with the task. His boss did not suspect he had many more secrets to hide.

"Good morning! Can you help me, young man?" said Yadira.

"At your service, Madame; what can I do for you?"

"I need the best dress you have. I will be attending the Inauguration Ball at the Union Club. I must look divine and, besides, I want it to be German. Do you sell dresses made in Germany?" she asked while inspecting the clothes hangers.

"Certainly, Madame. Several have just arrived, via Panama, from the Stern High Couture house of Berlin," said the salesman. At the same time, he pointed to the place where the new collection was located.

"Oh! I hope Jews do not own such store in Berlin, do they?"

"Well, that I do not know, because it is difficult to know what faith a dress avows to," answered Susanita sarcastically.

"Don't be smart with me! Of course a dress does not have a religion, but he who sells it does. Besides, it is tagged at a price no Christian would dare to charge! Anyway... bring me these two to try on. Yes... that one and that other one. Black with pearls looks exquisite," she unwillingly admitted. She disappeared into the dressing room.

While Yadira was trying the dresses on, the clerk was not able to hide his disturbance.

He knew, because Max had told him, that Yadira and Max had their "things," and that they constantly conspired against everybody else in Costa Rica. His friend The Duster, who was his personal witch and confidant, had warned him from a devilish rival she had "seen" in some tealeaves. But as long as his lover's infidelity was directed towards the feminine sex, Susanita would not be worried. He would have suffered with a male rival. "But this idiot is no competition for me," he thought. "The only thing she does, I am sure, is to open her legs."

"How did it fit, Madame?" he asked from the other side of the dressing room door.

"I like the black one. But the blue-and-red one seems more proper for the occasion. You know, these are the Republican Party's colors. I would like to wear it together with a white hat. I want my Committee for the Nationalization of Trade to be well represented," answered Yadira.

"Your presence alone will make it shine," responded Susanita with a false compliment.

"Do you think so? How kind of you to say so!" answered Yadira, not believing he was sincere.

"Thank you, Madame. And, may I ask what is your Committee celebrating?" wondered the salesman.

"The triumph of Doctor Calderón and Ricardo Jimenez's defeat. The old harpy did not dare to participate in the electoral contest; he knew very well Calderón would be unbeatable. That saved us all. As you very well know, we are in the midst of a world war and, particularly, in a war against the Jews and their customers, like don Ricardo. I hope stores

like this one will help in our campaign to nationalize trade," responded Yadira as she came out of the dressing room carrying the blue-and-red dress she had chosen.

Susanita got dazzled. "This harpy is up to her ears in Max's schemes," he thought. "And both of them hope the incoming administration will continue the persecution." For her part, Yadira could not help thinking. "This is a strange boy. He does not look very manly. He must be one of those... what is it that they call them now?... homosexuals."

Max and his escort called everybody's attention at the ball. According to Yadira, her dress and her companion were much admired. "Many women are dying to lie in the German consul's arms," she thought. For his part, Max was paying attention to a young man standing by don Alberto Echandi, the new Secretary of Foreign Relations: "Hum, this boy is yummy!" thought the blue eyed German diplomat. He pointed the Secretary's assistant to Yadira who, in turn, noticed the young man was escorting her friend Paquita Elizondo. Yadira pulled Max by the arm and both got closer to the other couple. "He must be part of our club," whispered Max to himself. Yadira could hear the comment. "Do you mean he is a Nazi?" she asked. "No, no. I was thinking about another club," was Max's answer. Yadira did not have time to ask what kind of club it was, since they were now face to face with the others. As soon as they saw each other, Yadira and Paquita disengaged from the men and walked to the toilet room. They had tons of female information to exchange. Max and the other man were left alone, unable at first to say anything, since the ladies had not made the formal introductions.

"Gentleman, let me give you my warmest congratulations for your electoral victory and also because, as I can see, you are now the assistant to the new Secretary of Foreign Relations," Max said, looking straight into the other's eyes.

"Thanks a lot. Have we been introduced?" inquired the surprised Costa Rican official.

"Not in this life, no. I would certainly remember. My name is Max Gerffin, from the German Legation," said the other. They shook hands strongly.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is José Flores, from the Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Do you like our country?"

"I love it. It has so many natural beauties, including very handsome people," Max said, smiling maliciously.

"Well, you Germans are not far behind us. Recently I was in Berlin and had the opportunity to know the nightlife. I was very well taken care of. My friends took me to all kinds of places, some of them you would never guess they could exist."

"In that respect you are wrong, my friend," answered Max. "I do imagine it; I do imagine it. Sit here by my side and let us have a drink together. Then I will tell you where in Berlin I would take you," whispered Max in José's ear, taking him by the arm to a large brown wing chair nearby.

While Max entertained José Flores, Paquita began talking to some friends of hers and Yadira was left alone. She immediately went to talk to Elizabeth, another of her friends. This woman was married to the new Vice President of the Republic. The two of them kissed each other on their cheeks and then moved closer to the President and his wife, Ivonne de Calderón, born in Belgium.

"Mister President, congratulations for your tremendous victories, both in the elections and in love. Your wife is truly a first lady to us all," said Yadira while smiling and shaking his hand.

"Thank you, Yadira. It is my honor to have you here at this party. Have you come with your father?" wondered the President.

"No. I came with Max Gerffin, from the German Legation. But he has disappeared. He is probably mingling with the people. And by the way, what plans does your administration have regarding this new European war?" she asked curiously.

"Absolute neutrality. It is not our war and we will remain distant from it," strongly asserted the new first citizen of Costa Rica.

"However, dear President, we hope you will support us in preventing the country from receiving all those troublemakers that, precisely, have provoked this terrible world confrontation. Practically all the Costa Rican merchants are on our side regarding this issue, because those immigrants have come to take away our businesses," added Yadira, paying close attention to Calderón's reactions.

"Do not worry, Yadira. My administration will abide by the law, both internally as well as internationally. Those undesirables you are mentioning will be put in the place they belong. Is not that so, Ivonne?" he said turning to his wife.

"As the First Lady, I should not get involved in politics. But, can you tell me who are those undesirables?" she asked suspiciously.

"It will be worthless to mention their names, unless we want to ruin this lovely party, Dona Ivonne," responded Yadira with ill concealed arrogance.

"I ask because, as a Belgian, I am not sure who they are, said the President's wife," putting an end to the cold conversation.

Yadira chose to withdraw and leave the discussion. "Max should have been here with me, to listen. Undoubtedly, the President is our ally, but that poisonous foreign First Lady is not," she thought. She walked around looking for her escort. She finally found him, engaged in deep conversation with the assistant to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs. "Sometimes Max does not even know who to talk to... A humble assistant is of no relevance. Instead, Max should invest his time talking to the President and the Ministers," she thought.

The Calderón Guardia administration kept the promise to Yadira. First of all, he maintained the doors closed to further Jewish immigration. Calderón attacked them in his inauguration speech, making veiled references. At the same time, he insinuated his support to the law nationalizing trade:

*To prevent unfair competition, commerce must be a business carried on by persons with deep roots in the country. Consequently, we should not allow the immigration of foreigners, except those committed exclusively to work in agriculture, to improve our industries, or to teach the arts and the sciences.*

On May 28, 1940, Francisco Calderón Guardia, the older brother of the President and Secretary of State, informed the Secretary of Foreign Relations that "each request to come into our country, presented by a citizen of any European country, unable to demonstrate a

known occupation or without precise basis, is to be rejected from now on." The restrictive policy also included Black and Chinese people. On August 27, 1940, the Costa Rican Consul in Jamaica was informed that Linda Keer Clarke had requested a visa to enter Costa Rica. "I notified her of the legal prohibition currently existing for members of her race, to come into our country." Thus, her application was denied, even though she had lived in Costa Rica for more than twenty years. On June 20 of that same year, Francisco Calderón rejected the request presented in Puerto Armuelles, Panama, by Amasa A. Powell, "of black race." Then, on September 24, 1941, this same official sent a note to Enrique Pucci, Costa Rica's Consul in Colón, Panama, where he reminded the diplomat that:

*"... the exact execution of the document circulated on March 13, 1940 and published on the Official Gazette on October 29 of that same year, which extends the prohibition referred to by the Law issued on May 22, 1897, to include not only those of Chinese nationality, but also members of any race, in such a way that, even if these have acquired the legal nationality of any of our American nations, by their mere physical appearance demonstrate they are originally Orientals."*

Some time later, Calderón would ironically accuse former President Cortés of having allowed "the largest Polish invasion of Costa Rica... 30 per cent of these entered the country using irregular procedures," and immediately ordered a study about "the Jewish problem." With this Indictment and responding to an interpolation presented by 120 "national merchants," including among them Yadira Dönning, the new government, under the Congressional leadership of Ricardo Toledo, established an Investigative Commission, unleashing the worst ever anti-Semitic campaign in the history of Costa Rica. The rationale to create such a Commission found a clear expression (although put in rather crude words), in the official newspaper, *La Tribuna*:

*All countries, except ours, protect their commerce...(from unfair competition) of transhumant people, lacking roots in our society, wandering around the world with no other orientation than seeking riches wherever they are, completely unconcerned about the nation or its institutions, or the people they are living with. These undesirable people will leave the country without any previous notice or concern for the well-being of those that protected them, in order to put their tent wherever they find better conditions to fulfill their relentless dream of making money, money and more money.*

At the same time, a caricature published in this newspaper complained that "the poor merchants do not receive any help, the Polish plague keeps feeding on them." A letter published some days later in this newspaper was titled "Devilish Synagogues in Costa Rica." The Government announced that, "all those Poles of more than 16 years old that have not yet presented themselves to the Congressional Investigative Commission, will be declared in revolt."

Calderón's position received the support of *El Diario de Costa Rica*, owned by Otilio Ulate, who would publish any and all anti-Jewish articles sent to him. On June 16, 1940, this newspaper's edition presented tendentious information about the Commission, with big headlines: "Most Poles living in the country do not have passports." On July 7 of that same

year an enormous headline covering about a quarter of the front page read: "Some Poles revolt against the Congressional Investigative Commission." On August 21, Calderón also received the support of Fascist groups such as the Costa Rican Patriotic Union. This organization had been attacked by the Jews because of its policies and answered using all kinds of strong personal epithets and accusations. Finally, the German Legation itself showed it was pleased with the new official policies, in an article published on its Informative Bulletin, perhaps written by Yadira, in which they demanded the expulsion "from the country, of these teecks (sic)."

Max Gerffin was only partially satisfied. The new administration seemed to be much more firm than the previous one in its campaign against the Jews. Through the grapevine (in fact through José Flores) he had found out that the Commission's President, José María Llobet, was ready to order the expulsion of all the Jews.

The information received by the German diplomat was accurate. In March 1941, the Costa Rican Congress agreed to impose upon the Jewish community, as a condition to remain in the country, "not to work in commerce or agriculture, but only to engage in new industries not yet established in the country; as well as the expulsion of all the Poles one year after the end of the European war." The Commission also rejected the permanence in Costa Rica of several thousand German and Austrian Jews, currently in transit but that had purchased the Hacienda Tenorio. By rejecting the request presented by this group of Jews, the members of the Commission accused them of being "dishonest," and predicted that, if allowed to stay, these people would soon end up as merchants.

The anti-Semitic campaign of 1940 marked the peak of Nazism in Costa Rica. The US Legation noted the advance of Nazism in the country, once France was defeated by Germany:

*The French defeat has considerably debilitated our position in this country. A number of Costa Rican citizens, until now supporters of the Allies, have started to change their stances and now support Germany, not because they consider it is doing the right thing, but because they admire a nation capable of obtaining so many victories. The average Latino wants to be on the side of the winner and the pervasive mood here is that Germany will win the war.*

*Today I talked (Vice Consul Zweig) with five Frenchmen born in Costa Rica. All of them agreed with the fact that the series of German victories in Europe might induce the local German colony and their sympathizers to provoke disturbances in San José.*

*Concerning those Costa Ricans sympathizing with the Nazi cause, today I talked to (Minister Hornibrook), a man who said he did not trust his brother, although they jointly own a business, given his pro Nazi tendencies. His brother sends his children to the German school and he has been led to believe that a Nazi victory and the German control of Costa Rica will both be beneficial.*

But Max was not satisfied with just the expulsion of the Jews. He felt that, although Calderón promised further anti-Semitic legislation, his foreign policy was less pro-German. Besides, there was something worrying him more than anything else, namely, Costa Rican policy regarding his country's ships. If the Calderón administration was to continue confiscating German boats, this would become a serious threat to his country's foreign policy and his own personal policies and stance were also very much at risk.

Since 1939, some German ships had been in custody at Puntarenas, the Costa Rican Pacific port. The detention occurred precisely during the transition period between the Cortés and the Calderón administrations. The crews had not been authorized to enter the country and the boats were prevented from leaving Puntarenas. Some German merchants had been trying to find a way to free the merchandise, but it was a slow and bureaucratic procedure. Yadira herself had noted her ally was obsessed with those ships and, because of them, "he has lost sight of the significant victories won by the Reich."

Max started to distance himself from the new government and to his partner Yadira he insisted they must "adopt drastic measures." However, she had got all she wanted - the expulsion of the Jews. That was not an inconsequential achievement, given that no other Latin American country had adopted such Draconian measures. She was happy with the new president, "who dared to accomplish, in a few months, what Cortés was unable to do in four years." When Max complained to her, she felt discouraged. "How come you are now against the Doctor, after all he has done against the Poles?" she asked. "Dear Yadira, your personal commercial interests are one thing, whereas the international interests of Germany are something else," he answered. "If Calderón continues flirting with the gringos and the British, then he must fall; he must fall."

Yadira was disturbed. Max had become her "beloved Nazi;" she had fallen in love with him "like a madwoman." But Max did not pay attention to her, ever since he had become friends with Pepe, the guy from the Secretary of Foreign Relations. When she complained about the fact that nowadays they almost never saw each other, Max argued he had to go out with the young man. "He is giving me a lot of crucial information concerning the Costa Rican government. Pepe is a strategic piece we must handle very carefully." However, Yadira was not fully convinced his "strategy" was only politically motivated.

But a romantic affair was absolutely unconceivable to her. "What may there be between two virile men?" she thought. She could not imagine it. Once she asked him what it was that Pepe knew so much about. "A lot. Yesterday he told me Calderón has decided to support the United States at the Conference in Havana and that the Government is going to seize our boats detained in Puntarenas. He is going to help me bring down the current government; it will fall down like a ripe mango and then Cortés will return to power." "And what will happen to the Poles?" she asked, uncomfortably. "We Nazis will have to take care of them personally. I will rather kill them than allow an alliance between Calderón and the damned gringos," he asserted, determined. "But Max," she asked, "how are you going to kill more than one thousand people?" "A few bombs thrown against the Synagogue will finish with most of them. The rest will run away to Panama," he said.

Mrs. Dönning was not satisfied. "It is one thing to throw the Poles to the sea, but something quite different to blow them into pieces," she thought. "Why should we endanger the gains obtained, starting now a war that will not bring any benefits to the country?" Her curiosity, however, pointed to a different direction. "The only way to find out whether Pepe is a spy or 'something more,' is for me to talk with José, the clerk at the lady's clothing store," she thought. "José is a weird guy and he must know." Using as an excuse the need to make some adjustments to her new gala dress, she returned to The Fine Lady.

She found José busy arranging boxes on the high shelves of the store. She came closer and went straight to the point.

"José, there is something I must ask you about and please do not take it the wrong way," she said while looking him straight in the eyes.

"What will it be my lady? What can I do for you?" asked the astonished clerk.

"You are an international, fine and well-educated male. Well, you see, I have "a cousin" that, according to the reports I have gotten, from time to time visits those bars located around El Paso de la Vaca. My informants have told me you also visit those places. I do not want to create a problem for you, or to harm you in any way. However, I must know if you have seen "my cousin" there. I suspect he has a forbidden relation with a boy from the Secretary of Foreign Relations," said Yadira, anguished.

"And who is your 'cousin', Yadira?" asked José, feeling now as cold as a piece of ice.

"If I tell you, do you swear you will not repeat it? Do you swear it in the name of the most sacred?" she insisted.

"I swear... if in turn you promise not to tell about myself."

"I promise. His name is Max Gerffin," confessed Yadira.

Susanita was paralyzed, unable to pretend anything. "Oh you big son of the thousand whores!" he shouted. Max had betrayed him with another man! Right at that moment the boy would have cut his veins, but for Yadira's begging eyes. Otherwise, he would have shrouded himself in his own blood, in the midst of all those fancy dresses brought from Berlin, Paris and New York.

"He will pay for this. He will pay for this," thought Susanita, madly. "Yes, yes, I have seen him in those bars!" he answered, blinded by rage. While Yadira hurriedly left the store, the clerk started to cry. Once he recovered somehow, he asked permission to leave early that day and went straight to Max's apartment, to confront him.

He was not there. Overwhelmed by rage, Susanita decided to collect evidence about Max's new relationship and, like most vexed lovers, went through his lover's things. In the armoire, to his surprise he found part of the photographic collection, wrapped in the Nazi flag. There were hundreds of nude men with whom "Max squandered his semen, just like other men do with wine," he thought. But what called his attention the most were the "local" photographs. In them, Susanita recognized many politicians and members of the high society, depicted in postures that would provoke the fall of Jericho's walls.

"But what is this mess?" he thought. Among the photos there were some recent ones of Pepe himself. "His buttocks are as loose as a Christmas *tamale*!" he screamed. Susanita put

in his bag the main photos of the Costa Rican men he knew, including those of Pepe. He chose those with titles that immediately called his attention: "Pepe Flores informs me about Ivonne's family in Belgium"; "Strategic Accesses to the Panama Canal"; and "A Nazi Party Plan to Overthrow President Calderón." "Max will not notice I have stolen these photos and documents. This degenerate has thousands of photos and papers, enough to fill a stadium."

While Susanita was stealing Max's photos and documents, Mrs. Dönning was running along Central Avenue, stunned, until she reached her store. "He is going to pay for this! He will pay for this!" she kept shouting.



**XIX**

"Mother, you are shouting," replied Elena when Anita attacked her. The mother had finally realized Elena was having a romance with Carlos and ordered Elena to leave him; otherwise she would risk a major uproar and her expulsion from their community. "*Oy, a shkandal!*" she kept shouting. Elena could not take it any more. She had been living with a constant lump in her throat since they left Poland.

Although Costa Rica was as patriarchal as Poland, in the European nation there was something one could not overlook, namely, the suspension of gender relations. Both mother and daughter had been left alone in Długosiodło, where they learned how masculinity and femininity ebbed and flowed like ocean tides. Thousands of years of patriarchal culture, for a little time, had been uprooted and left hanging in the air. Living alone and then leaving Poland had been like those suspensions Elena felt while on board the transatlantic ship. Women increased their self-confidence and tasted independence's nectar. Perhaps, if the journey had not taken place, they could have maintained their customs for some thousands of years more.

"Do not tell me that a woman's place is at home; we have worked all our lives," Elena responded. The girl feared the road to freedom would become a dead end street. "Mother, now that the worst struggling years are behind us, the Jewish community has started to recreate odious differences between men and women. It is as if God had closed the sea He once opened to save us from the Egyptian slavery." Elena had a foreboding, that their transition to the New World allowed her to visualize a different way to build their lives, but that their fellow Jews were returning to their old customs. "Some have started to send the women back to their homes, after they helped the men establish their businesses," she said. "Some others are beginning to identify themselves with the strong *machismo* prevailing in Latin American countries and believe independent women are a source of troubles," she added. The young girl felt that, if the heavens were to open, men would close them again.

"We used to have more control over our own lives. At least, mother, you handled the money. But ever since we came to the tropics, our father has taken possession of our bodies, of our minds, of our souls. I will not let him dominate me as he does with you. I did not leave the Middle Ages in Poland, to return to them here in Costa Rica. "

"But Elena, if during two thousand years they have treated us as their property, they have married us, sold us, flogged us, exploited us; how are you going to change all that? Ever since you met that woman painter on board the ship, a number of crazy ideas have taken hold of your head. Thank God she has already left this country!"

The mother was worried, fearing the consequences that would result if a woman took control of her own life. "If it is not the painter lady, then it is that man planting all those revolutionary ideas in your mind. Your father himself is now on your side! But you and I know Don David is a man of scandals, a good for nothing. He spends all his time surrounded by the worst kind of people. But you cannot follow his crooked example."

Elena had the intuition her mother did not know what she was talking about. "Carlos is becoming orthodox. That is the last thing I need. Thus, do not blame him. My ideas about the woman's condition are my own," she said.

Anita did not know it, but while Carlos explored the labyrinthine world of the Talmud, searching for a rational alternative to his dogmatic religion, Elena for her part was traveling in an opposite direction. Religious discussions between the couple were fine until they reached the topic of women. From then on, an irritation took hold of Elena, just like what happened to Anita when social classes were debated. Around these topics Elena had a distasteful feeling, also shared by her mother, as if bundles of dirty clothes kept piling up in the sink.

"Do not tell me, Carlos that now you are going to bless God thrice a day, as the religion commands, thanking him for not having made you female." The young girl had reasons to suspect that Talmudic religion would work against her best interests. She had witnessed the iniquity characteristic of the *shtetl*. Women were not only excluded from voting, as it was the case in Costa Rica, but they could neither own property nor have access to education. Her mother who herself had been a victim of these inequalities was now opposed to her, precisely vindicating those exclusions!

"How dare you tell me these are revolutionary ideas, mother? Is it not true that all the money you and I earned in Poland was invested in the Market's store and now everything is under my father's name? No, mother, do not tell me it has to be that way, because I shall not accept it," answered Elena. "You are willing to fight for the workers' revolution, so that men may reproduce this same patriarchal system under Socialism. Look what Stalin has done to the feminist struggles in Russia!"

The young girl's complaints, however, lacked a name. She was possessed by a legitimate anger against her community's attitudes. But until then she did not know whether or not there were others with similar stances in this country. Gloria, the woman that enraged Yadira when she bought her dress from David, would take Elena to her first lecture at the Feminist League. Gloria was married to a North American lawyer and realized that in the United States women enjoyed much more freedom than in Costa Rica. She gradually lost interest in fashion, in cosmetics and in becoming a typical housewife. During her visits to the United States, she attended the suffragist meetings and, particularly, Emma Goldman's lectures, a Jewish anarchist who deeply impressed her. She became convinced it was more important to own a checkbook than a beautiful dress paid by her husband. When she returned to San José, she started organizing women who thought alike.

Gloria decided to invite Elena one day when she was buying a piece of fabric and asked the young girl to tell her how women lived in her native Polish town. Once the girl detailed the customs, Gloria could not help exclaiming: "But things over there are as bad or worse than here!" The clerk's curiosity was stirred. "Is there a place where we women are not that screwed?" she wondered. "Well, Elena, there are some places better than others. But, why don't you come along with me to a feminist meeting? At least we can feel a bit better there."

The meeting was held in the evening, in the conference room at the Buenaventura Corrales School, nearby the Ministry of Foreign Relations building. Some forty women had gathered, most of them teachers or public servants. The lecturer was Angela Acuña and she talked about the need to acquire the right to vote and to educate women. For the young immigrant this would be the first time she was united with other women, just to talk about women. Besides, the lecturer was a woman, not a man, as was always the case in the Jewish community.

During some meetings at the Israelite Center, the men talked about how wives were supposed to behave. "The Hebraic woman is the center of the home and there everything turns around her," asserted the lecturer, a dentist that boasted about his knowledge on moral and family matters. When Elena asked her mother why things had to be that way, Anita answered: "To make us feel dizzy and to prevent us from running away." Although her mother realized men talked about women, always for their own particular benefit, she did not dare take the next step. She feared more feminism would result in her two daughters remaining unmarried.

"I am afraid," said Elena to Gloria. "I feel just like when we Jews gather. We are always afraid someone is going to put a bomb in the place, or that they will throw stones at us," she added. "Do not worry," answered her friend. "They will not do it just yet, because currently they are concerned with you Jews. But once they leave you alone, they are going to take it against women."

The two of them timidly sat in the last row and did not utter a word until the lecture started. Elena curiously studied the faces of other women attending the meeting. They came from different walks of life and were of all ages and sizes. What called her attention was the fact that most of them used little make-up and the usual overemphasis on femininity was not there. The group created a placid atmosphere of sisterhood.

The moment reminded her of some good times at Długosiodło, when the matrons gathered to cook. While they cut the chickens' necks, Jewish women laughed at male arrogance. "Do you know, Anita, said Dona Golcha, this bird's neck is larger than my husband's *potz*?" "Well, in my case, answered Dona Miriam, it is not as small as that, but it is just as dead." The other cooks split their sides laughing. Dona Charna, who at the moment was plucking a chick, told Rebecca she suffered a similar feeling when her husband ran away with the town's *kurveh*. "He did not leave me one single *zloty* to pay for my food," she explained. For her part, the matchmaker was asking Dona Guita, a widower, if she would like to have a new husband. "I rather have a good salami," she answered. These meetings acquired the taste of feminine complicity and the sweet revenge of the underdogs; just what the mice feel when the cat is away. "This meeting is very much like our kitchen meetings in Poland," thought Elena.

A woman, a typical lawyer, simply dressed and wearing glasses, entered the conference room displaying an air of security. She winked at the "new ones" like Elena and Gloria and started lecturing. According to her, sexuality was under the influence of the excessive

power held by men, thanks to their greater economic resources. There was a rampant inequality in relationships, calling for a balance by means of women's empowerment.

The lawyer confessed she had learned her subordinated role since an early age, from the subtle messages and the little things taught by her parents. From the amount of food she got at the table (men always got more than the women), to the daily decision making process (men decided where to live, how to live, with whom to live). "Men always had priority," she added. In most cases, "they can count with the support of their own women to do so."

This last statement touched a soft spot in Elena's sentiments, when she realized her own mother played that game and put her outmost attention in satisfying the needs of the men in their home. When her father talked, even though he could be uttering the biggest nonsense in the universe, women were supposed to listen and to acquiesce. During those rare occasions when friends from the community were invited for dinner, men and women would meet separately, boys to talk the relevant events of the world, such as business and politics, whereas girls would only talk about children, the kitchen and fashion. Elena hated such patterns and did all she could to sit with the men, since "feminine" topics bored her. Surprisingly enough, Anita would be the more upset by this. "They will say we are weird," she would tell Elena. In turn, the girl could not believe how submissive her mother had become in the tropics. "If you keep playing the victim, mother, please do not ask for my help when you need to beg your husband for some money," answered Elena.

"As a feminist," continued the lecturer, "I can tell you it is easy to see that girls receive much less attention than boys. When we women speak, we are constantly interrupted; much more attention is given to what the boys have to ask or say. At the Catholic Church, you do not find women priests, or females who participate in the policy making process. The message taught by the Church reduces our tasks to fulfilling our obligations as wives and mothers." The lecturer requested her audience to help her put an end to such oppression: "Dear ladies, if we are not entitled to vote, then we cannot change anything. We Costa Rican women must fight for the suffrage just like our sisters in the United States and in Europe have done."

The forty pairs of hands could not stop applauding. Elena was deeply touched, feeling strong emotions. She had found her home and a plan had occurred to her, to stab patriarchy. "I will wait until mother runs out of money and then we will see if we women are not capable of fighting together," she thought.

The lecture was followed by a debate about the condition of women in Costa Rica. First, they discussed the origins of oppression and subordination. From the different comments it was possible to conclude many women had been convinced that men were strong, aggressive, assertive, possessed by an insatiable sexuality, hard workers and, on the other hand, that women were submissive, passive, vain, coquettish and delicate.

Elena raised her hand to speak. "I want to share with you my personal experience. In the town where I come from, they used to tell me exactly the same things our sister (pointing to the woman that talked before her) is saying. Which is, that we women are naturally weaker.

However, our father had to leave us to come to Costa Rica and for about seven years my mother and my siblings had to manage without him. During that time I realized how many things we would not do while he was with us. We learned to do those things and we did them just as well as he did. Thus, I do not believe hormones are the cause of our problems and suffering. Instead, I believe our lack of power is what makes our bodies weak." Once she finished, she realized eighty eyes were upon her. The women were moved by the words of this timid, young and apparently fragile girl, and suddenly they all started to applaud her.

The Costa Rican feminists, noted Elena, had a particular way to consider the relations between men and women. In contrast to her view, they accepted "natural" differences and concluded that males and females were intrinsically different. However, these differences were not enough to justify male domination. They aspired to develop complementary relationships based on division of labor. But there was a danger in this position. If you recognize genetic and hormonal differences —she thought— enough to justify the division of labor, then the distance to accept discrimination is, therefore, very small. Elena knew German scientists were currently trying to demonstrate that inferior races had smaller brains and that women were not fully civilized beings.

Finally, they reached a general consensus, namely, that the right to vote and to be educated was the answer to their problems. Ana, a visiting American, said that only when they were able to vote would men listen to their demands. "If your husbands vote for you, they will never pay attention to your claims." Elizabeth, a dentist, in turn defended the right to education. "When each and all of us become capable of practicing a profession, then and there men's control and lack of respect for us will end."

Once the event was over, she returned home to prepare dinner for her parents. While she ran towards her house (about half an hour away), she was thinking she did not share all the ideas expressed that evening but, nonetheless, she had never been so excited and willing to do something to fight for her independence from men and from her own parents. It was as if someone had opened a closet and produced several magical suits for her to wear: a physician's white coat, a lawyer's gown, an engineer's frock. "I want to have a profession," she said to herself. "I also need to think of a plan to make my mother accept Carlos."

When she arrived at their hovel, a gust of wind made her shiver. "Someone has been in the house," she thought. Even though everything was in its place, the smell of strangers could be felt all over the place. She tried not to give it undue importance, but experienced a foreboding that something bad was about to occur. Elena had not yet realized that Carlos' picture had disappeared from her bedroom.

When her parents arrived she told them about these feelings. "But what kind of thief would want to break in this house, if there is nothing valuable to take?" wondered her mother. When Elena realized that Carlos' picture was gone, her mother tended to assure Elena that there had not been a break-in. "Do not worry. It was probably just your imagination." David looked into his bedroom and did not notice anything missing or changed. When Anita returned to the kitchen, her father added something to turn her against his wife. "You

know your mother does not put up with Carlos. She probably was the one who threw his picture into the garbage.”

“I have to think of something to force my mother to accept him. For a moment I thought a burglar had come into our home. This cannot go on,” Elena said to David, being now convinced that she had to find a way to end Anita's refusal to acknowledge her relationship.

They sat at the table to have dinner and to talk about other things. "You are nervous," Anita said to Elena. "You served your father less chicken than the usual portion." "No mother. From now on, he is eating as much as you do."

Sisterhood had its limits, though. One of these would surface months after Angela Acuña's lecture, when a woman went shopping to La Peregrina. It was Yadira. Elena immediately recognized her. She would never forget how, during her second day in Costa Rica, she received an anti-Semitic pamphlet from this woman. This time she was also bringing bad news.

"Good afternoon ma'am. What can I do for you?" Elena asked.

"Are you Elena?" Yadira asked harshly, while looking at the goods.

"Yes, I am, Dona Yadira," answered Elena, letting the woman know it was useless to pretend they had not met before.

"Well then, I will be straight with you. I know you are fooling around with my husband and since you arrived in this country the man has lost his bearings, spending all his time reading books of the Hebraic religion. I also recognize I have made some mistakes and you are the first one he has had relations with," said Yadira, trying to provoke chaos.

"However," she continued, "I have come here today to talk with you and to let you know, first, that I will fight to get him back and two, that I want to do you a favor," she added, looking at the merchandise again.

"And can you tell me what favor is it that you wish to grant me?" Elena asked completely incredulous.

"You know I have been a long-standing member of the Committee for the Nationalization of Commerce and that I have struggled against the open door policy for immigrants like yourselves. I have done this fully knowing my actions are honest and that I am not deceiving anyone. However, I have never wanted to participate in violent activities, or get involved in vandalism. Until recently I have worked with some friends from the German Legation and it has come to my knowledge they are planning a strike against the Jewish community. As you might realize, some of my fellow merchants and I do not support that kind of action and we do not want to be linked to them," said Yadira unhesitatingly. "Well, to make a long story short, I want you to talk with your fellow Jews and tell them that the Germans are planning to set up a bomb in the Synagogue during your Holy Week.

"But why have you come to tell me about it?" Elena asked, confused.

"Quite simple. I want you to know that I have done you a favor and perhaps later on I may ask you one in return. Such is life. After all, we are both merchants, aren't we?" added Yadira, full of irony. "However," she continued, "I want you to proceed very carefully. You are not to reveal my name to anyone. If they find out I passed this information, they are going to kill me."

The story was too incredible for Elena to be able to digest it at once. The young woman could not understand why Yadira now turned against the Nazi Party and their anti-Jewish plans. Once the woman left the store, Anita, looking at what was happening from the store across the passageway, came in running, anxiously asking:

"What did that woman want?"

"To tell me there is going to be a bomb in the Synagogue, during *Pesach*," her daughter answered, still unable fully to assimilate the news.

"But why has she told you that? Would it not be a trap? insisted the mother. Ever since her relation with don José had "warmed up," she had become more lenient towards her daughter's affair.

"I do not know, but it makes sense. It will be very easy to find out if it is a deception, mother. We must warn the Israelite Center, so they can take the necessary precautions. I will go there early tomorrow. After all, their office is located behind the Synagogue and they will be able to constantly check the seats."

The next morning, Elena visited the members of the Directive Board, at the time presided by Salomon Schifter, brother of one of the suitors her father was pushing her to consider. Both the office and the Synagogue were located across the Canada Dry Factory, on Fifth Avenue. It was a small place, consisting of a meeting room, a place for praying where the "Synagogue" was located and, at the back, another and narrower room where the Board held its meetings.

The Jewish political meetings were just for men and Don Salomon was apprehensive when he welcomed the young woman. The directors considered that women should not get involved in politics and were already disturbed by the fact that Anita had been in charge of passing migratory information to the government, through the intermediation of Don José Sanchez. And now her daughter had some further contacts with even more dangerous groups. They made Elena wait outside, while they "voted whether to let her in or not." Don Abraham Picoda, the Secretary, objected to inviting a woman.

"Don Salomon, I do not think it is appropriate that we listen to gossips of another Sikora; it seems they have come to this country to stick their noses everywhere," pointed out the annoyed Secretary. "Besides," he went on, "she is Anita's and David's daughter, both of them bad examples for the new generation. You are aware the Sikoras are known to be rebellious and choose bad company."

"Mr. Picoda, I understand all this is not customary, but the situation we are living nowadays is not normal either. If our fellow Jew, Elena, has something relevant to tell us, I consider it important to listen to her," the President of the Center, who normally was more provident than the other members of the Board, answered.

"I still object," screamed don Abraham, hitting the table and pulling hairs from his beard to intimidate his opponent.

Outside the room, Elena waited for more than half an hour, She knew she had something grave and important to share, but she needed a special permission to talk, as if women did not contribute with their work to support this organization. But this young woman was determined and would not wait forever. Without asking permission, she opened the door and left the Directive Board frozen with her words:

"Please forgive my meddling, gentlemen, but I do not have much time to lose and you have even less. Someone has told me they are going to plant a bomb in the Synagogue during *Pesach*," the beautiful woman said.

The Board members were left with their mouths open, not so much because of the news, but because of the messenger's boldness, daring to break into a masculine bastion. They asked who had passed her the information, but Elena had given her word she would not tell. Still, the information she brought was credible enough.

Since the Synagogue had opened in 1934, it had suffered all kinds of vandalism. The anti-Semitic campaign was currently at its peak and the Congress had passed a law to expel the Jews. This meant the Jewish community would not get support from the new government and it was left on its own.

"They are attacking us from all sides, Elena," explained Don Salomon, the first to recognize how brave this woman was. "The Nazis say they want us out of Germany, but when we do leave they come after us everywhere we go. They now want to kick us out of Costa Rica, but where are we going to go?" he asked.

"We should not let ourselves be intimidated by the Nazis and leave. What we must do is organize ourselves to fight back. If in Poland things have taken a terrible turn, there is no reason why they should be like that here as well. Those supporting the anti-Semites are the merchants, not the people of Costa Rica. We must ally ourselves with the workers and with the Communist Party," replied the woman, provoking a major scandal among the members of the Directive Board.

The conservative association was not willing to work together with the Communist Party, particularly in these times. However, Elena's determination made them seriously consider the possibility of a bomb attack. "We must hire security agents to carefully check every corner of the Synagogue," finally don Abraham Picoda came round.

But before planning the security measures, he insisted that no woman should be present at the meeting, because "she could tell the secret to her female friends."

Don Salomon could not but laugh at such a major foolishness. "If she has not told us who gave her the information about the Nazis, how come is she going to give away our information?" he asked Picoda contemptuously. But many of the other members had borrowed money from Don Abraham (at a high interest) and he controlled the Board. "Elena, it will be better if you leave us alone now, so that we may continue with out meeting," Don Salomon agreed, aware of the need to maintain their unity and consensus.



Elena left the office and prayed that this time the males would know what to do.

As predicted by Yadira, a bomb was found in the Synagogue the night before Pesach. With the help of a US official sent to train the Costa Rican armed forces, they were able to disarm it before it exploded. Some other bombs did blow up in several Jewish homes, but without fatal casualties. However, the one planted in the Synagogue was very powerful and would have killed hundreds of people.

"We owe a major favor to the person that tipped you off," Don Abraham said smiling to Salomon a few days later.

"No, sir," Don Salomon interrupted, "Our thanks must also go to an extraordinary Jewish woman."

**XX**

Anita was an expert at wringing chicken heads, although according to the strict kosher laws she was supposed to obey, the bird should be left to bleed to death. "The *schochets*<sup>85</sup> say the poor creatures do not suffer" she said sadly to Elena, "but I think it is better to wring their necks than let them die in a pool of blood." A number of things were changing in this New World and Anita did not want to break yet another tradition. However, here the birds put up more resistance than she was used to back in Poland. "Elena, I believe these tropical chickens are smarter than their sisters in the Old World," she confessed to her daughter. "Remember how those we ate last week, would not let themselves be caught for hours, as if they suspected my designs."

Her daughter was not convinced at all. "No, mom, how could they know?" she answered, uninterested. She believed only human beings could be deceived. "Animals are never coaxed by their predators' designs," she argued. Elena hated chicken meat, she thought that since childhood she had been forced to eat it; she was nauseated thinking these little beasts could possess any measure of wisdom. Here in the tropics, she had decided to increase her intake of vegetables and fruits, thus allowing more chickens to remain alive. "The truth is that since you began talking to Don José, the weirdest ideas populate your mind, mother. It is as if everybody knew about your friendship and had you under surveillance. The chickens represent your fears of being exposed."

The mother remained silent and had to admit her daughter was not all that wrong in this respect. The tropics had not only produced cleverer chickens, but brought to their lives an element until then unknown to them: romantic love. Formerly, Anita had bought her husbands as she purchased chickens in the market, making sure to choose the healthiest and fattest ones. Now she fell victim to a new disease. Since she met Don José, a strange feeling had increased her confusion regarding this New World. She anxiously awaited the arrival of the *gamonal*, as one anticipates the *Shabat* holiday, with an unknown happiness. She realized tiny worms tickled her stomach and forced her to return, again and again, to the mirror. One day she decided to paint her lips. Another time, she bought a new dress. She left her long hair loose, normally firmly tied with a common piece of cord, like hanging sausages. Then she dyed it with a lighter color. As they popularly say in Costa Rica, the woman was completely "nuts."

These new thoughts brought the harshest criticisms upon her from some Jewish merchants in the Market. Dona Golcha, who owned a store nearby, used to take a peek every time Don José came shopping. She was the spokeswoman for the rest of the community and Anita was well aware of her interest. Her neighbor was a typical *yenteh*<sup>86</sup>, whose life was centered on gossiping and commenting on everybody else's scandals. Even before Don José arrived, Dona Golcha put her daily task of completing the crossword puzzle in the newspaper aside, proceeding instead to write down in her journal whatever she could see or overhear. "Anita abandoned a customer to talk to that man. They may chop my tongue in

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<sup>85</sup> butcher

<sup>86</sup> Nosy

little pieces if I am wrong, but there is something *shmutsik*<sup>87</sup> going on between these two!" she would write, strongly underlining the Yiddische word.

The Jewish spy was sure that since Don José started visiting her fellow country woman, more than the 300 devils identified by Rabbi Yojanán near the town of Shijin, had moved into the Central Market of San José. Anita realized her neighbor spied on her and to avoid her surveillance, decided to meet her friend at the Market's cafeteria. When the time for the date arrived, she put on a ridiculous straw hat and a pair of very dark glasses, as black as her conscience (she thought) and walked in front of Dona Golcha's store as if she could not recognize her. "This depraved Anita believes I do not know it is her walking by my store," Dona Golcha would write in her journal.

The wretched Anita looked for a place in the Market's cafeteria and sat down to drink a cup of coffee. She thought of the stratagems she devised to meet with her friend. They were very much like those used by Samuel, the suicidal brother, to meet with the rabbi of Długosiodło. "Illicit lovers must act like criminals," she thought, "be they men loving men, women loving women, or Jews loving Christians. Perhaps one day the Socialist revolution will put an end to these kinds of deceptions," although she was becoming less and less certain such possibilities would ever come true. When Don José approached her, Anita pretended they met by mere chance and invited him to sit with her. However, all the merchants were aware of this pantomime, including Dona Golcha. She even came up with a nickname for Anita: "Greta Garbo, because the woman is an accomplished movie star," she wrote in her infamous diary.

The other merchants were not so critical. After all, many of them also had affairs outside their marriages and had assimilated themselves to the Latin culture, much more tolerant towards illicit love affairs between men and women. "Do not get muddled with those things" Don José advised ironically. "Don't you see we Christians are allowed to do anything we wish, as long as we later repent? As a good Jew, you feel guilty already, before sinning!"

"Oh, dear friend!" she answered. "The fact is, we Jews feel guilty about everything, including what we do not even do." The *gamonal* started laughing and requested her to remove her dark glasses, because there in the Market not a single sunray could get through. "Rather than an infidel woman, you look more like a raccoon. If I am not able to see your eyes nor hold your hands, then we are not doing anything evil or wrong," he said. "Oh, go and tell that to that witch Golcha, who is ruining my reputation in the Jewish community!" responded Anita.

Anita hesitated, took the glasses off only to put them on again, with very quick movements, like a lynx, every time one of her fellow Jews came near. For his part, Don José went into raptures contemplating his companion at the table; she looked like a small cuckoo bird on a broken Swiss clock. Poor Anita did not realize that everybody noticed her small ritual and each time a Jew passed by, his fellow countrymen put up a theatrical show.

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<sup>87</sup> Dirty

For example, the woman selling *chayotes* would throw in the air one of these vegetables each time Anita put on her glasses. The butcher would cut a fish's tail; the man selling eggs scratched his genitals; the woman kneading tortillas slapped them hard, because they would sound like drums; the owner of the flower shop squeezed one of her own breasts; and the shoe salesman would whistle "La Cucaracha." The entire Market participated in the improvised musical, without Anita ever finding out.

"I do not know why they are making such a big fuss today," she commented, distracted. She went back to her store, looking to one side and then to the other, but mostly towards Dona Golcha. But this woman pretended to be unaware of Anita's presence, provoking laughter among the other merchants.

Her husband David, meanwhile, danced to a different tune. When he chose to set up a store in the Market, he had to leave some of the customers he had as a *klapper*. He explained to his wife how he felt a tremendous sense of loyalty towards those that bought his wares during his first years as a peddler and that he would rather continue selling door to door. Every Sunday after closing La Peregrina, to his wife's annoyance David disappeared, using the need to sell some leftovers as a pretext. "Your father never spends Sundays at home," Anita complained to her daughter. She suspected her husband enjoyed those furtive escapades and that he went away, both to be separated from her as well as to visit with his chums at the tavern.

Anita was afraid to confess to Elena the only secret she kept, her suspicion that David could be involved with Susanita. To protect her daughter from such shame, she would only insinuate her belief that, "your father has a rather close relationship" with that homosexual. "Not that I am concerned about it" she would tell Elena, "but you know how people react here in America to such things." Her daughter laughed to herself, because she knew her father was just a friend of Susanita and thought her mother should be suspicious of Emilia and her friends instead.

And she was right. On Sundays, David went to the crummy bars where he socialized with the cream of the underworld. He thought life was hard and cruel, plagued by disappointments and he found his peace of mind talking to those that once dreamt of becoming somebody great, only to end up defeated or maligned. He would rush to Emilia's bar, trying to find consolation in drinking and talking. Each and every Sunday afternoon, he met with Emilia, Susanita and an old transvestite from Barrio Mexico nicknamed The Duster, to discuss their miseries, aspirations and the meaning of life...

Instead of the usual exchange of ideas, one day David transformed the weekly gathering into a session of airing complaints. They compared misfortunes and argued which one of them was more persecuted and discriminated against. Would it be the Jew, the one forced to marry someone he did not love, the Prostitute, the Sodomite, or the Transvestite? The discussion centered on studying which group had gained more rights throughout civilization.

The Jewish merchant was agile in twisting the discursive paths, employing a Talmudic style and did not allow anybody to question his monopoly of suffering. However, this time the rest of the participants had anticipated David's tricks to present himself as The Martyr and would not grant him an easy triumph. Like a modern Aristophanes in a renovated Platonic Symposium, they fought for the right to define, which was better and worst sexuality.

The discussion became such a plaintive contest, that even the Christians used Yiddish words to regret the fact they were suffering the worst *tzores*. "Do not worry that your marriage is a catastrophe, David," said his friend Emilia. "Life is never a rose garden; just look at me, I wanted to find a good husband and ended up a whore." "But woman, at least every night you can expect something new, while I always have to see the very Samael, king of the demons," he answered. "Besides, in this country if you repent you are immediately forgiven, even prostitution," added David.

Susanita did not miss one word of this exchange and now cut into the conversation. "The only one around here really involved with the Devil is me; there is not a fine or a penalty I could pay to 'change' and leave Max," he said, looking at David. He felt that, neither Emilia's nor David's was more difficult and more painful a predicament than his. "The most discriminated group in the world is us, homosexuals," he said. "Even men like Max," he complained, "take advantage of us *girls* and sooner or later leave us in the ditch."

But David would not give in. "You, Susanita, although everybody may oppose you, are free to love whomever you choose. In my case, I had to marry not allowed to choose my partner and that is the worst thing there is." "But Don David," replied Susanita, "tell me the truth. Did you ever had any pleasure with your wife?"

Even though he wanted to, the Jewish merchant could not deny the truth. "At first I did, I must admit. She was a hot woman and somehow morbid. She liked to look at my round and firm ass and she always told me I was a good lover. However, we slowly fell apart because of the damned poverty and the ensuing fights over money," he confessed, tears in his eyes. But everybody thought they were just crocodile tears.

When The Duster's turn came, he was ill tempered and said he did not have enough patience to discuss such sloppy themes. He had reached the kind of wisdom that only emerges after living many years and, therefore; he refused to discuss who was doing better or worse. "You are losing your time with these absurd discussions," he said. "For us, members of different minorities, modernity has made us easy prey to the Nazis and only the Communist revolution will save us. All the poor and the excluded are currently endangered; we have not benefited, at all, from the much advertised world progress," he commented.

"You David, take a good look at how things are these days," he continued. "What today is just a practice, tomorrow is going to turn into an identity."

"What do you mean?" asked David. "You are now flying too high and it is hard to follow your trend of mind."

"It is very simple," responded The Duster. "Let us take the case of Jews. In former times they were considered to be members of a religion. Thus, whenever the anti-Semites threatened them, there was always a way out of the predicament: They only had to undergo baptism and convert and all their problems were over. Nowadays, however, the Nazis have defined the Jews as a race and, therefore, nobody may escape his condition, whether converting or marrying a Christian. Hitler has established what it takes to be a Jew and is not based on whether or not you practice the Hebraic religion. According to the Nazi chief, you are a Jew if you have three Jewish grandfathers, even if currently you do not practice Judaism."

According to The Duster, something similar was taking place with the homosexuals and the prostitutes. "Twenty years ago, a whore could pay a tax and abandon her condition. A sodomite could marry and nobody complained. A man would dress like a woman and his acts did not make him untrustworthy. Meanwhile, today these become identities that nothing can erase or remove. Do not deceive yourselves thinking we are making progress and imagining we live in more civilized nations, because we are not. "

They could not reach a consensus about whose was the worst life, but David had a final card to win the contest.

In his view, the others had been able to choose their way of living, whereas he, notwithstanding his youthful dream of becoming a rabbi, ended up as a merchant. "You do not understand how much I suffer being forced to sell *shmates*, when I could have been a distinguished scholar specializing in the Talmud," he said. "But since I was poor, they did not respect my wishes and nobody follows my wise counsel."

Emilia would not let him win. "Well, I chose to become a whore and ended up poor and it is me that men want advice from," she answered. "You might not imagine how many customers come to tell me their miseries, when all I want is that they finish and leave." She could not understand what good could come from becoming a rabbi, as a prerequisite for advising others about how they should live. "If after all nobody pays attention, what satisfaction may there be in giving advice?"

While David talked with his friends, Elena met Carlos at the Morazán Park, during the weekly open-air band concert. She was much more daring than her mother and her father. She had no interest, whatsoever, in hiding her love affair. She knew this was a small country with only half a million inhabitants, but nowhere to hide. Besides, she had fallen in love madly with the beau as he fell for her. When the right chemistry exists, the bodies seem to respond to all kinds of stimuli, except reason. And the attraction between them was so strong that they could not find a way to control it. Both anxiously longed for Sunday afternoons, to meet and to look at each other, like perfect romantic dreamers without needing to say a single word. This love must have been really strong, to make them willing to confront the absolute condemnation from their respective communities. And condemnation there was, indeed. So much so, that both were left alone; their friends were not able to understand what was going on in their hearts. But their personalities

complemented each other in such mysterious ways, that neither the Bible nor the Talmud could separate them.

Elena and Carlos were immigrants, survivors and loners that could not find solace in tradition. They had ceased to believe in particular gods and in eternal traditions. Exile and poverty had forced them to open to the world, to the modern whirlwind that uprooted them from their hometowns and expelled them towards the new society. Neither suspected this future was about to come face to face with its worst enemy.

Events in Germany appeared quite distant from the tropics, to the point that they believed these would never affect them. "Hitler will not last much longer," Carlos said to Elena dreamily. However, according to the new racial laws, since 1935, marriages between Jews and Germans were banned in Germany. The kiss of love exchanged between them in San José could send them both to jail in Berlin. "Carlos, we must stop this madness," said Elena, although not believing her own words. "We are playing with fire."

But not only the lovers had a secret rendezvous. David and Carlos also met on Sundays, during the evening, to discuss the Talmud. Both had come to like and respect each other. Their meetings were full of controversy, as the afternoon meetings between Carlos and David's daughter were full of love. For both of them, their discussions about the rabbinical schools were like honey for the spirit. Carlos had found a religion, that of Hillel, organized around endless debates concerning justice and morals, but open to change. David preferred the Shammai School, which maintained a rigid stance concerning law and tradition.

David had told Carlos that Hillel and Shammai were two rabbis that lived at the end of the first century before our era and at the beginning of the first century. The discussions maintained by these two wise men were transformed into two Rabbinical schools, the Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, which continued the dialogue after the destruction of the Second Temple, that is, until the second century of our era. These debates were essential material of the Oral Law and the source of disagreements between David and Carlos.

Hillel proposed a more 'humanist' interpretation of the laws, and was more sensitive to the every day realities of his followers. David considered them too loose. The Bet Shammai School, for example, argued that a woman requesting a divorce, because her husband had disappeared and was presumed dead, but who only presented one witness, should be denied her petition. To the contrary, the Bet Hillel, aware of the suffering endured by an abandoned woman, accepted one testimony as valid and sufficient. The Bet Shammai was rigid. The man could not get a divorce unless he could discover his wife committing adultery, since the Bible says: "Because he found something indecent in her." The Bet Hillel maintained the opposite view. A man could get a divorce if he found any defect in her, including something trivial such as the wife spoiling his meal, since the Bible says: "Because he has found something inappropriate in her."

David preferred the Shammai, in part because he had married Anita thanks to his town's rabbi, who had granted her the divorce on the bases of alleged impotency on the part of her former husband: "If Anita had not obtained the *get*, he reasoned, I would not have married

her and now I would be free. To me, divorce is not justifiable unless the woman is guilty of adultery."

For his part, Carlos considered it unfair that people had to remain tied all their lives to the person they had first married. "You, Don David, since you did not dare leave your wife, want everybody to remain tied and unhappy."

Carlos was concerned because, since there was not a rabbi in Costa Rica, David had a tremendous power over the Jewish community about the *halakah*<sup>88</sup>. The man could use his known opposition to divorce to deny the moral recognition of Carlos' divorce from Yadira. This was the reason why David was proposing to the Costa Rican Jewish Community to outlaw any *gets*. "We have among us a fellow Jew granting divorces helter-skelter, for money. If we let him continue, in a few years we will not have even one single couple left," he would explain to Carlos. "The solution is to pass a law prohibiting anybody from taking advantage of other people's marital failures."

Discussing with David, Carlos became more convinced that Judaism was something more than a people or a religion. He started to regard it as a way of thinking; even a Gentile like himself could appreciate that. "At first I believed it was crazy to get lessons from you," Carlos said to David. "With time I realize you are becoming more and more Jewish and stubborn," David answered, laughing.

The tutor could not help noticing that his student had become not only a religious expert, but also that now, as a good fellow Jew, he only answered to questions by means of presenting further interrogations. "If you support Shammai's position on divorce and claim that only infidelity is a legitimate reason to accept it, do you not think Anita could be accused of infidelity because of her private meetings with Don José?" asked Carlos.

David, who had adopted a strategy of looking the other way regarding his wife's love affair and feared his wife more than the Last Judgment, answered with yet another question: "And who will dare to accuse her?"

Elena's father was not convinced his student's wedding would be the best solution. "You face so many obstacles with a mixed marriage," he would tell Carlos, "that I am sure you will not be able to cope with them." "If marrying someone from your own people is a mistake, just imagine what kind of error would it be marrying somebody from a different people," he insisted.

David believed passion was something ephemeral and a bad foundation for a marriage. "Even though *shiduchs* like mine may be a disaster, the truth is they last longer than those based on passionate love," he said, challenging Carlos. "In my opinion, it would be better if Elena marries someone from her own people, even if she does not love him," continued David. With Carlos, he adopted a completely different stance to the one he had maintained just a few hours earlier, at Emilia's bar.

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<sup>88</sup> Religious Law



But Carlos would not be intimidated. "I cannot understand how you managed to have intimate relations with a woman you just met at your wedding night. If I had to go to bed with someone I had been introduced the day of the wedding, I would feel like the most miserable man in the entire world," he bluntly asserted. To the young lover, if passion was a bad counselor for marriage, as David claimed, it was even worse to let others make the selection for you.

"If, as you claim, physical attraction is ephemeral, then would it not be better to enjoy it while it lasts, rather than never experience it?" Carlos could not stop now: "Besides, how is it that you defended Samuel when he chose to fall in love with another man and now you want to prevent your daughter from doing something similar?"

"But, don't you realize," replied David mockingly, "that he fell in love with a Jew and not with a Christian? The truth is, Carlos, there is a fellow Jew chasing my daughter and, if I have the opportunity, I would rather marry her with him than with you."

"Who is he?" Carlos asked immediately, suddenly possessed by jealousy. "It is Adolfo, the brother of the Israelite Center's President," proudly replied Elena's father. "This suitor is a lovely thing, although not intelligent at all. But at least he is a Jew and that would save me from a major scandal."

"You are a rogue!" popped up Carlos. "You are looking after a moneyed man and you do not care if your daughter will be happy with him. Remember there exists a curse against those who pursue material goods only."

David answered promptly: "If that was the only thing I wanted for her, then I would choose you; you are wealthier than King Salomon. Besides, if having money is a malediction, then I want to be cursed one hundred times. I have had enough of poverty!"

Don Carlos was flabbergasted by such an insult. Also, the Talmud forbids that you curse yourself. "Don David, you will be punished for such a loose tongue!" he said, reproachfully. "You are not only going to make your daughter unhappy, but you will end up poorer than a rat yourself!" warned Carlos.

Their discussions about love continued until late at night.

Anita was furious waiting for her husband, got ill tempered and ready to make him pay for leaving her alone during the day. "Well, it was time His Majesty King David decided to come home!" her fury disguised in irony. He said nothing and she continued: "You spent all day with Carlos studying the Talmud, while Yadira attends the Nazi meetings. What an excellent company you have found for yourself! Whores and sodomites during the day and Nazis and Germans in the evening! No wonder this home is all topsy-turvy; no one seems to know what to do with his or her life. You have provoked this chaos with your adventures

in this country's underworld. In Poland we would have already imposed a *herem*<sup>89</sup> on you for licentiousness and for living with heretics."

Her opposition to her daughter's love affair was not based on religious reasons, since she did not care too much for these, but were rooted on ideological and social class matters. "No rich man will divorce to marry a poor woman like Elena, much less a Nazi," she said. David, just to spite her, now proceeded to defend the lovebirds he had attacked earlier. "If Carlos studies the Talmud because of his love for Elena, that is much more than what you have done for me during all these years," he recriminated.

"*Oy Vey!*" said the woman. "Now you are going to tell me that supporting you in Poland, while you wasted your time with your friends in the Synagogue, did not mean anything?"

They could not agree, although both realized that in this tropical country things were more "modern," and that the little love worm had been let loose, invading traditional homes and taking possession of the Jewish hearts. "In Długosiodło," insisted Anita, "nobody had ever married because they were in love. The only one that did it, namely Samuel, ended up with a bullet in his head."

"Perhaps you are right," said David, "but nobody died with such a broad and happy smile."

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<sup>89</sup> The hardest punishment, implicating the expulsion from the community

## XXI

A deceived soul is a tremendous enemy. When we find out our loved one is dating someone else behind our backs, repeating the promises previously offered just to us, we are capable of wrongdoings. Our ego is a small elf, an intolerant dictator that refuses to admit any competition. Yadira felt destroyed to the marrow. That night she dreamt with Max; he seemed much more handsome than ever and was wearing a new suit. Although she did not believe in Freud or in psychoanalysis, Yadira realized the suit represented her rival. While her head at any moment now, apparently was about to burst, she made a decision: "That miserable will not treat me like an old rag!"

By morning she had her revenge prepared. She got in touch with her father, to ask him a small favor:

"Daddy, can you get me an appointment with William Hornibrook, the Minister of the American Legation?"

"Of course I can, honey. Why? Have you perhaps changed sides?" he inquired mockingly. "You only visit the German Legation, what the hell are you going to do with the *gringos* now?"

"Everything goes in war and in love," she quickly responded. "Besides, *I* didn't change sides."

Don José would try, without results, to find out her reasons. His daughter remained unmoved: "I will talk about the war. What else is there?" She knew that, because some German businesses were boycotting *El Diario de Costa Rica*, the Americans had decided to finance it. This newspaper was certainly anti-Semitic, but also pro-American; it was one of those contradictions typical of a tropical country. If the Americans could negotiate with the anti-Semites, why couldn't she?

If the request sounded strange to her father, it was astonishing to the diplomat. Hornibrook was well aware this woman sympathized with the Nazi Party of Costa Rica and he also knew she was the main instigator in the anti-Jewish campaign. Besides, he had gotten news about her special relationship with Max Gerffin, a probable enemy of his country. Yadira visited the American Legation two days later.

"Mr Minister, thank you for receiving me. I know you are a busy man. I will try to be succinct," the visitor said as she accepted a chair.

"It is my pleasure to have you here, dear lady. What can I do for you?" the diplomat asked.

"Look, Don William, I am really worried. You know very well that I have worked to have our Costa Rican laws duly respected, and to put a stop to the current free immigration ordinance. However, above all I am a "Tica"<sup>90</sup>. I am afraid our government will not be firm enough to resist the pressures from foreign powers. You know the German Minister, Otto Reinebeck, has his offices in Guatemala and his delegate in Costa Rica is Max Gerffin, who also works and cooperates with our government in infrastructure matters. Although he is a friend of mine, I have reliable reports that some Pepe Flores is passing state secrets to him,"

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<sup>90</sup> Costa Rican

said Yadira. She stopped at this point and looked at the Minister's face, as if to assess the impact of her words.

"What kind of evidence do you have?" asked the diplomat from his leather chair, disturbed and surprised.

"I am aware Germany already knows the official position Costa Rica will adopt during the Conference in Havana, the one you are helping to organize. I also know that Minister Reinebeck is preparing a coup d'état here, to bring down a government that, in his view, is just "a puppet" of the United States. If all this I am telling you was not true, then how could I know your government will propose in Havana an inter-American treatise against Nazism, based on the principle of not accepting the transfer of the colonies belonging to European countries invaded by Germany?" asked the woman with an enigmatic smile.

Hornibrook was speechless. The information she mentioned was absolutely top secret. Pepe knew the strategy the United States would pursue in Havana, but not the specific details of the treatise his country will propose. As the official representative of Washington, Hornibrook had been secretly working with the Calderón administration, trying to convince it to participate in a wide international anti-Fascist front. The Roosevelt administration realized the avowed neutrality of the United States was untenable. If, for some reason, his country entered the European war, the Panama Canal and therefore Costa Rica, acquired a major strategic relevance. A neutral or a pro-Nazi Costa Rican government would be unacceptable for his country.

To prevent it, the American Minister had signed several contracts of reciprocal help and had also promoted negotiations to finally settle the boundaries between Costa Rica and Panama. He had also increased the Costa Rican coffee quotas in the American market and made promises to provide military assistance. However, this woman was now telling him something he suspected: The Germans were plotting to sabotage the plans to have Costa Rica on the side of the allies, by means of a coup d'état.

Hornibrook tried everything in his hands, to keep the situation under control.

"Dona Yadira, what you are telling me is extremely serious. If it is true that a coup d'état is being planned and that there are German spies inside the Costa Rican government, then we need proof of it. Please excuse my daring, but you have been very close to the German policies and now you are not anymore. Why should I trust you?" He asked the key question. As he spoke he looked at Yadira's hands, clamped down and firm.

"You see, Don William, I will be crystal clear with you. The Calderón administration has approved the expulsion of the Jews. For that, I tell you frankly, I requested Max's and the German Legation's support. But now they want more. They want to bring down Calderón, because of international affairs not of my incumbency. If I am to be consequential with my beliefs, why am I going to support a coup against Doctor Calderón, after he has solved our Jewish "problem"? I want these people out and that is all. However, you have also made contradictory decisions. I know you have decided to finance *El Diario de Costa Rica* because, even though Don Otilio supports the expulsion of the Jews, nonetheless he is an

ally of England. Is it not as paradoxical as what I am doing now? We always put our interests first, is that not right?" added Yadira. She then looked at the picture of the President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, hanging on the wall behind Minister Hornibrook.

"I need proof," said the Minister.

"Let us say I will get them for you; and let us say you believe there is a German spy in the Costa Rican government. And let us also say that you know this spy is preparing a coup. And finally, let us say your country decides this spy must disappear" she said.

When Mrs. Sanchez de Dönning left his office, Hornibrook mopped the sweat on his forehead. He immediately called his Vice Consul Zweig, giving him urgent orders: "Find everything you can about Max Gerffin and Yadira de Dönning." The Minister was worried because Pepe, his secret agent, was also passing confidential information to Germans, trying to make them believe they had access to Washington's plans. However, what the woman had revealed could not come from Pepe, since that kind of information was not in his hands. "Someone else," he thought, "is obtaining key information inside the Costa Rican government." He immediately sent a long cable to the US Secretary of State:

*The German propaganda here has been effective and is taking root. Currently, the Americans are somehow favorites, but the fluctuating Latino temperament may change in a one day. The Germans have successfully spread the message that Hitler will surely win the war and this has weakened our diplomatic stance... I have the unpleasant feeling that something sinister is going on in Latin America; a breeze, a wind, a return to the anti-imperialist vision that prevailed in these countries during the Republican period. I am convinced this is due to the belief, among numerous sectors, that Germany might win and that it is the only market for the Costa Rican coffee. And, unfortunately, they also believe the United States is not well prepared to defend the Western Hemisphere from an external aggression... the possibility of an actual overthrow of the current government, by León Cortés and his German followers, is something that, in my opinion, must always be kept in mind by the Department.*

The corroboration of Yadira's words did not take long to reach the American Minister. On June 27, 1940, Otto Reinebeck, Extraordinary Envoy and Reich Minister in Costa Rica, from his seat in Guatemala sent a very strong letter to the Costa Rican government, accusing it of allowing the spread of anti-German propaganda. Reinebeck had received a letter against Hitler, signed by a Costa Rican citizen in his private capacity and, without consideration for any diplomatic regulation or usage, the German ambassador proceeded to threaten the government of Costa Rica:

*I would not want to avoid letting Y.E. know the attached document, signed by José Rafael Morera, sent to me from San José, Costa Rica. Although its contents are far from altering my peace of mind, nonetheless they offer an additional sad proof of the moral brutishness that has become usual among the citizens of your country, due to an unscrupulous instigation against Germany, unfortunately tolerated by the estatal (sic) authorities of that Republic.*

On July 1, 1940, this German diplomat sent a circular letter to all the Central American governments, manifesting his point of view contrary to possible motions directed against Germany, at the Conference to be held in Havana. He admitted to know about and he deplored, a possible seizure of German boats docked in the ports of the Western Hemisphere:

*I will want now to call Y.E.'s attention to the fact that the Reich's government, in a given circumstance, would be forced to consider the use of German boats, currently stationed in ports of the Americas, by an American country and without the consent of the German government, as an attitude contradicting neutrality and incompatible with friendly relations between Germany and the American nations.*

At the end of this message, the German Minister warned that the Latin American countries should not support any measure against his country's interests:

*Apart from all this, I have been asked to manifest, in general terms, the strong hope held by the Reich's government, that the efforts developed in the aforementioned Conference, according to its goals, should take place in the framework of a well understood policy and that in such event, the participating nations should not adopt any resolution directly or indirectly addressed against Germany.*

Hornibrook had the "evidence" in his hands, proving that Germany knew the agreements in advance and was ready to do all it could against Calderón. Alarmed by the intensity of the German pressures and by the information filtering, that same day he asked the President to his Legation, "to preserve the required total confidentiality" of their meeting. Calderón did not take long to arrive. He was anxious as he entered Hornibrook's office; sure that something bad was hatching.

"Señor William, thank you for your invitation," the President said, anguished by the Minister's urgency.

"Welcome, Don Rafael, this is always your home. Please let me explain the reason of my request. As you know, I have been negotiating with Don Alberto Echandi, your Minister of Foreign Relations, about a number of details concerning the Conference soon to be held in Havana. We will discuss vital issues about the hemispheric security there. Among these will be a pressing issue of our neutrality. In order to safeguard it, we must not accept Germany "taking control" of the Dutch and French colonies in our part of the world. We had agreed to seize those German boats which, when the conflict began, were docked at American ports. However, several of the topics to be discussed were known only by our governments and were kept under total secrecy. Now we have information that the German Minister in Guatemala is not only aware of them, but is threatening reprisals. Given such breach of confidentiality, we have investigated the possibility of informants in your Ministry of Foreign Relations. A non-identified source has assured us such is the case and, what is even worse, that the German Minister has decided to organize a coup d'état against you and in favor of Don León Cortés.

Calderón saw his worst fears coming true. The President suffered from an incipient paranoia, but clearly understood that his country was in the "sphere of influence" of the United States and realized this country would be his best ally to help him hold on to power. However, he feared the pro-German and the Nazi groups, which were constantly trying to separate him from the United States, would overthrow him before the American help could materialize.

"Do you know who the informant at the Ministry of Foreign Relations is?" asked the President.

"I do not know yet. However, the person who gave me the clue presented proof demonstrating the report is reliable. We will have to wait to find out the culprit. If you are with me in this, we must set up a trap."

"Absolutely. But I have a major concern. You know very well the terrible shape of the Costa Rican Army. Moreover, you also know I do not have adequate personal protection. If we decide to launch a "preventive" operation, I would like your support in providing me with a mobile guard. Besides, I need a loan to stabilize the economy and to reduce our dependency from Germany and Italy."

"As soon as my government is satisfied with the strategic cooperation provided by your government, I promise I will take the necessary steps to fulfill your demands," Hornibrook responded categorically.

"You will immediately get tangible proof about my country's commitment with the foreign policy of our great ally. Please do not worry about it," assured Calderón.

The Costa Rican government would not take long to show its willingness to cooperate. On July 5, 1940, a note from the Ministry of Foreign Relations was made public. The Government announced that "Central America will maintain a united position at the Conference in Havana." The same day, Calderón called Hornibrook to tell him his delegate to the Conference will be Luis Anderson, well known for his "pro American" stance. Besides, the President sent a most suggestive note to the US Minister:

*I wish that, regarding my government; you will feel free to express, frankly, any point of view you may have regarding both foreign and domestic affairs. I want your help and your cooperation. Any suggestion that you make will receive the outmost attention in these critical moments when we need your counsel so badly. Please, do not limit yourself to observations about foreign affairs.*

Hornibrook did not delay his promises. A week later he presented a request to provide Calderón with military aid to the Department of State:

*I urgently need a loan or a donation from the government of the United States of America, in arms and ammunitions for the internal defense (of the Costa Rican government), since their military equipment is old and useless. The President is extremely concerned with the activities of the Nazis and the Communists.*

The US government designated eight thousand dollars to create a mobile unit to protect the President of Costa Rica. This news was not well received by all the different sectors in the

country. While Calderón was "euphoric" because he now had his own private militia, the "Cortesistas" (i.e., followers of Cortés) and the army officials, argued that the President was creating a paramilitary force.

While the romance between Calderón and the Americans entered a hot phase, Yadira thought that now was the moment to separate the anti-Jewish merchant groups from the Nazis and the German Legation. She believed her duty was to follow upon the steps of Otilio Ulate, who was, at the same time, a furious anti-Semite and an ally of the United States. With Don Otilio at her side, she could win the support of other sectors. Besides, she could count on Hornibrook. Thinking about Pepe Flores, a sentence popped up in her mind: "I will sit waiting by my door, until my enemy's casket passes by." She will visit Max in his house, to resign from the Nazi Party.

Yadira went straight to the point:

"Max, dear, I must talk to you. I want you to know I will not be able to continue attending the meetings of the Club. It is because, at the Committee for the Nationalization of Trade, we are trying to make sure the government really applies the Congressional decree about the Jews."

"But I do not see why you should leave our Party. Why can't you do both things at the same time? You know we need you and we do not want you to leave us," Max said wearily.

"Well, each day a little less... It seems you do not need me much anymore," she answered ironically.

"That is not true. You know I have been extremely busy with my work at the Legation. Besides, I have prepared reports to the Costa Rican government, about the state of bridges and roads," he responded looking into her eyes.

"I am sure you have been opening new roads. It seems you are excellent at that," Yadira said. She sat feeling limp and destitute.

"I do not know what you are talking about," Max said nervously now.

"Well, I talk about nothing. I have heard one of those roads leads to El Paso de la Vaca," she added, accumulating all the scorn she was capable of.

"I swear I do not know what you are insinuating," Max said, while a few cold drops appeared on his forehead.

"I imagine you do not. Although currently I think the road you like best is that leading to the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Is that not right?"

"It is not what you think. I believe you are comparing me with your husband. He is certainly walking some crooked roads."

"But I do not care about his ways now. I will not change my mind about the Party. I would rather concentrate on the Committee," she said firmly.

Max could not hide his uneasiness. Perhaps Yadira knew too much. He sensed danger and had to be careful. He should not let her go, without finding out how much she knew. Besides, her anger made him both fearful and excited. He was attracted to danger and had an acute sense of it. Insinuations were stimulants for his voracious appetite. A betrayed and jealous woman, what an irresistible snack!

"If you want to leave the Party, Yadira, do it. But do not leave me," he whispered in her ear.



"I do not understand you, Max. Since you have abandoned me during these past weeks, why do you care now?" she answered, softly pushing him away.

"I do care. I do care," he whispered, approaching her once again.

"Please, do not do that. Do not do that. I do not have enough energy to love and then to be abandoned. I am tired of it," begged Yadira. This time, however, she did not push him away.

Rejections were for Max the bait of love. The men and the women he had had always first rejected him and it was his pleasure and his art to change these rejections into positive responses. This time, like a dog smelling the chemical nectars of perturbed hormones, he slowly began to remove his clothes. Once naked, he withdrew towards the white bed covered with pillows in red and black satin and lay down. "Come into my arms," he ordered.

The woman turned off the light and, once again, she obeyed.

**XXII**

Susanita could not return to his workplace and from Max's apartment went straight to his friend The Duster's house (witch, magician and harpy), carrying all the photographs and the documents. The sorcerer was also a sort of “grandmother,” that is, a substitute mother and father to a number of people in the homosexual world of San José. The Duster liked to address her friends employing feminine pronouns. She had learned the love arts in the jungle. Although an “old man” (“woman,” that is) of about 70, she was lucid and coherent. She had been a cook in several inns during the last century, as well as in the first “restaurants” of San José. There, from black and Indian healers, she had learned how to prepare healing concoctions, useful against warts or loves’ sorrows.

People said she had trapped an Italian man, using some magic potions she put in his macaroni. For many years she had also worked as a cook in several of Minor C. Keith's workers encampments. Keith's company was in charge of building the railroad to the Atlantic coast. From this operation, the engineer made quite a large fortune that, in turn, was the basis for the creation of the well-known United Fruit Company, the largest Banana Company in the world. The Duster had discovered three things there, although she could not remember in what order: occult arts, exploitation of workers and sodomy.

The Duster left the suffocating encampment of the Atlantic route, transformed into the first open homosexual of the country. At the same time, she was in favor of Socialism, of Communism and the occult sciences. “I was one of the founders of the Communist Party in 1931,” she proudly used to say. But those things took place when she was already quite old: “Manuel Mora and Carlos Luis Fallas asked me to help them create the Party, even though at the time I was already about 60 years old... Now I am retired,” said “The Sodomite of Barrio México,” as she was known in the workers' district of San José.

She lived alone in a small house, making some money from the visits of those suffering love deceptions and also obtaining a few more *colones* from public charities. “In more developed countries like the United States or France, or in the Soviet Union, they have pensions for the old folks. Not here in Costa Rica, though...”

Susanita burst into her friend's small living room without knocking at the door, taking advantage of the fact that it was always open. The Duster had acquired this custom during her days as a cook, “so that the Italian stonecutters could come in to get their dessert,” as she mischievously used to say.

"Little Duster; Little Duster! I have been reduced to ashes! I just found out that the treacherous Max has been fooling around with a sodomite who works at the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Moreover, I heard it from that harpy of Yadira; she is worse than a mice plague. I am grieved because I like the man and I cannot accept the fact that he has left me. I need your strongest potion!" Susanita cried out.

"But my darling, you had already told me that Max was dangerous. I do not know if I am too old or not, but in my days no gentleman would tie his lady to the bedpost, nor would he be pulling her hair while making love. Much less that he would beat her buttocks. You are sick to put up with such abuse. And now you are also as buttered up as a bitch in heat. I did warn you: 'Do not get involved with Fascists. If you like to fight, then better move to Nicaragua, they are always in the midst of a civil war there'. But if you are going to have a relationship, let it be a loving one. One of these days you are going to end up with your neck broken like a duck in a Chinese restaurant."

"There is something more. I do not know if I told you this before, but I believe he killed a mulatto girl when she was no longer useful to him and I am afraid that is going to be my destiny as well. One day I found a knife covered in blood in his briefcase and that very day Max had told me he was going to kill the thieves robbing him. I believe he is capable of doing it and much more. I fear for my life, Little Duster! I do not know what to do. I am destroyed," he started to cry.

The Duster was a wise sodomite. She had learned that nobody paid heed to counsels and that concoctions do not work when the mind is muddled. To calm his friend down, she thought that the best thing to do was to tell her own story in the encampments of Italian workers. There she had learned to choose between God and Evil. "Since you only understand politics when they force you to, then listen to what happened to me. Sit down in that chair, because it is a long story and you are only interested in long things when you have them between your legs. Let me give you some hot herbal tea so that you stay still, just as you like to be passive in bed. Do not open your mouth; the most interesting things are those getting in there, not those coming out of it."

"Those were quite different times. My father was a farmer who lost his land and ended up working for a man called Sanchez who bought the land. My mother took a job as a cook with the new landlords, because my father's salary was not enough to feed my nine siblings and me. My youngest sister and I were always with her in the kitchen and it is how I learned the art of cooking. Even though my father wanted to take me to the fields, I felt very early that it was not the kind of job I wanted. Ever since I was a little child, I felt attracted to women's things. I was noticed by the day laborers working with my father. They used to tell my Daddy that he had "quite a joyful and fine boy," apparently not strong enough to carry on the kind of work they did. But they saw potential in me in other occupations. One day, when my father went to collect his pay at the hacienda, one of his fellow workers took advantage of my innocence. I was about seven when Ramón, one of the day laborers, locked himself with me in the cowshed. At first, everything seemed normal. He said he wanted to teach me how to milk cows. Once I had learned how to do it, he pulled out something else, you can imagine what, and said, "now it is my turn." This way we began a relationship that lasted almost nine years. At home they never suspected anything," The Duster explained.

"But did you know at the time that sodomy was a sin?" Susanita wondered, quite intrigued. "Were you not afraid they would hang you?" he asked.

"If you keep interrupting me, then I shall not tell the story," the narrator responded.

“Go on, please; go on. I am captivated by the tale.”

“I was not aware of doing anything wrong, but I did keep it secret,” said The Duster.

“Many day laborers did the same with other young boys. In those days, women would not allow even a kiss without a previous formal engagement and those that did kiss the men never married. Thus, I knew that my brother Hugo had a thing with Paco, another of my father's friends; and that Carlos, my oldest brother, was my uncle's, Juan José's, favorite.”

“Sorry to interrupt you. But please tell me about Ramón. Don't skip that information,” Susanita said.

“He was a handsome and virile man, with black hair and big white teeth. He had a dimple on his chin, which made him look quite attractive and, besides, his eyes had the color of chocolate. I remember that his hands were very wide and could, he would say, “be used as a seat for your buttocks.” However, I cannot say if I liked him. He was cruel, egotistic and extremely jealous. If he saw me talking to another fellow, he would beat me to death and would not let me go to town. Now, about my feelings, I was still too young to understand them and I did what I did without pleasure and as a sort of duty, one more of my house chores. When I was fifteen, in 1888 to be precise, he said he was leaving for the Atlantic area, to work building the railroad. He had gotten me a post as a kitchen boy and he said to my father he would give him some money for me in advance.”

“Well, but where were you going to go, exactly? And how was the job?” again Susanita interrupted.

“What a silly woman!” said The Duster: “I will tell you all, but now, just shut up and listen.”

“We were sent to the Las Animas campground, located about 30 British miles from Cartago, on the way to the Atlantic coast and in the area known as the Reventazón Valley. It was a zone much feared because of the jungle, the tropical diseases and its remoteness. The encampment consisted of 146 Italians, out of more than 1,200 that arrived that year. The houses were large, built with round or carved woods and conveniently covered with galvanized iron plates, or else with straw. They followed the style of huts in the countryside. The kitchen, where I had to work, was separated from the bunk beds, just like the rooms for the boss and the foremen. According to Ramón, they would pay us good salaries, plus food and lodging and medical assistance and we would only have to work ten hours a day during six days of the week. They offered me a salary of 5 *colones* per day, equivalent to 5 dollars.”

“And what was Ramon's job?” Susanita asked.

“When we started I did not have a clear idea of his duties. He had told me Americans wanted 'Natives of the country' to make sure Italians were well behaved and did the job they were supposed to do. His role was of an intermediary and informant to the Company; he was supposed to report any incidents, robberies or mutinies. By the way, I had to welcome the immigrants arriving from Mantua. They came on board the ship Australia and arrived one day in December 1888. Upon their arrival, the government and the Banana

Company checked them out to make sure they were healthy. Ramón and I came along with Dr. Juan Ulloa, sent by the government and Dr Calnek, sent by the Company. They would tell the Italians: 'tutti li,' that is 'all of you over there,' for the medical examination. This is the reason why, thereafter, all the Italians in Costa Rica were called 'tútiles.'"

"And what was your job, if you did not know anything about medicine?"

"My role was to help the physician, writing down the data on the report that would be sent to Don Minor Keith, the contractor. Ramón was in charge of buying the food and other materials. However, he expected there would be problems, since he had read both the contract signed with these men in Italy and the one that would be applied in Costa Rica. According to Ramón, in their native country the Italians were promised better salaries than the ones they were actually to receive in Costa Rica. Over there they signed a contract establishing a salary varying from 4.20 liras to 7 liras (1 lira was 1.25 *colones* and 1 colón was equivalent to 1 dollar). When they arrived in Puerto Limón, the Company established a single rate of 5 liras. They were also promised health services, financial aid in case they needed to return to their homeland due to illness and food poison. Moreover, the original contract signed by them in Italy said they would have the weekends off. But none of these conditions was fully met."

"The Italians were to get a salary four times the one they normally got in their hometown (Mantua), but were taking a major risk, because in case of illness they would only get half the pay."

"As I was telling you, we did expect to have some problems, but we did not anticipate we would really need to confront them. When I came into the boat I did not expect to find 562 Italian men, all of them between 18 and 22 years old, in the prime of their youth and more beautiful than anything I had previously seen in my life. When Doctor Calnek shouted 'tutti li,' they all followed his orders and undressed. My relation with Ramón had been so stormy and so much against my will, that I did not know if I liked it anymore."

"But that morning I realized my particular disposition. One by one the Italians marched in front of me, without any clothing whatsoever, tens of very beautiful men, strong, happy and ready to start quite an adventure, such as building a railroad in the middle of the impenetrable jungle. They would stop before us and the physician carefully checked them. For my part, I was doing my own scrutiny."

"This one is a good specimen," said the physician. "He will be a good stud." In his opinion, the Italians, like the bulls recently imported from Spain, were excellent sires. For my part, I thought there were no women in 30 miles around and the only available cow is me."

"The immigrants, in turn, came from a society where sodomy was even more common than in Costa Rica. Doctor Calnek himself, originally from London, said that Italy was the holiday paradise of the 'sodomites.' Some of the men winked an eye to me, as soon as they detected where in their anatomies was I putting my sight on. Others, when passing by my side and noticing my excitement, touched my behind, grabbed a hand or got a hard on. The

physician sent by the Costa Rican government laughed and said to me innocently, 'You surely remind them of their girlfriends.'

"This is the best story you have ever told me! Just by imagining 562 naked Italian peasants doing the military salute with their lower swords, I start to play the castanets with envy," excited and joyful Susanita said.

"But it is not all, it was not all fun. I suffered and I learned," the narrator added.

"Once in the campground I noticed the injustices committed by the Company. Ramón was a tattletale that tried to squeeze all the juice he could from the poor workers. He did not respect the salaries and paid the same amount to the different types of workers: peasants, stonemasons or stonecutters and masons. The food was bad; believe me, since I was in charge of preparing it. In the morning we gave them just two loaves of bread, a cup of coffee and a piece of brown sugar to sweeten it. At lunchtime, they would get three loaves of bread, some rice or beans and about eight ounces of meat. They got the same portion for dinner. Some days the bread was rancid, other days we gave them macaroni, but with worms and when I complained, Ramón told me to grind them. Because of the many difficulties with transportation, we constantly suffered delays in our salaries."

"Don't explain, all that economic stuff! Please go on, tell me about the love affairs," Susanita interrupted again.

"Love and politics cannot and should not, be separated; as you yourself should know better, dear Susanita," The Duster replied.

"Without a woman in sight and with just one 'sodomite' in their headquarters, life in that campground was pretty busy for me. I had dozens of these men. Typically, they would come knocking at my door during the night, when the others were resting. Of course, I would let them in only if Ramón was not there. Otherwise, he would have killed me. I tried to be as fair as possible and whenever I could I would give them an extra piece of bread or some rice. They were always hungry and not only for my buttocks."

"But do not believe the entire campground depended upon my services. Inside some dark cellars, those more ardent satisfied themselves with some of their fellow workers who charged for their ministrations and some of these were making more money in this way than with their stonecutting. Still, some others would sell opium to dampen the pains of both body and soul. Ramón was involved in all the dark businesses going on in the campground and stole much of the money the Company provided to buy medicines."

"No one was surprised," she continued, "when suddenly those robust and hardy Italians, began to fall sick with yellow fever and dysentery. We had days when half the workers had to remain in their bunk beds; however, the physicians would hardly visit them. If we had medicines, we would give them an iron tonic mixed with rum to bring down the fever. But sometimes we did not have anything to give them and soon many began to die. Just in our campground I counted thirty men dead. The workers were getting really upset at the way the Company treated them and some of their leaders started to talk about a strike, something previously unheard of in the country."

"The workers had never been organized, and we did not even know how to proceed to start a strike. But Ramón always found out who the leaders were and, if they got sick, he managed to make their medicines 'disappear.' At other times, a 'sudden problem' emerged, which prevented the sick men from reaching the hospital. They were left to die in their bunk beds; that simple."

"By October 1889, the situation had become unbearable and more and more workers were talking about starting a general strike. 'We will fight for our rights and we will not let the Company exploit us any more,' they shouted in Italian. They wanted physicians in the campgrounds, macaroni instead of black beans, wine instead of coffee, the salaries they were promised in Italy, paid overtime during weekends, and the possibility to return to their homeland."

"But what is the connection between this story and my situation? I do not understand," Susanita complained, now beginning to get bored.

"Perhaps if you let me finish...?" The Duster replied.

"Ramón did not leave our campground because he knew it was about to explode. He had heard the main leader among the nonconformists was Giorgio Dimani, a peasant with anarchist ideas. I knew him well since he was the love of my life. When I saw him, beautiful like Michelangelo's David, I could not but fall in love with him. One day I put some ground '*milenaria*' leaves in his coffee, which I had previously used in my morning bath. When I saw him drinking it I said to myself he'd make a perfect lover. And I wished he'd come to me. And he did. That night, I had him in my room."

"'In my homeland,' Giorgio said to me, 'we also use *milenaria* leaves to attract love. But we do not use as much as you do.' We made love, but he also told me how the European workers were organizing themselves to fight against exploitation. 'I will organize a strike and then you and I will get married by the river.'"

It was precisely this Adonis who was the one Ramón had decided to get rid of! He had told me how he was going to do it: 'I will kill that *tútile* in an accident, provoking a landslide.' The strike was planned to begin on Tuesday October 22nd. Ramón was ready to provoke an 'avalanche' at the spot where Giorgio was working."

Susanita began to realize the parallels between their lives. However, he struggled against the idea. "My situation is not exactly like yours, dear Dusty, because you did not love Ramón," he commented. Nonetheless, he did not stop listening.

"I decided to go to Giorgio and ask him to move the beginning of the strike to Sunday, October 20, because his life was in danger. 'They want to kill you and you must act quickly,' I said. The peasant looked at me tenderly and asked me how did I know. I had to confess Ramón was planning an 'accident' himself. Then, instead of thanking me for the

information, he said he was worried for my safety. 'What if Ramón finds out you have told me?' I did not know what to say. 'He will surely kill me,' I replied."

"That Friday night we went to the river. We carried a red wax candle, vegetable oil, orange blossom flowers, ground iris roots and crushed anise. We wrote our names on the candle and drew a heart around them. We oiled the candle and mixed the herbs. Then we covered all but the tip of the candle with the herbal mixture, making sure it was well covered, lit the candle and dived, naked, into the river."

"Giorgio planted a hot kiss on my lips and made me his partner. That would be the last time we were together. 'If they kill me during the strike,' he said, 'write a letter to my family and tell them why I died.' I also had something to request: 'If Ramón hangs me from a tree, pray for my soul.' But perhaps the most important thing I learned that night was the pride of being what I was: 'Never lower your head because you are a sodomite. Proudly display what you are, because it is something good,' my husband told me. 'Some day they will say Giorgio's lover saved the first workers strike in this country,' he predicted."

The Duster explained to his listener how that was the first workers' strike in Costa Rica and how it became a model for those that ensued throughout the Banana Company campgrounds. The Costa Rican worker's movement emerged from it, which, in turn, gave rise to the Reformist Party and then, in 1931, to the Communist Party. Their goals were to improve the terrible conditions endured by the workers, to struggle to obtain social security, freedom to organize unions, an eight-hour working day and a decent minimum salary. "As a present," The Duster said, "he left me the socialist thought, the example of how to organize a strike and a reputation of a sodomite, irrespective of the fact that I was born in such a respectable family."

But Susanita could hardly hold himself; he was dying of curiosity:

"Do not tell me about politics. I am dying to know what happened to Giorgio."

"On Sunday, when the strike started, Ramón went berserk. Somebody had revealed his plan. He asked his friends and informants, to find out the name of the traitor. Nobody knew or said anything but when he came into my room he found a piece of red wax candle with our names on it, also the *milenaria* potion I had used to seduce Giorgio. I did not know Ramón had found these things. He looked for some rat poison and exchanged it for the *milenaria* potion. That very night I killed my husband," The Duster confessed.

Susanita began to cry.

"Do not permit the shedding of innocent people's blood, much less that of the Jews, for all they do is to earn their living," The Duster said to Susanita.

Susanita did not know what to say. "Perhaps I am waiting for a miracle which will bring Max back to me," he whispered.



The Duster finally gave Susanita all the necessary instructions to accomplish his wishes. "Go to the Central Market, across the store of your friend David. There they sell the following goods. Buy them and prepare the following concoction: six rose petals, one kitchen spoon of lavender, one kitchen spoon of cinnamon, one piece of red ribbon of about 3 centimeters, one five cent coin, one rose quartz, 18 centimeters of pink fabric, green thread or worsted yarn, thread and a needle. On Friday under the waxing moon, place the six ingredients on the center of the fabric. Tie its ends with your fingers and hold the sac by your heart. Then sing: Venus, queen of love, divine, obey me; bring to me that love that belongs to me. He is as perfect as I am; together we are destined to be and to share the beautiful. Venus, queen of love, so much filled with warmth, to me without hurting, bring my love."

The betrayed lover left The Duster's place and went directly to the Central Market. He did not know what to do with her friend's story, but was convinced the spell would not fail. However, he felt like a thorn pushing through his heart. "Poor Giorgio! What a horrible way to die!" he thought. Once he bought the goods to make the concoction, he realized he was near David's store. From the distance, he saw him trying to sell a pair of underpants to a peasant woman.

"This? This is not a hole, missus. It is ventilation," the salesman argued. Susanita felt an enormous tenderness and a knot in his heart. He remembered Giorgio, The Duster's love and remembered all the poor people that had to leave their homelands.

"Could I betray them?" he asked himself.

Susanita took the most difficult steps of his life and came closer to the merchant. "David, the Nazis want to take over and exterminate you all. Here, take these documents and photographs I found at Max's! Warn your community and get ready for the worst!"

Once the truth was out he felt relieved, inhaled deeply, walked a few steps and then threw all the ingredients in a toilet hole. "They will do better in there," he said loudly.

## XXIII

"Shit Pole! Go back to Poland!" was the insult Samuel heard when he got on the bus with this father. The abuse reminded him of how in Poland some people shouted similar things, but demanding they go to Palestine.

Samuel returned to his childhood. When he first entered school in Długosiodło, the Christian Polish children had a feast with their Jewish classmates. One of the favorite sports in town was, precisely, throwing stones to the scared and poor Israelite students who since the end of World War I, were forced to attend public schools. The teachers were as anti-Semitic as their Polish students and therefore would not move a finger to prevent the abuse. "They (the Jewish children) deserve this, because nobody asked them to flood our schools with lice," said the mathematics teacher.

Whereas Elena stoically braved the rain of stones, the boy decided to find protection among his fellow Jews. From the start, some kind of special gene made him rebellious against the notion that he was less than others and he was ready to fight. Increasing his strength he tried to change existing power relationships. Aware of the fact that the children attacking him were older, Samuel had to outsmart them. Among the older Jewish students a few of them were tall and fit for boxing. One of them was Jaimito Techman, who was 12, tall and good at throwing blows. Samuel promised him bread rolls and doughnuts if he protected him whenever the Polish children threw things at him.

Since the Poles feared Jaimito, on numerous occasions his partner was able to avoid Christian attacks. "Whomever has any problems with Samuel must fight with me," the bodyguard shouted, as he counted the bread rolls his protégé had brought for him. "We should not fear the Poles, otherwise they will forever walk all over us," said Jaimito to Samuel and to the other Jewish kids. "If they bother you, do not hesitate to call me," he added. Jaimito was obtaining as much benefits from the anti-Semitism as the Poles themselves.

However, something called Samuel's attention about his protector. He was the son of Don Salomón Techman, the Zionist leader in Długosiodło. Apparently his inclination for fighting originated in his father's teachings.

"Do not pay attention to the Techmans," Anita advised her son. "They are a bunch of crazy Zionists that want to take us all to Palestine to grow potatoes." The mother, who was a recalcitrant Socialist, did not want to relate to the Jewish nationalist ideology. Ever since she had read Theodor Herzl's book, **The Jewish State**, which proclaimed the need to colonize all Palestine for the Jews, she regarded that ideology as dangerous. "What it does is divide and creates bourgeoisie among us," she used to say.

But her only son would not pay heed to her advice. Slowly, Samuel became interested in Jaimito's stories about the need for returning to Eretz Israel, their ancestors' homeland.

According to his friend, Zionism was the only ideology that could put an end to anti-Semitism, forever separating Christians and Jews.

"They will never accept us; and no matter how much we try to be like them, they are going to expel us, or sooner or later they will kill us," said Jaimito, repeating what his father used to say. The boy told Samuel the founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, had convinced himself that assimilation was impossible when he saw the anti-Semitic French masses condemn Dreyfus as a national traitor. "It was easy for them to accuse a fellow Jew of espionage in the army, simply because, for them, the Hebrews could not be loyal to France."

Although you could count the Zionists in town with the fingers of your right hand, they did have an impact on everybody. Anti-Semitism was on the increase. When Poland acquired independence, the population became more nationalistic and thus less tolerant of those who did not exactly match the image of what a Pole should be like.

Samuel began to assimilate the dreams of living in a country only inhabited by Jews. Each time he saw his mother doing paper work to immigrate, he begged her to take them to Palestine. "Mother, do not take us to America; buy tickets to Palestine," said Samuel. "If it was in my hands I would rather go to Moscow and never to Eretz Israel, where only the madmen go," Anita answered enraged.

But not everybody in town thought like her. Given the attacks of the nationalists, some Zionists in Długosiodło first decided to organize themselves and then to migrate to Israel and work in the kibbutzim. The town Zionists began to give lessons of Hebrew, of personal defense and agriculture. Their philosophy was that Jews should diversify economically and again be able to practice all trades, as it was the norm during the Biblical times.

The lessons of personal defense were so attractive to Samuel that he attended them without his mother's knowledge and approval. The boy knew that sooner or later he will not have Jaimito around and will be forced to fight for himself. To do so he must learn to fight.

The Zionists enraged religious people when they allowed women to fully participate in their movement. Women were included even in military training and were taught to learn how to use the old Polish rifles. For their part, the Socialists resented the fact that the Zionists mocked their dear Yiddish language and preferred to communicate in Hebrew.

In turn, the Zionists considered the Bundists to be fools aspiring to create an independent Socialist Jewish republic within Poland. At the end, many of the tactics for self-defense were used, not against the anti-Semite, but in fights between Jews.

The main source of problems was that both held their meetings at the same school. Each time they met, the smallest spark would kindle the conflict. One day, to demonstrate their independence from the Torah, the Bundists organized a dinner in which, horror of horrors, they served smoked ham! The religious advocates of the Agudat Israel were so outraged

seeing their Jewish brothers committing such a profanation that they started to hit them, destroying all the school desks.

Another time the Zionists decided to organize a dance with Hebraic songs, in which men and women danced holding hands. This motivated the religious sector to start fighting, ending it all in a major melee. "Heretics!" shouted the conservative members of the religious party, while exchanging blows with the Zionists.

Zionism never obtained the support of the majority. The Jewish bourgeoisie feared that large-scale propaganda would harm their position and could threaten emancipation achievements. The religious sector objected to the Zionist tendency to take in their hands what should be left to God or to the Messiah.

The Bundists considered the dancing event as a bourgeois entertainment and an enemy of the desired solidarity between Christians and Jews. Anita taunted the Zionists because, for them, any land was good to colonize and they were undertaking negotiations with the British to obtain Uganda. "Perhaps for you and your sister it would be better to move to Africa. You will fit in perfectly with your Turkish color," she said to her children.

Migrating to Palestine was not a real option for the Sikoras. The land of the ancient Israelites was just a desert where you could not find industries or commerce and the few Jews that had migrated there were hungrier than in Poland. When they got the tickets to travel, they decided to go to a different Promised Land. "Perhaps Costa Rica will be the new land the Messiah was going to give us," said Anita with plenty of irony. "God may promise one land and then give us another one. The important thing is that we get enough food from it and not the other way around - not the land eat us."

Once in the New World, Samuel did not have any protection, since Jaimito stayed in Długosiodło. Now, the boy had to fend for himself falling back on what he had learned in his self-defense lessons. His body had developed and the former fat and placid boy had become a beautiful and virile adolescent. He soon was able to boast of a tremendous physical strength and he had a face that drove women mad. His eyes had a fury in them, similar to that of a Spanish bull, always ready to gore whoever faced him. He had light brown eyes and impressive eyebrows that provoked sighs among all young girls at his high school.

The young man, in contrast to his sisters, did not wish to raise a family in Costa Rica. Since he arrived, he was looking for ways to get information about how to immigrate to Palestine. Without letting his parents know, he started to study Hebrew at the hotel owned by a Zionist friend and to practice target shooting with two friends.

When it was time to do his *bar mitzvah*, unlike others, he could understand the Hebrew he was reading perfectly. "I will need it very soon," he would tell his friends. Although his father introduced him to a number of Jewish girls, all beautiful and rich, trying to make a good *shiduch*, Samuel was not interested. After courting and enamoring them, he would tell

them it was still too early for him to think of marriage. "I shall marry," he told Elena, "under the sky of Jerusalem."

When the man shouted to his father to leave Costa Rica, David was not ready for the aggression. Until then, the anti-Semitic incidents had been but rare. Most of the times, the Costa Ricans mocked him for his strange way of speaking Spanish, or else complained about the prices he charged for the goods he sold. Now and then, he did not receive good service at some store or at a government's office. On such occasions, he was never sure if the cause was anti-Semitism, or simple bad humor from the part of the clerk. But he never had to face such an open and hostile confrontation.

The anti-Semitic diatribes published in *El Diario de Costa Rica* were beginning to influence the population. One day this newspaper accused the Jews for adulterating the milk sold at the stores. Some other day, it said that Jews were persecuted because Judas had sold Jesus Christ, as if Judas and Jew were the same word. A few days later, the pasquinade reported that the Jews were planning to buy an entire Costa Rican province in order to settle millions of their countrymen. When the Government decided to register the Costa Rican Jews, the newspaper said they were refusing to cooperate and had attacked two policemen. Just like in Germany, the anti-Semitic poison flooded the newspaper articles and the people's hearts. "Poles refuse to reveal the contents of their suitcases," was the headline of a recent article.

But the days when you could use bread rolls to buy protection had come to an end. Samuel, getting up from his seat on the bus, went to the man that had insulted his father. The thug was a government white-collar worker, neither poor nor rich, neither an idiot nor smart. Just one of the souls filled with envy, wishing to blame others for their own miseries, never able to recognize their own infinite mediocrity.

When he saw David's son coming up to him, he also stood up and waited with a threatening pose. Soon the two men, or rather, the man and the boy, looked each other in the eyes, overwhelmed by hate and lack of understanding. Two thousand years separated them, still fighting over whether God could become a man, divide Himself into three parts, die or be reborn again.

"Would you repeat what you have just said to my father, please?" asked Samuel with his fists clenched and with his eyes like those of the bull when he sees a red cap. "Just what you heard, you shit Pole!" answered the government's clerk. But before he could finish the sentence, Samuel had jumped on him and started his first fight in the New World. The Christian hit Samuel three times on the face, making his left eyebrow bleed. Samuel was able to hit the man with a right punch, breaking his adversary's nose.

His father contemplated the brawl in dismay. His religiousness prevented him from agreeing with the fight. He believed violence had been taught by Zionism since they claimed Jews should get a state *before* the Messiah came to fulfill his promise of returning them to Jerusalem, as was written in the Torah.

When his offspring returned seeking comfort, he slapped him and told him that it had been the last time he was involved in a fight. "But father, why should I let them insult us?" Samuel was bewildered because he could not believe his own father could treat him in such a way. "Nobody asked you to start boxing with such a vulgar and lowlife of a Nazi," was the answer.

Since his children had arrived in Costa Rica, David felt uneasy since none of them followed his steps, and none showed any interest in reading the Torah or the Talmud. The father blamed his wife for being a bad example to his offspring. For him, Elena's feminism was a thorn to his pride. But Samuel's ideas were even more outrageous. Not only did they break with tradition, but also rejected his parental authority.

David wanted to straighten his son up with blows, the only pedagogical method he had personally learned. He was bothered by Samuel's independence, his restlessness and, above all, his Zionism. The boy's only concern was to learn a trade that would allow him to go to Palestine. He was meeting other Costa Rican Zionists behind his father's back, like Moisés Burstin, the owner of the Jewish hotel. On several occasions, the enraged father had to go and fetch his son from the meetings to the family's store. "Damned bastard!" shouted David. "Who do you think you are to waste your time with these good-for-nothing Zionists?"

But the more blows the boy got, the bigger was his desire to find a different way of life. He did not believe assimilation would solve the problem and suspected that sooner or later their ideological allies would betray them, be they Socialists, Marxists, or Feminists.

"Elena," he would say to his sister, "Don't you realize that Feminists will kick you on the *toches* as soon as they obtain the right to vote?"

He considered these ladies to be conservative, ready to support anti-Semites like Ulate, provided he would recognize their political participation. In his view, once they got the right to vote, the bourgeois housewives would turn against the "immoral customs" and the presumed enemies of the Costa Rican "family."

"Those women's values are like those of the Nazis; they will burn the books they consider pornography, as well as the bars at El Paso de la Vaca, since what they want is to put an end to their husbands' sexual freedom," he would scold his shocked sister.

Since their arrival in the New World, the siblings were disagreeing. Sarita was still a child, suffering from asthma and too weak to take sides. She had been the only one that had not embraced an ideology. But Samuel and Elena chose different paths and causes. She had become a fighter for the rights of women and he for those of his people. Although theoretically there was no reason for their differences, the truth was that they did not share much. His sister had put distance between her and the Jews and was in love with someone he regarded as the enemy. For his part, Samuel only socialized with the Zionists, who criticized whoever left the pack.

At the Sikoras' home, neither the father nor the mother could bridge these differences. Anita did not like either Elena's Feminism or Samuel's Zionism. She thought both were wrong in their political preferences. In turn, just like Elena, she was consumed by romantic passion and did not even have the time or the energy to reconcile the differences. Her single concern was obtaining more economic independence that, in turn, would allow her to be freer. "Your father does not give me a penny of what I sell at the store," she would tell Samuel. "Instead of thinking of the liberation in Palestine, why don't you do something to save your poor mother from her current slavery?"

When Samuel returned to the house, wearing an open eyebrow and bruises on his face, Elena got very mad at him. Although she considered the feminist struggle was legitimate and necessary, she could not support his brother when he risked his life confronting the Nazis. "You cannot fight alone against the enemy," she said disapprovingly. The sister did not support the Zionist cause and even less so if it threatened the integrity of her only brother.

Elena fetched the first-aid kit and with swabs and alcohol began to cleanse Samuel's wounds, increasing his pain with the added burning sensations. Involuntary tears came out of his manly eyes. The young man asked her to help him buy a ticket to the Promised Land. "I do not want to stay here, forced to live surrounded by hate. Ever since Ulate started this manhunt against Jews, things have become unbearable, terrible... Even at school, where they treated us so well when we arrived, now some teachers have started to demand that we Poles be forbidden to carry the national flag during the school parades. Dona Virginia, the Principal has taken their side and said she does not want the Poles to participate in national holidays. This is the same thing we already went through in Poland. It is time we do something and stop living as underdogs." He was about to cry, this time not because of the alcohol applied to his wounds.

Elena felt pity for her brother. "Dear Samuel, I wish I could do something to prevent you from leaving and from marching from country to country. Perhaps things will improve. You know anti-Semitism increases and decreases without any logical reason. One day things are pretty bad, but the next they are better. If I had it, I would give you the money so that you could try your luck elsewhere, even if it would be very painful to see you go. But you know perfectly well I do not have any money and that our father puts it all in the bank, hoping to spend it in a distant future. Not even our mother has a penny to her name. Our father will never agree to use it to buy you a ticket," Elena said, hoping her brother will resign to his destiny.

But Samuel would not give up his dreams easily. "It is true that our father will be against my desire to go to Palestine, but if we convince our mother, then the three of us could pressure him to accept it," he said, reassured and looking straight into Elena's eyes to see her reaction. But she was not so sure. Their mother could be more open, but she would never support the Zionist cause and much less would she be willing to lose her beloved son. "Mom will not risk her relationship with our father just to help you leave the country," added Elena. "Besides, she does not want to strike any deal with us, because she is against my relationship with Carlos."

But the boy had a plan. "Probably, our mother will not support me for mere ideological reasons, because she does not believe in Zionism. But, if we offer her something she could gain in her struggle against our father, then it would be quite different," he smiled roguishly.

"But Samuel, what can you offer her?" wondered Elena, thinking her brother was going mad. "All you can offer her to have her on our side is simply some more of her own soup," he said, unwilling to fully reveal his Machiavellian plans yet.

According to Samuel, their mother was currently in a difficult position because she had fallen in love with Don José and her life and fortune were endangered. The only thing she had ever valued was her freedom and her independence and she had lost them the very moment she came down from the boat. Since then, her husband always had the final word about everything. "If we could offer her to recover her independence, that is, to make father share the store's earnings with her, then she would become our ally."

Elena began to be interested in the plan. She realized Samuel's proposal could also mean benefits for her. Since she was seeing Carlos, her mother had become her worst enemy and did not want to know anything about their love affair. She was constantly spying and trying to prevent her from seeing her beloved; she kept searching everywhere, trying to find proof that the lovebirds dated secretly. "If my mother could find some benefit in establishing a pact with me, then she would stop bothering me," Elena thought.

But one thing was theory and practice was something completely different. She could not conceive what they could possibly offer to their mother to put an end to their poverty. Their father would defend his few pennies just like the Hebrews fought to prevent Masada from falling into Roman hands. "Samuel, you must be mad if you think daddy will yield to our mother's whining and entreaties," she said reproachfully. "My father would not let all the trumpets of the world bring down the walls of his Jericho, that is, his bank account," she concluded.

"But who said we would beg him to do so?" Samuel answered. He thought the moment had come to share his war plan with Elena.

"How then are we going to do it?" she asked, now really confused.

"With a strike!" answered the boy.

Elena had to find a chair, otherwise she would have fallen to the ground.

"With a strike?" she repeated to herself.





**XXIV**

The Costa Rican government signed the 1939 Declaration of Neutrality at Panama and became a permanent member of the Inter-American Committee on Neutrality. This Committee adopted a number of resolutions and recommendations, including the right of each Latin American country to adopt "measures deemed necessary, to prevent their neutral ports from becoming operational bases for the conflicting parties."

Several merchant and passenger ships belonging to the Axis countries were surprised by the war docked at Costa Rican ports. Four of these were German: Havilland, Wessen, Stella and Eisenach; and one was Italian, the Fella. The Havilland and the Wessen left for Mexico and were there confiscated by England. The Stella was sold to Nicaragua. Only the Fella and the Eisenach remained in Costa Rican ports.

Although Costa Rica had signed the treatise, in fact the Government looked the other way and was not fully enforcing it. The boats were not detained and neither were the crews who were left to go about their business. Like Max Gerffin's Company, "importer of medicines," that used German ships to transport drugs. Max knew very well that because of the 1939 treatise, to continue his illegal trade he had to use ships belonging to "neutral" countries. But, he could not do anything about the cargo already on the two ships in Puntarenas and he was not to let anyone find out the real nature of the "medicines" he was bringing into Costa Rica. On the Eisenach, there was several tons of cocaine that he was about to sell.

Max kept a low profile to avoid suspicions and to get rid of the drugs without calling anyone's attention. However, the boats and their crews were a source of problems for the Costa Rican government, because of constant bar brawls in Puntarenas. To stop the fights, on June 13, 1940, the government announced an "interdiction to enter the country" to all the passengers on board of this ship. The provision was not respected and the citizens of Puntarenas witnessed it on daily basis. Officials of the German Legation, custom officers and merchants contacted each other regularly.

Max was most assiduous. The diplomat had to make sure the business he inherited from Ernest was in perfect order. To prevent a repetition of the mistake they had made with Lady, he had to check the weight of the imported heroin.

During the previous years he undertook an effort to increase the amount of drugs exported to the United States, using Puntarenas, the Costa Rican main port in the Pacific. Max had to move his office from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as the banana companies had done, although for different reasons: the banana plantations got infected with uncontrollable diseases, whereas Max moved his operations to the Pacific because he had left a dark trail of death in Puerto Limón and now had staunch enemies there. Besides, he was also dealing with the Japanese, exchanging his cocaine for their opium.

German shipping companies transported the drugs. They offered the merchandise in departing ports such as Iquique and Antofagasta, in Northern Chile, as well as in intermediate stops like Puntarenas, in Costa Rica. The final destiny of the "stuff" was Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. The opium and the heroin arriving from Asia generated the largest profit margins.

Thus, Puntarenas was the ideal place to exchange the merchandise without requiring banking mediation. But, of course, in this kind of business you always find people who try to outsmart others. In January 1941, Max had discovered that a Japanese had given them less heroin than what he had reported.

Since Max anticipated problems with the Americans, he tried to move the cargo out of the way, as fast as possible. However, such urgency helped the Japanese sailor to keep part of the drug for himself. On January 4, 1941, the Costa Rican press revealed that he had paid for it dearly, when it reported that the German crew had murdered a Japanese sailor during a bar brawl in Puntarenas. The Costa Rican authorities were reported to be lenient with the sailors, "since they allowed them to get drunk."

What was not reported, however, was the reason for the fight, namely drugs. The German and Japanese crews were allies militarily and politically. *El Diario de Costa Rica* timidly insinuated the issue, pointing out that Puntarenas had become "a center of espionage and totalitarian activities," and that "we are providing shelter to some individuals that actually deserve to live among criminals."

Not only the press, but also the British government, was alerted by the murder of the Japanese sailor. The Royal Navy believed these German boats were unarmed and duly passed this information to the Costa Rican government. The British Minister was concerned with a possibility of these boats being used to block the Costa Rican Pacific port, in case the United States entered the war. Thus, the British government requested the President of Costa Rica to disarm both vessels, but Calderón had declared himself unable to act, unless he could "count on the support of the Americans." Calderón wrote to Hornibrook, the U.S. Minister that "Costa Rica fears these ships may block the port and, in such a case, my government will not be able to do anything about it."

In principle, the United States Minister felt that he was unable to help the British, since he still represented "a neutral country" and, besides, he did not have instructions from his government on this matter. He was also unable to cooperate with the Costa Ricans because,

according to Hornibrook, he did not have "precise instructions" from the State Department. The United States, aware of how dangerous this situation could become, decided to study alternatives to a military action carefully.

Moreover, during the afternoon of that February 26th, Hornibrook was visited by a Jewish man, claiming to have "critical information about the role of these ships," and about "the danger they represent to Costa Rica." The Minister was used to a parade of informants in his office, telling him all sorts of conspiracies.

David Sikora was the least impressive of these informants. Hornibrook was usually briefed by more important spies, including Ministers and Vice Ministers, First Officials, accountants and an endless number of public employees, seeking extra money, a scholarship for their children, or just a trip to the United States. "The wife of the Minister of Economy, secretly meets with the Japanese Ambassador's chauffeur," said Ana Cecilia, the telephone operator at the Nippon Legation. "This morning, I heard that Italy is preparing a meeting with the German Minister of Foreign Relations," the man advising the Italian Legation in matters of coffee imports confessed. "And why are you telling me that?" asked the US diplomat. "Because the Italians are stingy and perhaps you might help me to finish my house's roof."

Sometimes, as it was the case when he met with Mrs Dönning, he got important information. The Minister had corroborated the presence of a spy in the President's cabinet and was on its scent. In most of the cases, though, the information received would be perfect if you wished to write a pornographic novel but mostly irrelevant for foreign policy.

Hornibrook supposed that this man, who came into his office carrying a suitcase filled with clothes, would be just another useless informant. "Probably he is going to tell me how the Germans are making alterations on the fabrics of those dresses, to convey secret messages in the seams," he thought. He began to pay closer attention to David, though, when the Jew said that Cortés was preparing a coup d'état. This information was not public, as just a few officials knew it. Still, this was no news for him. But he became much more interested when, next, the merchant talked without mincing his words.

"Mister Minister, we Jews are much worried for the lack of support our community is receiving from your Legation. We know and please forgive me for saying so, that your government is providing funds to Otilio Ulate and his anti-Semitic newspaper. We realize this newspaper favors the Allies, but it is also racist. We believe you have not done enough to stop, neither the anti-Semitic campaign, nor the Calderón administration that is about to expel us from the country. Our community is worried by the rumors circulating about the fate of our fellow Jews in Europe. President Roosevelt says he is doing all he can to uphold human rights and that, if he is unable to do more at the moment, it is because he represents a neutral country. But do not tell me the United States cannot put pressure to have this small country respect human rights. Nobody believes your government lacks the means to help us."

After this rather long tirade, Hornibrook was offended. "Who in the world is this small Jewish merchant, speaking a terrible Spanish, telling me what I should do about foreign policy issues?" he thought.

"Mister Sikora, I understand the uneasiness felt in the Jewish community, about the most recent measures adopted by the Costa Rican Congress. However, our country is trying, first of all, to defend the national security of these Central American countries. For the time being, we believe the best way to do so is by maintaining a strict neutrality. Nonetheless, our Legation will do all we can to prevent the Costa Rican Congress from passing legislation violating the fundamental freedoms of people. I cannot do more than that, given my difficult diplomatic position. However, I would like to find out where you have obtained the information on Cortés."

Hornibrook went directly to the only point that really interested him. As soon as David told him the name of the tattletale, he sent his visitor home, since the American diplomat wanted to go out and have a good hot black coffee.

"Before leaving, Mister Minister, I would like to tell you a short story," David said. "You know that we Jews like to say things by means of stories. It will not take too much of your time and I am sure you will be interested." Hornibrook got a bit angry, because this would mean delaying his cup of coffee and, particularly, because he never liked that kind of conversation or parables which, anyway, always resulted in being very long and boring.

"I hope your story will not take long, since I must go right away to a very important meeting," Hornibrook said pretending to be interested.

David began his story, telling the Minister about the miseries endured by a peddler. He thought not that much of this trade in intellectual terms but at least, thanks to this activity, David had been able to meet a large number of Costa Ricans and foreigners, from all social classes and of all walks of life. He had become best friends with many among them and one was a lady, a most particular woman, called Susanita. In turn, this lady had developed a very strong friendship with "a very important person" working in a "certain foreign Legation." But, as it is prone to happen between lovers, their relation had ended quite "abruptly," David said.

Hornibrook was bored to death and the veiled allusions only mortified him even more.

"Don David, your story seems too sad and I can understand very well that you are suffering for Susanita's bad luck. But please tell me, why should the representative of the United States care for your tale?" he asked impatiently.

"It is much more relevant than you think."

Disregarding the diplomat's interruption, David continued his story. However, he now tried to go to the point. "The Legation in question is the German and Susanita is a homosexual, as well as Max, his partner. I do not have any trouble at all with that sort of sexual preference," David said, "after all, my wife's brother was one of them and he killed himself

because of your government, Mister Hornibrook, but that is another story. Anyway, as I was telling you, the information I received from Susanita has deeply disturbed me."

Realizing that the U.S. Minister did not show signs of interest in his tale, David went straight to the heart of the matter: "Susanita has provided me with photographs and documents that I have studied carefully. According to what I have discovered," he continued, "Max Gerffin sells drugs, transporting them on German ships. He will not let anyone check or confiscate these ships and, moreover, he has conversations underway with Cortés, to organize a coup d'état against President Calderón. In some of the documents that I have seen, there are detailed plans to carry on military strikes."

"But how is he going to hide the drug, if those ships are under the control of the Costa Rican Army?" the diplomat inquired.

"That should not be a problem for Gerffin, Mister Hornibrook. I have pictures of some of the President's advisors with me, stark naked and in the middle of orgies with this German diplomat."

At that point Hornibrook was gaping and felt uncomfortable sitting in the beautiful black leather chair presiding over his sparkling clean office.

"Why stark naked?" - he asked, trying to make sure they were both speaking the same language.

"Yes, Mister Hornibrook. Take a look at this picture here; it depicts someone from the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Look at his really weird pose, as if he was about to undergo a prostate examination and look at that strange object inside of him. Just imagine what the press would give to have one of these photographs and imagine Mister Gerffin's power over dozens of officials in the government. Any one of them would do whatever he asks, provided Mister Gerffin does not release their compromising pictures."

The American Minister did not care any more about his coffee and went straight to his bar to prepare a double Johnny Walker instead.

"Don David, would you like a drink?" he asked.

"Sure. Give me one with soda, please."

Although he tried really hard, Hornibrook was not allowed to look at the photograph again. He knew that perhaps it was the last picture taken of Pepe before he was murdered.

To change the subject, he asked about Ernest, who could be seen depicted in full action.

"But this one is Ernest Roehm," Hornibrook said scandalized. "He looks ugly naked, does he not?" David said ironically, "Here, take this, Mister Hornibrook. I am leaving you one of the many letters containing war plans, for you to realize who this gentleman Gerffin really is."

"What do you want from me?" bluntly asked the Minister.

"Save Calderon's government, but make him withdraw his support to the Committee for the Nationalization of Trade and also have him put an end to the anti-Jewish campaign."

David would not let Hornibrook see more pictures or documents, "until we see that you do what you should do and prevent a disaster," he said. The peddler drank his whisky with soda, said goodbye and left, leaving Hornibrook bewildered and preparing yet another drink for himself.

The US Minister regarded the information provided by the Jewish merchant as scandalous, although not essential for his country's security. "These Jews are always obsessed with all kinds of plots," he thought. "Later on, I will send copies of all these things to Washington."

He felt much sorrow contemplating his collaborator's picture, José Flores. The poor man had died for the United States and he would let Washington know this in a memorandum titled: "Our spy has been discovered by the Nazis."

Hornibrook did not pay much attention to David's information, but it was different in the banana companies.

Limon was experiencing difficult times. The United Fruit workers did not have any social security whatsoever and were fully dependent on the good will of their bosses to survive the many health hazards confronting them, as well as to reduce the impact of inflation and recessions and the ups and downs of agriculture. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, these workers had tried to improve their situation by means of Mutual Help societies. But it would be after World War I, when the more radical ideas arrived in Costa Rica. In 1916, in Puntarenas, the first Union was created by a group of craftsmen. In turn, the first workers' confederation, the Anarchist General Workers Confederation, was established in 1921 and it launched the first national strike that year, fighting for the eight-hour workday.

During the 1930s, the labor movement grew, thanks to the efforts of Miguel Pop and his comrades in the Communist Party. The Marxists organized the workers of the banana areas, struggling to obtain better working conditions. Miguel helped organize the general strike in the Atlantic banana areas, fighting for better salaries, better living conditions and minimum health coverage. They demanded basic services from the Banana Company, such as a clinic and ant ophidian serum to treat the hundreds of workers bitten each year by the snakes, animals that love to coil inside the warm banana bunches. The workers' victory in this struggle increased the Party's prestige. By 1940, the Communists became the second largest electoral force in Costa Rica.

Miguel had helped to consolidate a strong union in the Limón region and developed a good relation with the main Communist leader, Manuel Mora. Miguel was 35 years old, a son of Jamaican immigrants, robust, attractive and with the reputation of being a fanatic Communist. He was well known for supporting popular causes. Ever since the mysterious disappearance of his brother and his female companion, some ten years earlier, Miguel was the only male son left, in charge of his entire family.

In marked contrast with his brother William, who according to evil tongues was involved in some wrongdoings, Miguel enjoyed a blameless reputation. However, given that people like to criticize anyone without any real reason whatsoever, it was gossiped that Miguel used to venerate an old witch man, half shaman and half queer, called The Duster. Miguel's enemies accused him of never organizing a strike or a demonstration, without first consulting with this shaman. Moreover, it was argued that he found protection in the latter's magical spells.

He rejected those accusations, arguing that since his brother disappeared without traces, his family remained permanently disconsolate, constantly worried for the only living son. His own mother suggested to him to seek the advice of and "the works" prepared by, The Duster: "That man gives you good concoctions and has never failed in his prognostications about when is the best time to start your dins." Besides, Miguel had known this shaman at a meeting of the Communist Party itself, where The Duster was accepted because he had been very close to the first Italian striker in Costa Rica.

The union man used to listen, delighted, to the stories The Duster would tell him, about the legendary and mythical first workers' strike, the one undertaken by the "*tútiles*." When some of the Party members objected to the fact that Miguel paid attention to a homosexual witch, a component of the "opium of the people," he responded that The Duster was a key element in their infrastructure and, therefore, strategic for scientific Marxism.

The poor Communists stood perplexed when they heard such statements: "How can you say that a queer is part of the infrastructure, man?" complained one of his comrades.

"Do the bananas generate surplus value?" he asked.

"Yes, but, what does it have to do with this?" a bewildered friend responded.

"Well, The Duster has harvested more bananas than any plantation," he answered.

This time, however, The Duster was not coming to prepare a magical spell for him. The shaman was already too old to pay frequent visits to the banana plantations and, besides, he hated Limón, "because it is so hot that I arrive there much more melted than a Salvadoran *pupusa*<sup>91</sup>," as he used to say. Besides, there were always some men ready to make fun of an old transvestite, while others tried to pick him up on the road. Some of them would shout obscenities at him like: "You brute, you are so ugly because probably you were conceived during the 1910 earthquake!" Some others mocked his large breasts: "Where are you taking that pair of watermelons?" Since he had to ride a horse to get to the plantation where Miguel worked, he was exposed to all kinds of dangers and abuses.

That day, a handsome banana worker had offered to take him, on his horse, to the Limoncito area. The Duster rode in front and the man began to fondle him.

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<sup>91</sup> Cheese turnover



"Have you lost something inside my dress?" he asked. "Don't you respect women old enough to be your grandmother?" he added, infuriated.

The worker acted as if he had deaf ears and at every opportunity he had, when the horse stepped on a difficult spot, he took advantage of the moment and his hand probed the shaman. "Listen, young man," said the transvestite, "why do not you grab your horse's tits?" However, the young banana worker did not heed and instead said:

"If my horse had that kind of tits, then the two of us would ride on top of you."

The poor Duster would not admit that his large breasts were just a couple of stuffed cotton bags and he finally arrived much more "plucked" than a coffee plant," as he told Miguel. "But the important thing is that you arrived," the syndicalist answered smiling broadly.

"I did not come to this hell just to pay a social visit," he said solemnly. "I am worried because last Friday Susanita, the queer, visited my house. He sends you many regards and told me how he always remembers the good times you both once had... But that is not what I have come here to tell you. You know how this faggot is when he falls in love; when he finds a good log to hug, the big queer gets totally dazzled. Well, these days he is fooling around with a man that now, however, is scorning him deeply. As usual, he came to me, seeking a potion to try to win back his lover. But, as you know, the only thing he may retain is food."

"Well, well," said Miguel, used to the endless stories The Duster would always want to tell and fearing he would not stop for hours. "Just tell me why you are here!"

"Well," continued the shaman, "last week he came to me with the strangest story and asked me for an elixir to give to a man currently involved in dark businesses but who nonetheless he wants to keep by his side. The problem is that I found out that his lover is trying to stage a coup d'état with Cortés's followers and if such a thing were to happen, we workers will face the worst ever predicament. It is time for the Communists to wake up and find ways to support the current government. Although not very good, it is not as bad as one that would ally itself with the Germans."

"But dear Dusty," said Miguel, "please remember that the Communist Party supports the Soviet Union and there is a treatise between the USSR and Germany. Besides, we have opposed this government, regarding its policy to dismantle the electricity and gasoline monopolies, because this move was just a 'sell out' to the American companies. A government headed by Cortés would not necessarily be bad for us."

"Look, Miguel," The Duster answered, "I did not travel all this long distance to come here and have you talk unbelievable nonsense. I do not give a damn about all those European treaties and agreements. One thing is what is going on over there and something quite different what may happen to us workers here. I do not see how a Nazi party in power is going to help us in any way whatsoever."

Miguel was not convinced. After all, how could he trust the lover of a homosexual? It could be just an exaggeration concocted by unimportant characters, living on the fringes of power but wishing to pretend to have some of it, a common desire among minorities and the poor. He had also heard a long string of stories, by workers, banana employees and craftsmen, all trying, from time to time, to impress him with their "connections" and their "friends" in high governmental or business circles. But when you scratched below the surface, all you found were irrelevant, tiny and circumstantial "connections."

"Surely Susanita, who creates more fantastic realities than a magician in a circus, never had a real relationship with that politician," thought Miguel. He thanked The Duster for his gesture and his dedication to the cause of the poor and invited him to a coffee at the Company's cafeteria. Just to make some conversation, he asked him who was the important character that gave Susanita the information.

"Max Gerffin," answered the shaman.

A shiver climbed through his spine all the way to his forehead, from which some sweat drops emerged, just like those freezing spells that from time to time destroyed the coffee harvests.

"What are you telling me?" he asked, not believing what he just heard.

"Max Gerffin," repeated The Duster. "The same man your brother used to work with."

"Do you know what, dear Dusty?" said Miguel, "you will not need to ask anyone for a ride back to the city and because I myself will take you; I am going back to San José."

In the meantime, on March 7, 1941, the Costa Rican Congress approved the report issued by the Investigative Commission, recommending the expulsion of the Jews. Meanwhile, that same day the government of the United States decided to support the seizure of boats belonging to the Axis countries.

The State Department sent its "green light" to Costa Rica, on March 20<sup>th</sup>. "The day when the Costa Rican government seizes those ships, the government of the United States will make sure that one of its torpedo boats will casually arrive in Puntarenas, just to provide moral support." Hornibrook, suspecting the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Relations, would not tell them the exact date when the boats would be seized. The U.S. Minister requested the President to use two dates; one only to be known by himself and the Army, the other one known by the entire cabinet. The definitive date would be April 2, 1941; the one disclosed to the cabinet, April 5<sup>th</sup>.

Max was well aware of the negotiations taking place between the Americans and the Costa Rican government, through Pepe Flores. He knew they had accused him of storing drugs on board the German ships and that the government would launch an inquiry and would seize the boats. But the exact date provided by Pepe was not the correct one. When he found it out, he realized that his friend, and informant, was deceiving him.

"Who is giving advance information to the Germans?" Hornibrook inquired.

"Perhaps it indeed is the First Lady," his assistant answered.

"The woman is not exactly pro-German, but she may have fallen into Max Gerffin's hands," he added. According to Zweig, on December 17, 1940, Ivonne de Calderón unwillingly provided the Germans with secret information about the whereabouts of her own family, when she asked about their health in occupied Belgium, through the very Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Relations.

She had sent her parent's address to the Costa Rican Consul in Hamburg and this officer, in turn, did not have qualms to inform Berlin. It had called the attention of the American Legation that the President's wife began to protect and to be intimate with persons considered by the State Department, as "guilty of inclinations and association with the Nazis." It was not hard to put two and two together. "She might be blackmailed by some Germans in Costa Rica," as later would be put in an official document of the State Department. And when blackmailing was the issue, Max was always involved, since he was the main plotter at the German Legation. However, all this was but a guess and the State Department "is not fully convinced who the informant in the Costa Rican government is," Hornibrook's assistant pointed out.

Whoever it was, through him, or her, Max obtained the real date when his boats would be captured. To counteract the Government's action and the current *rapprochement* between Costa Rican and the United States, he devised a not too complicated plan.

The shrewd diplomat organized an assassination plot against the President. It would not be necessary actually to kill him, because dead people may become martyrs and he did not want to deify Calderón. His sole intention was to have some shots against the President, enough to create a front-page scandal. The best opportunity would be during the weekly meeting between Calderón and the Minister of Foreign Relations, which the President normally attended without bodyguards. The hired killer would be located in the Parque España, a bushy place with numerous dark corners where it was easy to hide, just across from the main entrance to the Chancellery, the so-called Yellow House.

The Jews would be the easiest group to blame for the attempted murder. They had much to lose from an administration that wanted them out of the country.

In order not to raise suspicions, the Nazi Party chose a gunman completely unrelated to the Germans. This hit man would plant some evidence, strongly suggesting that the attempted murder was a response to Calderon's anti-Semitic policy.

The Nazi leader had reports that David Sikora wrote letters in the name of the Jewish community and was passing information to Hornibrook, something that made him the ideal victim to blame.

Max sent a petty thief to steal something from the Sikora's home, to plant it later at the scene of the crime against the President. If the plan resulted as expected, the pro-Axis

masses would take to the streets against the allied cause, thus provoking chaos in town. Then, to restore order and to put an end to terrorism, the seizure of the boats would have to be cancelled and a military coup would be launched.

"It will not be too different than when Hitler declared a state of emergency, blaming the Communists for the fire at the Reichstag that he himself had ordered," thought Max. If the "Cortesistas" return to power, he thought, Costa Rica would remain neutral in this war, as it had done during the Civil War in Spain. Then he could continue with his drug businesses as usual and David Sikora and the Jews, who had denounced him, would have paid dearly for it.

**XXV**

"Strike!" was a scream like thunder that could be heard throughout the Market. As usual, the workers arrived at 7 am to their jobs, wrote down their names on the daily attendance sheet and then put on their uniforms. However, on this morning, things would be different. As a replica to the earthquake that hit the banana companies during 1934, a tremor shook San José. The struggle to reduce the workday to only eight hours, to improve salaries and working conditions, was as relevant to the workers in the Atlantic plantations as among the clerks laboring in San Jose's stores, warehouses and factories.

The employees working in commercial businesses as well as those laboring in the emerging clothing industries suffered a vile exploitation. Their workday varied from 10 to 12 hours, they did not have any work insurance, neither maternity help, nor retirement pension. If they got sick they were simply fired and if they complained they could be thrown to jail, accused of insubordination. All this, apart from the ill treatment and the abuses they had to endure from the new capitalists and industrial bosses who, in turn, followed the steps of coffee or sugar plantations owners. This exploitation was a fertile ground stirring the workers' mobilization and once these urban workers had learned their lesson from the exemplary strikes launched by the *tútiles* and the banana workers, things would never be the same again.

The police was traditionally at the service of the national oligarchy and thus rapidly arrived at the spot where the new conflict was beginning. A merchant had informed them how the insurgents were blocking a major national road, thus endangering the health and the well being of all the honest and hard working citizens. When the Secretary of Security realized that the strikers were preventing the free flow of transit, the Baton Regiment was immediately sent to take care of the matter. This Regiment was the anti-riot police, a military corps much feared by the people, since its members never hesitated to attack the workers, breaking the skulls of many among them. Recently, their action was devastating to the printer's craftsmen that had started a strike.

The Central Market strike promised to be a really hard nut to crack. First of all, workers from several different economic sectors were participating. A conflict with one of these groups, or so the Government feared, could translate into several others and get out of control. Secondly, the Government did not want an unnecessary blood bath.

The Secretary of Security had issued clear orders to the Police Chief: "Open any road that may be blocked, employing all the necessary means." To make sure the situation would not worsen, the Secretary had asked the President to find a mediator that "would do all he could to prevent a blood bath," and that "would do everything possible to reach a compromise with those on strike." The President looked for a politician that usually visited the Central Market and who, at the same time, was well regarded by both workers and owners. The Secretary of Security blessed him, as he was to begin his delicate mission: "May God help you!"

The anti-riot police was welcomed with strong animosity from the part of the Central Market's workers. On several occasions these guards had abused their power when confronting 'troublemakers'. The policemen entered the place marching in goose steps (the new style imposed by President Cortés), but unable to keep the rhythm and in a disorderly fashion. Their lack of synchronicity and their worn uniforms made it clear that this was a military unit composed of unemployed peasants without any other means to earn a living. Actually, they were not different, in terms of class, from the strikers. "Go on! Go on! March at the step! Do not look at the people!" shouted Colonel Alvaro León.

The order not to look at the people was issued because the striking workers stuck out their tongues and mocked the soldiers for their ridiculous appearance. "Long live the worker's revolution!" shouted the butcher's shop clerk. The shoemakers began to whistle 'The International' anthem and the woman selling vegetables placed all her tomatoes on the front boxes, trying to create a red flag. But the most daring was the prank organized by the man selling brooms: He distributed all the brooms he had among the female personnel working at several other stores and they all composed an impressive army of women hoisting brooms as if they were weapons. "Down with the exploiters!" shouted these clerks, moving hundreds of brooms up and down.

The policemen received a major surprise when they reached the business where the strike had started. They realized the workers' movement was just two women and two children sitting on the passageway leading to the Market's urinals and toilets.

Who denounced the strike alerting the Government about the workers' insurrection threatening the well being of the population, was David Sikora. Anita and his children had walked out from La Peregrina, refusing to continue working under the terrible conditions they had to endure. The wife was carrying a sign nobody could understand, since it was written in Yiddish, but the workers from other stores could imagine what it was about. When she was asked to translate it, she was ashamed to do so. Nonetheless, she shouted: "I will end up *Oyegemutshet!*<sup>92</sup>. Long lives the yiddishe revolution!" The first Polish strike in the country had already started.

Colonel León, in charge of the Baton Police, could not contain his anger toward David Sikora for deceiving him about the kind of protest they were supposed to confront.

"Mister Sikora, don't you find it ridiculous that you call us because your wife and children are striking? Besides, how dare you tell us they are blocking a major road in San José?" a dazzled officer said, feeling David was pulling his leg.

"Look here, mister Colonel, the witch of my wife and my children, who had agreed to follow her tricks, have blocked the way leading to the toilets. Besides, don't you think that if the urinals and the toilets were blocked, this would create a major problem in the city? Think on the thousands of folks unable to pee or to do other things," explained the merchant, who never anticipated his own family would organize a strike against him.

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<sup>92</sup> Dead from so much work

The police could not intimidate Anita or her children. They were ready to fight to death to improve their working conditions. In the first place, the wife was tired of working twelve hours every day, while David spent part of his time at the Synagogue or discussing politics. Moreover, she wanted to earn half the income made at the store, instead of depending on whatever sum David decided to give her (he always gave her the minimum). She did not want her younger children to be forced to work and if Elena, the oldest, had had to abandon school to help at the store, then she should be free to hang about with any friends she decided to do so. Finally, Samuel could use a salary to start paying for his ticket to Palestine.

David would not budge. He knew perfectly well that Anita did not have a penny and that the strategy of passive resistance would end up in a hunger strike that would force her to give up. Since the police was not willing to remove the strikers forcefully, the owner of La Peregrina decided he would simply prolong the situation. He was certain the Government would pronounce verdict in his favor, since it was unheard of that a woman could control the money and would be off work while her husband studied the Bible and discussed the *halakah* with his friends. "If we were in Długosiodło, the police would have already detained her," he thought.

"Come on woman, get on good terms with God and stop acting as a fool," he shouted trying to convince his wife.

"We will not budge until we cease to be your servants and you recognize our rights," she replied, with the approval of both Elena and Samuel.

"But, what rights are you talking about, if I support you?" screamed her confused husband.

"We don't want to work twelve-hour shifts without salaries. We are tired of begging for our daily income. Also, we do not want Sarita to help in the business. We had agreed she would study until she was older. There is no reason why Elena must come to work on Saturdays, while you are at the Synagogue. And pay Samuel his salary, so he may do whatever he wants to do. You are such a *Groisser fardiner!*<sup>93</sup>, that if you were to meet our Messiah, you would immediately have him selling pants," she said exasperated.

"Well, you are going to starve for being so stubborn, since I shall not give an inch," shouted David to put an end to the discussion.

On the second day, other clerks at other stores began to close ranks with the Jewish strike. First of all, once they understood what was written on Anita's sign, they brought plastic bags. Then, they printed pamphlets in Spanish and in Yiddish, explaining the reasons for the strike. "Support the employees of La Peregrina in their struggle for an eight-hour working day," read their sign. Finally, they sent food so that no one among the employees would abandon his or her position.

Obviously, David would not let his family starve but, as a good Sikora, once he got mad he could not control himself. Therefore, he started crying aloud against the modern *anarchyiddishunionist* ideas that had infiltrated his traditional Jewish home.

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<sup>93</sup> Big Provider

Things had started to warm up ever since Elena and Samuel had agreed to fight for Dona Anita's liberation. Once they agreed, Elena began to use feminist tactics to convince her mother. The chicken would be the first instrument to be used in her political platform. Each time her mother decided to cook one of these birds, Elena carefully watched how she distributed the portions. "Woman, if it upsets you so much that I eat more," David said, "then just give me the *toches* and in this way we will not have a fight." "Do not make a joke," she answered, "King Salomon himself decided to cut the child in two not to be unfair to either of the two women claiming to be this child's mother."

The discussion about the chickens was but a first step toward winning over the mother. Elena knew Anita considered the feminist causes as a waste of time and believed the only important struggle was taking place in Spain, where General Franco threatened to destroy the Republic and its allies. While Anita was tracing the events of the Spanish Civil War, Elena started to have her interested in Emma Goldman's travel to that country where she supported Catalonian workers.

To increase Anita's interest, Elena gave her Goldman's biography, her political essays and her articles appearing in the journal **Mother Earth**. Anita began to love Goldman's anti-war stance and her campaign for family planning. She also liked the fact that this Lithuanian woman had dared to defend the rights of homosexuals in the United States. Anita started to wonder why she wasn't familiar with Goldman back in Poland, considering that her brother had killed himself.

Anita's feelings for Goldman got even warmer when she read what she thought about marriage. According to this anarchist thinker, marriage was one of the major disgraces ever created. In her view, it was a calamity not only for women, but for men as well. "This is a really sensitive woman," Anita said softly to Elena. Goldman argued that the institution of marriage had been established with the purpose of tying woman to maternity and man to the repetitive and monotonous work. "Only when both men and women learn that the ultimate purpose of their union is personal growth, will it be possible to redress the sordid goals for which bourgeois society created marriage," she wrote.

"Goldman is the first female Jewish Messiah!" exclaimed Anita when she realized this author shared her hate for the *shiduchs* and was in favor of free love. Anita got so enthused that she even explained to Elena: "If Emma says that infidelity is not a crime, who am I to contradict her?"

By criticizing Goldman, David threw Anita to the arms of Anarchism: "If you continue reading that garbage from that ill-born Jewish woman, you will end up in jail, just like her; apparently it is her favorite dwelling place." For David, if Communism was a disgrace for which the Jews were blamed, to make things worse, now another Hebrew woman was at the origins of a yet more radical movement. "The Nazis blame us because Jews like Karl



Marx and Rosa Luxemburg created Communism and now they are saying we have also created Anarchism, thanks to that *meshugeneg*<sup>94</sup> Lithuanian woman."

But his wife always did the opposite of what he wished. "Tell me something, David. What is wrong with Emma's assertion that working twelve hours a day is but an exploitation on the part of the Capitalists that take advantage of the poor?"

"There is nothing wrong with it," David answered, "but why do you look at me like that, if I don't own any factory?" The truth was that David was stuck with his small store in the Market, while his fellows were opening industries. In his view, the only 'capitalist' thing he could be blamed for was the fact that he lived in the capital city of the country.

"Do not play the innocent," she answered. "You make me work twelve hours every day at the Market and you do the same with my children. I know what Emma is talking about. If the workers in Costa Rican banana plantations went on a strike demanding to work only eight hours, we should do the same." "But in Puerto Limón, the banana workers launched the strike because poisonous snakes were biting them, whereas here the only person that may die poisoned from your tongue is me," David said helpless.

David started laughing and did not pay any attention to his wife's complaints. He did not believe there could be any comparison between the *shmate* factories of Chicago or New York and the working conditions at La Peregrina. He honestly believed that, if he did not work twelve hours every day, it was simply because of his "legitimate" religious duties. "If I did not go to pray and to teach about morals to the community, soon we would end up eating pork in this country," he added, indignantly. "Besides, this wanna-be-rabbi is actually selling *gets* as if they were pieces of underwear and already has divorced half the community. If I let him have his way, he is going to end up separating even the Dead Sea again."

But the merchant should not have underestimated the power of the underdogs. Once the mother and her children had set aside their differences, they became an incontestable force. Anita "inferred" organizing a strike from the many newspaper clips, about the sit-ins of the Jews in the *shmate* factories in New York, conveniently left on her bedside table by Elena and Samuel. When the mother came to ask for their help, her older children were ready to negotiate.

"Elena, Samuel, we need to make a plan against your father. We must recover the freedom we once enjoyed in Długosiodło," Anita said.

"You are after more freedom, mother, but you forbid me meeting the man I love," Elena answered. "Don't you realize that the same rules should apply?"

"As far as I am concerned, I want to get a salary so I can leave for Palestine," Samuel said.

"I do not see the connection between reducing our daily work from the current twelve hours and your desires to do as you please," the mother answered, not wanting to agree on these terms.

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<sup>94</sup> Crazy

"Well, it is a question of principles. If we are talking about freedom, why not the freedom to marry the man you love and the freedom to live wherever you like?" Elena responded.

"Because it is not the same. You will suffer a lot if you make these decisions."

"If you consider it that way, then I do not believe you have understood what Emma Goldman really says," Elena was disillusioned.

"Well then, just remember how badly things turned out for her when she joined a bunch of Christians that abandoned her when she most needed them." Anita said angered.

"Nonetheless, you have to go on strike for your *Jewish* husband to respect you." Elena said with a similar passion.

"All right! All right! That is it!" Anita gave up, "I need your help to liberate myself from your father and if I must withstand your relationship with Carlos, or let you go to grow potatoes in Palestine, I will do it, for the sake of the proletarian revolution."

Once the Feminist, Zionist and Anarchist at La Peregrina reached an agreement, things changed in the Brum-Sikora family. His wife's signature would be the first signal. Instead of becoming invisible using the Sikora surname, Anita started to use her maiden name. And once this small victory increased her self-confidence, she decided to vindicate her right to meet Don José. "My relation with that man is purely intellectual," she said to her husband. "If your conversations are that cultivated," David answered ironically, "then why do you dress up like a clown when he visits you?" "You can't tell the difference between being elegant and dressing like a *khurve*, which is what one of your best friends is," Anita made her point.

David gave in because he thought that Anita was completely *meshugeneg* and that for him it would be the same thing if she called herself Brum, Sikora or Fiddlefortz<sup>95</sup>. He did not mind if she talked to Don José, because in this way he would be freer to have some drinks at Emilia's bar. But regarding ethical principles, such as who can manage the money and who can pray while the other one works, he stayed dogmatic.

"If you had control over the money, tomorrow you would buy another husband," he said to her. David feared Anita would divorce him, making an alliance with the wanna-be-rabbi and would buy a *get* from him as fast as she used to buy chickens.

The woman would not accept more gibes. After this last conversation she decided to close the store and sit on the passageway leading to the Market's toilets, not letting anyone in until her rights had been recognized.

This was how the Market's Yiddish rebellion came about. It was the rising of the Costa Rican Jewish proletariat. When Anita hoisted a sign that read "*Go kucken*"<sup>96</sup> elsewhere" – alerting the toilet customers that she would not move and therefore they should use toilets at home - a new chapter in the workers' history was written. And given that their victory assured Samuel the means to go to Palestine, it was also a chapter in the history of Costa Rican Zionism.

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<sup>95</sup> Fancy Fart

<sup>96</sup> Defecate

Since David would not surrender he sought allies among his fellow Jews on the Market. To put an end to the problem, the Government decided to send a personal representative of the President there. To David's horror, Don José Sanchez was sent as the mediator.

"Don David, the President has asked me to put an immediate end to this strike. We do not like the fact that a woman and her children have to block public roads, to fight exploitation." Don José was serious but winked to his favorite female friend.

"*You* can't act as a judge! It is as if a fox was in charge of looking after chickens! If the President wants to reach a fair compromise, why is it that he sends such a partial envoy?"

David responded angrily. He tried to get other Jews on his side. But they backed off because they knew their wives were on Anita's side and did not want troubles.

"I am not here to defend anybody, but to make sure that justice is done. And for your own good, it is better that you immediately reduce the work day to eight hours and that you share the money with your wife who deserves it even more than you do." Don José's face showed anger.

"All right! All right! I have had enough of this scandal. Let the witch keep everything and do as she pleases. If she wants to change her name, let her do it. And if she is going to eat all the chicken, that is fine too." David tried the victim's appeal.

Anita had won the battle. She recovered the freedom she had lost in the New World. Elena was allowed to go out with her beloved, if not with the blessings, at least with the full knowledge of both her parents. Samuel was allowed to leave for the Holy Land.

Elena's mother understood that battles for liberation should start from below, without depending on a state or a party. Since then she ceased to believe in Marx and Stalin and became an Anarchist. Emma's photography was placed in the house's bedroom.

"Is it not enough that you won the strike, but now you have to rub it in my face, placing the photo of that... over my head?" complained David.

And when everything seemed to be going the right way in the tropics, the Second World War arrived.

## XXVI

Pepe's and Max's friendship flourished since the new government's inauguration ball. Since the assistant to the Minister of Foreign Relations liked boxing, he invited the German diplomat to have a "match" the following Sunday. The leader of the Nazi Party was able to appreciate the excellent physical condition of his new friend. The boxer had a firm and muscled body, except for his buttocks. He had a Semite nose, in contrast with a pair of "perfect" lips. His hair was curly, combed backwards and his forehead was protuberant. He was an attractive and extremely virile young man. Nobody suspected, except Max, his secret preferences. Not certainly his lover and relative, Dona Paquita Elizondo.

After the ball, they went out to have some more drinks and talk about politics. The Costa Rican diplomat would tell Max about his visits to Europe and how much impressed he was with Germany's progress.

"Hitler was the first one to disregard the sacred laws of the market," he explained to Max. "His decision to implement large public programs and to foster the military industry would then be followed by Roosevelt himself." Pepe believed that the *New Deal* was implemented aping the Nazi economic program and that many other governments, including that of León Cortés, had followed upon those steps. Besides, he considered Germany to be right about its territorial demands. "After the First World War, they unjustly took away a number of its former territories," he said to Max.

Once he knew his ideological stance, Max revealed to Pepe some secrets. He told him that his attraction for Nazism was based on his appreciation for discipline. Without it, nations would not be able to move ahead. "Loafers are a threat to society. Some poor bastards might be executed because they steal a chicken, but those who deserve to be killed are the free riders that live among us, unharmed," he furiously said. He was convinced that some races, like the Indians or the Jews, were parasites that only sucked wealth. Max told Pepe about some of his friends, like the Vice Consul at the Legation, Juanito Madremal, who did nothing productive and who always was ready to take advantage of somebody else's work. Increasingly irate, the German diplomat believed that such persons did not deserve to live. "Herr Madremal always depends on somebody else's intelligence and when the tit he is sucking runs dry, then he becomes your worst enemy."

The Costa Rican diplomat realized that his German friend considered economic and sexual activity to be essentially Teutonic: "Let us not conclude asserting that backward people are all passive," Pepe pointed out, "or that such passivity is expected from us."

According to Pepe, Latin societies were made of different social strata, each one at a different stage in the evolution scale. "Our political elites are as sophisticated as the Europeans and have learned the discipline they themselves impose on their employees." "The boss," he continued, "knows how to guide and use his servants." In his view, it was a common practice for the Latino *gamonals* to enjoy the employee's women and children "for

their own personal satisfaction." "The educated classes," he commented, "accept this old tradition, without bothering with European psychiatric definitions."

This Costa Rican explanation about how the poor were submissive did not impress Max. "I find something strange," the German said, "in this Latin American ritual of only searching for beardless youths or minors. I do not understand why there is such a predilection for innocence. I think that in this country, both men and women are pedophiles, Greek style. When a woman or a man reaches his or her maturity, he or she is no longer considered interesting." Max thought that such pattern was not much "civilized." For him, both in the economy as in love, the most exquisite thing was struggle. He regarded pain and submission as necessary to reach this goal. "I am bothered by Latin passivity," he complained. "It is a way of living off others, of waiting for somebody else to do the job." According to Max, passive men and all women were like Jews: Beings that depended on the virility and the struggle of real men."

"Therefore, each of us two holds," answered Pepe, "irreconcilable positions." "My view," he continued, "is perhaps outmoded, or underdeveloped, but I like adult women and young men. I adore an experienced woman like Paquita, or the innocence of a high school student. I do not mind who is doing the job, as long as it leads to pleasure. I am not turned on by mature men."

The Costa Rican laid his cards on the table. Notwithstanding his attractiveness, he did not want to have a relation with someone of Max's age. "We have," he concluded, "similar tastes, let us say a predilection, for being active."

The presumed sexual incompatibility would not be an obstacle for exchanging information. The German diplomat invited Pepe to discuss politics and international affairs at the Legation and, in turn, the Costa Rican invited Max to do likewise, at the Chancellery. Max did not hide his interest in the information, nor Pepe his willingness to satisfy his new friend.

The assistant to the Minister of Foreign Relations would tell Max something Hornibrook had authorized him to leak, namely, the growing American pressures over the new government to support, during the Havana Conference, a policy rejecting German control over the colonies belonging to European countries currently dominated by Hitler. Although incomplete, this information was valuable for the German diplomat, since it was useful to plan a *rapprochement* with groups opposing the Costa Rican government. He wanted the country to remain neutral.

But for the last few weeks, the information provided by the Minister's assistant was not fulfilling the expectations at the German Legation. The data he was supplying was either false or inaccurate. In the case of the German ships stationed in Costa Rican ports, the Ministry of Foreign Relations did not seem to have but vague ideas about the American strategy. However, Pepe asserted that the military operation to seize these vessels would take place on April 5th. Max began to suspect he was being deceived. Soon he realized that

each step taken by the Nazi Party of Costa Rica was under surveillance. This became evident twice.

The first sign of trouble for Max had to do with the protest against the public exhibition of the film "The Case of Edith Cavell," a movie about the execution by the Germans of a British nurse during World War 1. The Nazis planted a bomb at the Variedades Theatre, where the film was to be exhibited since they wanted to warn the new administration that a policy change in favor of the Allies would have to be paid with blood. However, the police "accidentally" discovered the bomb before it exploded.

The second incident was yet another bomb planted in the Jewish Synagogue, which was located near Barrio Mexico. Some militants of the Nazi Party intended to blow it off during the Jewish Holy Week. However, security agents were also able to spot it and dismantle it before it exploded. The chief of the Nazi Party realized that someone was tipping off his enemies.

Max was not being totally discreet and he shared his plans with Yadira. He had told her how he was aware, by means of confidential information obtained from a friend at the Ministry of Foreign Relations, that the United States was exercising pressure upon Costa Rica for the Havana Conference. Marx revealed to her this much since he believed that the U.S., now looking to cement an Anti-Nazi Front, would not allow the Costa Rican government to expel the Jews, something that he hoped would turn the Committee For the Nationalization of Trade to his side.

But Max falsely believed that Yadira was unaware of their plans to carry on a series of bomb attacks. However, during one of his tantrums, he himself had disclosed this information. "I shall burn to ashes those films, just like we are planning to burn down the Jews," he had said in front of her. This information will become part of Yadira's revenge when she found out about Max and Pepe.

Max had forgotten this incident and his suspicions were concentrated on the assistant to the Minister of Foreign Relations, Pepe Flores. The German national had asked him information about the position that the President would take, concerning the anti-German movies. When Pepe told him that the Minister would not censor them, Max's rage expressed itself in threats to blow them all in pieces, together with the movie theatres.

The Germans had a more reliable source of information than Pepe. In the circles close to the President, one key informant had revealed that Minister Hornibrook had warned Calderón that the Nazis were preparing two attacks and that they also knew about the cargo contents on board of the Eisenach. Max suspected that it was Pepe and not Yadira, who had passed this information. "That bastard was the only one who knew about the bombs!" he thought. To solve this problem, he invited him for a drink to his apartment.

Pepe came in with a strange feeling in his heart. He was asked to sit down. Max was dressed in leather and wore a sardonic smile. "Feel at home," the German diplomat said.

"The script between a man and a woman is easy to predict," the host said, while he prepared a glass of rum with orange juice for his guest. "But between two virile men, what may happen?" he asked. The Assistant to the Minister of Foreign Relations had an intuition about the road Max wanted to take. "Do not be so sure. Paquita could surprise you a lot too," Pepe answered.

The host turned off the lights and turned on the radio, which at that moment was playing Pepe's favorite song, "Noche de Ronda." Max sat in front of him, on a brown leather chair and lit a cigarette. Pepe stared at him, not intimidated by the German's eyes. He noticed that they had changed color, approaching a reddish light blue, more intense than ever. "Not only the position is a mystery between two males," he answered after taking the first sip and relishing the bitter taste of orange juice, "but the courtship and the seduction as well," he added, with a deep voice full of certainty.

The German diplomat smiled and pulled out from his pocket an envelope containing white powder. "Let us inhale some of this wonder, while I think how I can satisfy your wish," Max said, whispering in Pepe's ear.

Both took four "lines" of cocaine as pure as snow. "I get it from the best Bolivian fields," Max commented. The host served more drinks, this time pouring twice the amount of rum. From his suitcase, he produced a photo album, so that his guest could enjoy looking at the pictures, many young German men, and some Costa Rican boys too. This was the most precious part of his photo collection because, as Max himself pointed out, "these are pictures taken on the night the men lost their virginity." According to the German collector, he liked to take photographs of boys and men "during their first sexual act".

As had been anticipated by Max, the boxer began to warm up with the portraits' exhibition. The purity of the cocaine was such that he did not feel the liquor. "Are you sure you are pouring me rum?" Pepe asked, apparently able to taste the orange juice only.

"Do not worry, there is rum in our drinks. What do you think of my collection?" "Wonderful!" answered his mate, while looking at the hundreds of photographs depicting the victims or the companions of Max's former lover.

As his guest of honor was enjoying the pornography, the apartment's doorbell rang. Max went to see who it was and - surprise, surprise! - it was one of his young friends.

"Come on in, Rodrigo, do not worry, we are not engaged in businesses. Here, let me introduce you to a friend. Have a seat. Would you like to drink something?"

Pepe was not able to hide his delight. The boy was just a teenager, probably still attending high school, but he already was a beautiful stud. He had an innocent face, fair complexion and brown hair, blue eyes and a sincere and sweet smile. He told Pepe he worked at the German Legation, "doing errands" and collecting payments for his boss. Indeed, he still attended high school and later wanted to become a lawyer. Max presented the boy with some white powder that he inhaled with the hardly contained passion of youth.

Pepe stood silent. He could not look at the photographs, when this dream-comes-true sat at his side.

It was Rodrigo who broke the ice: "I see that you are studying the photo album. If you look some pages ahead, you will find me," he whispered in his ear.

The assistant to the Minister of Foreign Relations was not able to resist the temptation and went after the ace of this photographic deck of cards. "Aha!" he exclaimed: "Is this your photo?" Pepe immediately realized that the boy's innocent eyes contrasted with his daring pose. This could not have been his first night, he thought, since the young bull looked straight at the camera, without shyness.

"You have the most beautiful body I have ever seen," Pepe said. "Well, this body is going to take a shower," he answered. While he went to the bathroom, Pepe realized that Max was still in the apartment.

"Who is that beautiful boy?" he asked him. Max smiled and served him another drink. "Do you like him?"

"I love him!" Pepe could not contain his intense emotions.

"He is one of my employees and, besides, one of the best lays in the entire country. But he is so jealous of me and loves me so, that he will not do anything, unless I am also present. The boy has firm ideas and strong personality; do not believe he is easy to seduce."

The guest was feeling high and horny. A desire was rising in him, very hard to keep under control. He wanted to run to the bathroom and open the door, but he felt the need to make a deal with the boy's boss.

"What do you want me to do?" Pepe asked Max.

"I want you to work to have that young man; I want you to struggle for him; I do not want you to entice him with money or power," the German answered.

Max wanted him to beg for this delightful lad; he wanted Pepe to conquer the boy, toiling and sweating and not with just a few *colones*, as he used to do.

"Rodrigo makes good money working for me, he does not need either your money or your lineage. Those are irrelevant things for him. But let us stop talking businesses now and let us have a heroin shoot to enjoy the evening. Rodrigo loves to get very high and you will not disappoint him, would you?"

The Costa Rican diplomat had doubts. He did not want to lose control. However, he thought the boy was worth the risk. The host produced the syringes and prepared a strong solution. He took the rubber cord, tied it around the boxer's big arm and injected him. "Fly Pepe, fly; do not be reluctant to enjoy the pleasure," he whispered in his ear.



The Costa Rican guest began to see his friend's eyes changing colors extremely fast. In a moment they appeared black and in the next they had turned yellow and then green and so on, without stopping. The words came out of his mouth and ran toward the apartment's walls, bouncing there and then falling to the floor. The feelings became so intense that each was a wonderful experience. In a given moment, Max took his hand and asked him how he was feeling while transmitting him the most comforting warmth. Later, Max brushed his hair and the feeling was that of a cloud made from wild essences, settling over his head.

"Is it not true that in moments like this, age is completely irrelevant?" he asked. The boxer agreed. "The trip is so pleasant," he said, "that the only thing I wish is it would continue for ever."

"Well, there is no reason why it should not go on for ever," his host explained.

Pepe wanted to be kissed as he dreamed of the boy in the shower. He wanted the boy but his desire was so strong that any lips, even Max's would do. This was not a problem for his friend who was an expert in satisfying those who did not want him.

While the two men entwined their tongues, Rodrigo came out from the bathroom and joined them. He softly touched Pepe's back and undressed. The boxer carefully turned his face from Max's and focused all his attention at the object of his desire. This was an unfortunate slip, because he lost sight of the other's machinations.

"What do you want to do?" Max asked.

"Whatever."

Max then asked Rodrigo what was he expecting from his guest. The young man coldly turned around and said: "I want him to pay me with his virginity; I want this to be his first night that I take a photograph of him."

Max, for his part, was excited as he felt fear. He explained that, unlike other men, he was not attracted by gender, physical constitution, sensibility or the intelligence of the person he was with, but toward the danger inherent in every living animal, including humans.

Pepe, however, did not like the insinuations and was not, in such a drugged and drunken state, willing to play as bait for sadomasochistic games. Besides, he did not trust the tone of the voices he was hearing; they sounded old and perverse.

Notwithstanding his exhilaration, he tried to stand up, but Rodrigo pushed and knocked him down. The German took the opportunity to pull out handcuffs and put them around Pepe's wrists. Although Pepe attempted to kick his assailants, he slipped and both Max and Rodrigo took advantage of the confusion and put a knife to his back. They forced him to walk toward the bed, where they threw him face down and tied his feet to the wooden bedposts, using leather strips.

He had fallen victim to the farce. Max then explained to him that he did not tolerate disloyalties and that he very well knew he was an informant to the Americans. "If they

think I believe the bunch of lies that you have told me, well, they are pretty much mistaken. But you are going to tell me who has denounced me for drug trafficking to the American Legation."

While Max was boasting and Pepe was sweating with terror, the Nazi leader undressed and began hitting his buttocks with a police baton. The screams of the man were muted using a gag that Rodrigo brought from the bathroom. Later they removed it when they wanted him to talk. Both demanded of him the name of the informer. Rodrigo climbed on top of him and began to penetrate him.

"Is this what you wanted?" he shouted to Pepe, while his instrument was tearing the other's insides. Max was on top of him next, even more brutally. Blood was oozing from the victim's body. Physical sensations increased with so many drugs, and the pain of the assault was unbearable. After the rape, Max and Rodrigo continued punching and kicking him, until the man could not withstand it any longer and revealed the name of David Sikora.

"Do not kill me, I do not want to die for fucking politics," Pepe begged. "He brought the information to the American Legation," he said, as he cried for making such a confession. He was so much in pain that he did not see when the adolescent pulled out a knife from a towel.

When Rodrigo pushed the knife in his stomach, Pepe did not feel any pain, just a feeling of coldness and lightness.

The diplomat's murder made the Costa Rican authorities realize that the Nazis would not leave their spies unscathed. Since then, the Ministry of Security kept a constant surveillance over Max. But they were neither able to relate him to this murder, nor prove his complicity. Although they knew the Nazi would not trust the false dates given to him by Pepe, again they moved them a few days ahead, hoping the German Legation would not find out the exact plans. But they were wrong.

When they found Pepe's body near Plaza Viquez, his lover Paquita felt as if they had stabbed her own heart. The young man was her favorite and she was determined to do all she could to find the murderer. Lieutenant Elizondo, her husband, promised he would find the murderer. After weeks of investigation, he told Paquita they suspected the German Legation. On several occasions, the young Flores had been seen with the ominous Max Gerffin.

Paquita then confirmed her suspicions by asking Carlos, who admitted that Max was a dangerous man. "But why is your wife a friend of somebody like him?" Paquita inquired. Carlos said that Max and Yadira had had a close relationship, but that lately they were more and more distant.

"I hope my wife stays away from him," Carlos confessed to Paquita.

The next day, Paquita went to the Central Avenue to confront Yadira at her store but Carlos's wife did not admit knowing about her partner's love affair with Pepe.

"But Paquita, how dare you say that Max and Pepe had an affair?" Yadira protested. The news was obviously displeasing to the merchant. She felt guilty for Pepe's death, although she was fully convinced that her German friend had nothing to do with it.

"I can assure you that Max was not involved in this murder." Still, Yadira felt tormented, believing that she had provoked Pepe's death.

But Paquita was not going to remain quiet. She did not believe Yadira and decided to break up their business arrangement. First, she talked with several merchants, members of the Committee For the Nationalization of Trade, to have her removed from the presidency of the group.

"Gentlemen, we merchants face a crossroads. On the one hand, we want to put an end to the Jewish unfair competition but, on the other hand, the Nazis are pushing us to an abyss. Yadira has vexed all of us who believe that European war is not our war and who do not want to be considered enemies of the United States. She has worked closely with the German Legation and, even though lately she is somehow distant from them, nonetheless she casts a negative public image of our organization," Paquita said.

Many merchants agreed with her: one thing is the Jews, but quite a different one is the Nazis. They should not be regarded as obedient followers of the Axis because, in case of a defeat, they would go, together with the Germans, to hell.

The Directive Board confronted its President. They explained to Yadira that relations between the Committee and the Nazi Party had become too obvious, so much so that they were now losing the support of their allied sectors.

Although Yadira admitted she had too close relations with the Germans, she explained that she had been working on improving their image at the Legation of the United States. She could not tell them, namely, her suspicion that the American Legation was probably behind the death of the informer. For Yadira believed that her reports to Hornibrook had caused Pepe's assassination and that her new American friend was the executioner. Because she could not publicly explain these things, she resigned as President of the Committee. The woman felt tormented by the young man's death and wanted to do something to correct her mistake.

Once she relinquished power in the Committee, Yadira was put on the Black List at the German Legation. The Nazis perceived her as an ally of Calderón and as interested in saving her face with the United States. Max had no use for her, although she looked for him on several occasions and even begged him to return to her. But the German despised her and returned to Susanita. In compensation, Yadira thus decided to find consolation both in her husband and in her father.

It was easier with Don José, because the coffee oligarchs had started to distance themselves from Calderón and to seek a new leader in the opposition. The reason for the divorce between the Liberals and Calderon was the perceived *rapprochement* between the President and the Communists. Numerous rumors circulated in San José, which indicated how President Calderón would be willing to offer a series of guarantees to the Labor Unions, provided they and the Communists, would support the Allies. Don José had said to his daughter: "We face the disjunctive of allying ourselves, either with the Communists, or with the Cortesistas and yet we cannot agree with either of them."

On this issue, father and daughter started to share similar political views. They would get even closer, when Yadira realized that the government of the United States had pressured its Costa Rican counterpart to give in to the demands of the Jewish merchants. Yadira considered this a double treason: She had helped the Americans who were now stabbing her in her back. Her only option now was to support Don Otilio Ulate, who combined a furious anti-Semitism with a strong love for the British. This would be the new formula chosen by the Costa Rican right wing during the ensuing years.

But if it was easy to recover her father's love, regaining that of her husband was not. During the last months, Carlos only wanted to talk about divorce. Up to that point, his wife, however, had not had the time to investigate the reasons for his distance. She had been so much in love with her Nazi friend that she actually was the last one to find out what was going on in Carlos' head and less so in his heart.

**XXVII**

The leader of the Nazi Party received the mysterious phone call in his office. His key informant provided him with the exact date when the German ships would be confiscated, namely, March 31st. Max laughed wildly, while his blue eyes acquired a darker tone, the color of the sea at the end of the day. He put his fingers through his black and smooth hair, then lighted a cigarette, inhaled the smoke and put one of his hands over his genitals, as a sign that courage would be required to undertake the next steps. Now, he would have to make his moves very quickly.

First of all, he talked with the German Ambassador in Guatemala, to tell him that Costa Rica was planning to seize their ships and that this represented a violation of this country's neutrality. Reinebeck was furious: "If this information is correct," he said, "the Americans are getting every day closer to war. We cannot allow them to seize the 'secret documents,' nor the merchandise we have in there." Besides, the Captain of the German ship had "very sensible" instructions about how he should proceed. "Nobody and particularly not the Americans, was to have access to the cargo," said the Ambassador.

Reinebeck instructed Max to continue with the plan: "Negotiate with the Army, with Cortés and with the Axis' communities. We have to overthrow Calderón and neutralize the Americans... But you have my support to abort the plan, if needed," he finally indicated.

These instructions were the "green light" Max needed to begin with his plan. "You know I will use the decree expelling the Jews as an excuse for the attack against the President," informed Max.

"I think it is an excellent idea," replied Reinebeck. "Nobody will believe that we are launching a coup d'état against an ally of the United States."

Secondly, Max talked on the phone with the Captain of the German boat. "Have you already sold all the merchandise?" he asked.

"I still have several kilos left," was the answer.

"Well, be prepared, when I call you again, to bomb Puntarenas," he warned. "In case of war against the Americans, we cannot, I repeat, we cannot, allow the confiscation of the merchandise, much less of the secret documents," said he with a threatening voice.

Max immediately called the Italian Legation, to coordinate the actions with the Captain of the boat Fella. "We will not tolerate that the ships belonging to the Axis, end up in the hands of the Americans," he said to the Italian Minister, Enrico Mezynger. "But do you think that Calderón is also going to turn against our community?" the Italian asked.

Max had to put all the cards on the table: "Hopefully, that will not be necessary, but you must prepare the Italians living in Costa Rica, as we are also preparing the Germans and the

Spaniards, to take to the streets, protesting against the alliance between Calderón, the Americans and the Jews. I will keep you informed about the right moment to do it."

Once he had organized the foreign communities living in Costa Rica, Max concentrated on convincing his Costa Rican "friends" about the need to launch a coup d'état.

First of all, he turned to hundreds of key public employees and advised them on the need to "defend the country's neutrality." Then, Cortés and his followers had to be alerted; after all, they believed that Calderón was ruining the economy and in a meeting with these local politicians Max was categorical: If Costa Rica joined a bloc with the United States, Germany would immediately stop buying coffee, cocoa and sugar.

"Mister Cortés," he said, "you must know we are currently buying about twenty per cent of all your coffee production and about eighty per cent of all the cocoa and the sugar. My government is ready to increase our coffee purchases up to forty per cent. If you remain neutral, you would not suffer. But, what will you gain entering an alliance against Germany and Italy? Nothing! And the same is the case regarding Japan, who buys a good amount of iron from Costa Rica. Unfailingly, you would lose that as well."

The Cortesistas did not need to be convinced. And even less those in the Army, since these were "confidentially informed," that Calderón was planning to create a Mobile Unit, independent from the armed forces.

At a meeting with representatives from the Costa Rican Army, Max said that their role in the country would be "weakened" if they allowed Calderón to have his own private army. "I do not know if you are aware of it, but that was the same reason why our Führer got rid of those traitors at the SA," said Max, without blushing. He had no qualms to use his former friend Roehm, as an example. "It seems to me this Costa Rican President wants to do a similar thing, since he knows you do not support his foreign policy," he emphasized.

Lieutenant Jimenez fully agreed with him: "What our friend Herr Gerffin here is telling us is very serious. We only have old 1916 rifles, completely useless and now the President will use the resources provided by U.S. military aid to arm his own personal guards with the latest weapons. Besides, he has told us that an American, Colonel Montesinos, will take care of "technically upgrading" the Army. This means he will be supervising us and that, in turn, is a flagrant violation of our sovereignty," he pointed out.

According to Jimenez, one of Montesinos' recommendations was to dismiss him, because, according to the exact words of the American, "he does not have previous military experience and, to put it frankly, he is not interested in training his own troops." His comrades-in-arms laughed. "If that is so, why does Calderón want to get into the war, if his army is useless?" wondered a Sergeant.

"All that man wants," said Jimenez, "is to stage a coup d'état.

The military concluded that, "in case of instability in the country, due to mistakes in our foreign policy, we will be brave enough to save the Fatherland and to keep it neutral, as it should."

According to the German plan, the attack against the President would take place two days before the seizure of the boats. The police would put the blame on the Jews, thanks to the "evidence" that would appear in the Parque España. Then, the Cortesistas, the Nazis and thousands of merchants belonging to the Axis communities, would stage protests in the streets, against the Jews and their American allies. The boats in Puntarenas would bomb this port and, facing the real perspective of a total chaos, the Army would declare a State of Emergency to protect the country's sovereignty. Cortés would then be called to preside over a new government and to maintain Costa Rica's neutrality.

Now, Max needed to get a passport, a residency carnet, or any other document, linking the attempt against the President with David Sikora, the author of the letters of protest against Calderón and his administration. To do this, he hired someone called "Elephant's Trunk," a man whose main occupation was killing unwanted informers.

This hit man had attended meetings of the Nazi Party with Max where he was put in charge of several "dirty" jobs, such as robberies and murder attempts. According to the instructions provided by Max, the Trunk would first break into David's house to steal a document. This would opportunely be left "abandoned" in the Parque España.

"Trunk," said Max, "I need you to steal some documents from that Jew and then, I also need you to get ready to shoot at the President on the 29th, the day when he will be visiting the Ministry of Foreign Relations."

With a sour face, the hired gun promised he would not fail, "as I have never failed in any of the errands you have commissioned," adding that the promised money would be welcomed, since he currently had "lots of debts." This assassin had developed such a liking for heroin, that he had pawned all his belongings and had also obtained several loans to pay for the drug.

The German diplomat recommended him to be extremely careful: "I do not want this family to realize someone has broken into their house. Therefore, you are not to take anything from there, but the documents. I do not want to alert them."

"Do you understand me clearly?"

"Yes, of course, Herr Max," answered the man.

Given that David and his family worked during the day, it was not difficult to get into their house. At first sight, Trunk realized the target house was located in between two stores, both of them closing from 12:30 to 13:30 in the afternoon. Moreover, the other neighbors were also workers and small merchants like the Sikora family. "There is nobody around here during the *siesta* time," thought Trunk. He was an expert opening doors and the old and cheap lock would not offer great resistance to his skilled fingers.

The next day, things happened as planned. A dog living in the back garden of the house, heard when Trunk opened the front gate and immediately started barking.

Trunk walked rapidly to the corridor and its protective shadows and sharp angles. In about one and a half minutes he unlocked the front door. Once inside the house, he looked out through a window for about ten minutes. Nobody seemed to have been alerted by the dog or had seen him sneaking into the house. The dog could no longer smell or hear or see Trunk, or perceive anything else outside the normal. He soon barked less and less and finally stopped altogether. The thief, moreover, had brought with him a small piece of cheap meat (entrails of cows and pigs) and was ready to use it if needed, to distract the animal.

Trunk did not have difficulties locating David's passport in one of his desk's drawers. "This is too easy," thought the pachyderm man. He felt an irresistible urgency to take something else from the place.

"Jews are poorer than rats," he whispered to himself, looking at the bare living room. Even so, he went through several drawers, cups, pots and armoires, always trying to leave things as they were before. There was nothing to take, except a man's bracelet, a small suitcase and a few silver coated forks. In the main bedroom there was also a good painting hanging on one of the walls, but Trunk decided not to take such a large and obvious thing; its disappearance immediately would alert the dwellers. The only other picture in the house was the portrait of some man that Trunk found familiar, but that he was unable to identify. At exactly 12:57 p.m., Trunk stepped out of the house.

That same night he handled the loot to his boss. Max examined the objects and selected the most compromising one. They were very lucky because Trunk brought with him a valid copy of David's passport.

"This is a real jewel!" said Max: "Probably the man ordered this additional copy in case he lost the original one. But, do you see, Trunk, this is a valid copy and it means his owner can legally use it anytime he wants. This is perfect for our purpose. Take it and keep it carefully and then leave it on the spot of the Parque España from where you will shoot at the President."

"Yes boss, I get it all. Do not worry, but now I need at least some coins to complete the preparations, do you understand me...?" Trunk answered.

Max took from his wallet the large amount of two hundred *colones* and gave them to the hired criminal. "Remember, there will be eight hundred more if you do as agreed."

For an instant, Trunk saw himself sending a few hundred pesos to his old folks in Guanacaste, but then his dreams changed to the pleasures of heroin. Thus, before leaving he asked and got, several doses of several drugs. "Well, Mister Max; I will be on my way



now... Ah! At that house of Jews they have a photograph of a German man. Is that not curious?"

"What? What are you mumbling, Elephant?" Max asked.

"Nothing sir, that they have a picture of some man I have seen in the German Club, sir," said Trunk, trying to emend himself. Max was now short of time and did not pay much attention to this detail. "*Alea iacta est*," said Max to himself, remembering his Liceum days back in Germany and feeling like Caesar about to conquer a new Rome.

He took a good shower and then dressed up for the evening. He checked his suitcase, where he put the bracelet, other documents and one of the forks brought by Trunk. "Just in case we require further evidences..." he thought. That night he would have his most important meeting ever at the German club. They would discuss the final details of the plan and would actually start mobilizing the cadres; the operation itself would get under way next morning. "Indeed," he thought as he felt the cool breeze of the early evening in San José, "*alea iacta est; alea iacta est...*"

A most joyful atmosphere prevailed at the German Club of Costa Rica. The members of the Nazi Party were optimistic. They felt part of that extremely successful, intelligent and powerful force, once and again demonstrated by the Third German Reich and its ultimate leader, Adolph Hitler. Delegates from all the different sectors and groups were present, including the first mates of the two contended boats since the captains did not come. They would not risk leaving alone their ships since anything could happen at any time now.

There were numerous things to look after, some more important than others: The timing to start the "spontaneous" demonstrations in the streets; the brigades to burn the Jewish stores during Costa Rica's *Kristallnacht*; the demonstrations and the provoking commandos against the American Legation; the chaos in the streets of San José and the intervention of the Police and the Army; all the way down to the women, in charge of preparing food, first aid and propaganda, for the protesters and the saboteurs.

"Our feminine wing must prepare two thousand more sandwiches. Besides, we need the nurses assigned to the different doctors, as well as the cars and trucks that would help them move the wounded," ordered Max. "Here in the Club there is enough bread and diverse preserves. Now we are under way, people..." he added, louder, so that others could hear him. "We are now on our way," he repeated, this time even louder, trying to reach everybody. They all stopped for a moment with their tasks and listened to their leader: "There is no stopping now, children of Germany... We must start tomorrow very early. Now go on with your duties and fill your minds with the image of our guide and leader..." They all lifted their arms and saluted their Führer: "Heil Hitler!" shouting at unison with Max.

They went back to the preparations, Max helping here, there, everywhere. "About medicines, we will take them from the German Drug Store," he ordered. Max insisted that it was necessary now to prevent what their enemies would do.

He wanted to know, for example, what the Communists were up to. "They are against the President because he sold the electric companies to the Americans; they will not support the President, at least that is what they say," said Julio, an officer of the Costa Rican Army. "What about the Liberals and the Republican Party?" asked Max. A journalist from *El Diario de Costa Rica* answered him: "We are not to worry about them. Calderón has insulted Don Ricardo's followers, including the rest of "El Olimpo." "They will not do anything against us, " added the man from this newspaper. "And the Church?" wondered Aspirin von Bayer, voicing religious and aristocratic concerns. "Not at all," said an Italian merchant, adding: "We are Fascists and Nazis and Falangists, all of us Christians after all, not Communists. The Catholic Church will not support the Atheists. Such is, apparently, the opinion of His Holiness, Pope Pius XII."

"This all may look easy, Baron Karl von Bayer, but it is not, at all," said Max, adding: "A coup d'état is not a child's play."

The aristocrat immediately went pale and said: "Do you doubt that we will prevail?"

Max hesitated, but then, as a born leader he came up with the required answer: "But of course we shall prevail! What I mean to say, Baron Karl von Bayer, is that only to us Arians the most difficult tasks are the easiest to accomplish. We are that universal child mentioned by Nietzsche: 'In command of destiny and innocently playing dice.' We are ruling the new era. We Germans ride the high tides of the times, organizing the world around us. We are born rulers, are we not, dear Baron?" added Max.

Despite such an eloquent speech, both Germans knew that the real issue was to predict what would the United States do. Max and the Baron considered this issue somehow indirectly.

The first told the Baron that, "we have on our side the tremendous unpopularity of Calderón and thus enjoy a large margin of error." "The Americans don't like him either," said Herr Bayer.

Nevertheless, Max was worried: "But even so, dear Baron Karl von Bayer, we must be careful. Do remember that in 1917, the United States never recognized the insurrection headed by Tinoco. At the end, the dictator was brought down by the Constitutionals." If the Americans decide not to recognize Cortés, he will last as long as a sunny day in the rain forest," he added.

Despite some reservation, he felt "that now, however, we have a different international scenario from the Great War. Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and Argentina may provide support to the new Cortés government and the United States does not have a strong position. It is rather trying to appease conflicts in Latin America. Roosevelt has accepted the Mexican nationalization of oil and for all practical purposes, the implications of the Mexican Revolution. The United States holds a "Good Neighbor" policy towards the region. Although increasingly hostile to us, still the Americans overwhelmingly support

their neutrality status. They are trying to stabilize Latin America and will avoid a confrontation with Cortés," concluded Max.

"Moreover," agreed the aristocrat: "The United States will not risk to make an enemy of Costa Rica and if Leon Cortés has a second administration, the only difference with Calderón is that the new government will remain neutral. That is all and, moreover, such is the current status quo. We are a new, although vigorous, actor in the Caribbean, whereas the United States and England are the established powers. The United States cannot risk not recognizing the next de facto government of Costa Rica. After all, we are next to the Panama Canal," concluded von Bayer.

The Baron told Max to keep up the spirits: "All will be well, Her Commandant Gerffin." "Come on," he continued, "let us have a drink to celebrate our triumph," winking an eye.

Max followed him, feeling there was more to be learned from the aristocratic fellow. He was not mistaken. Von Bayer warned him from some individuals, including some of his friends. Max demanded to be told the name of his friend: "I have heard rumors," said the Baron, "that Carlos Dönning has fallen in love with none other than a Jewish girl, daughter of one of their leaders."

"What? What?" -exploded Max, without trusting his ears. "What you heard," said von Bayer, feeling happy because he possessed crucial information: "The son of a bitch is in heat with a girl that works at the market and attends high school. Perhaps that is why Yadira abandoned our Party," he warned.

The news made the Consul cough and spit the drops of whiskey he was drinking. He could not stop and had to go to the bathroom. He threw up all the contents of his stomach and then also had a complete evacuation of his bowels. When he finished he felt empty, but also clean, ready to die when necessary. Wagnerian emotions shook him, combined with a bitter taste of vomit stuck in his throat and a persistent smell of shit.

"It is not possible! It is not possible!" repeated aloud Max, like the Haitian zombie that lost, stolen, his spirit. It took him some minutes to calm down. Still in the bathroom, he sat on the toilet to think things over.

He estimated that his enterprise would be endangered, if the Jewess Carlos was seeing, was precisely David Sikora's daughter. If the police could obtain evidence about the relation between Carlos and that girl, then Calderón's supporters would claim that, since Carlos and Max were friends and both members of the German Club, the attempted murder against the President had been a trap prepared by the Nazi Party. The police, or David Sikora, or his daughter, could very well use the portrait of Carlos currently in their house. They would show or give the portrait to the journalists and certainly, immediately the press would publish it.

"As soon as possible," thought Max, "anything related to Carlos that may be in that house, must disappear."

Still nauseated and feeling both anger and ire, he went to find the Trunk. Together with him, they would return to the Jewish house. "The Trunk says the Sikoras leave early in the morning and return late in the afternoon," thought Max. "He will help me get inside and we will remove the photograph. That Jewish pigsty must not contain anything German," concluded Max.

He found the servant in the traditional bar on skid row, called "The Trinity." This night, his man had money and drugs and thus whores and drug addicts surrounded him.

"Some professional, you are!" said Max getting by the bar. "Trunk," he asked, "that photograph that you saw, was it perhaps of Carlos Dönning?"

"Now that you mention it, yes. It was he."

"I forgot him -continued Trunk- because it has been a while since he does not show up in the German Club," putting airs as if he actually was a member of that exclusive institution.

"Shit!" shouted Max: "I was afraid it would be him!"

For a few seconds Max did not say a word because he was trying to order his train of thoughts and for his part the Trunk did not dare interrupt his now enraged boss. Then Max spoke again: "Tomorrow, before you go to do your business at the Parque España, I need you to go back to that house, this time with me."

"Why, boss?" asked the hired gun. "Because we need to remove that portrait of Carlos Dönning."

Once he had a plan prepared, the German diplomat felt better and joined the Trunk and his friends to relax. He asked a whisky. "Do not worry, boss," said the Trunk to his ear: "Tomorrow we will get in quietly, like cats and nobody will see us."

"All right! All right! There is nothing to be alarmed of. Everything will go well if we do as I tell you," answered Max, who added: "And now, Trunk, please introduce me to your companions here. What I now need is sex. It is the only thing that calms me down."

Max, the Trunk and four women spent the night together. There were rooms on the floor above the bar and the place was conveniently close to David Sikora's house. At seven in the morning, they were ready to begin their Odyssey. They would take the portrait and then each one would attend to their business. In case something went wrong, the Trunk carried a gun in one of his suit's pockets.

Max got up with a lingering worry, but he calmed down once he drank a cup of black coffee and some "Spanish" bread and butter. "I am hungry if I am tense," he said to the Trunk. Fifteen minutes later, again without the slightest difficulty, the Trunk opened the door to David Sikora's house.

"Where is that portrait?" asked Max.

The Trunk took him to Elena's bedroom and pointed out at the table where there were two photographs, one of Carlos Dönning, indeed and another one, depicting a beautiful young woman.

"That Jewish girl looks really good," thought Max.

But even with her radiant beauty, the girl was his enemy. He said to the Trunk, "I cannot understand how such an elegant and rich German as Carlos, ends up with a woman from a slave race of inferiors."

"But boss," said the Trunk, smiling, "I do not see anything slavish or inferior in her body."

Max would not pay attention to his remark and added: "Let us not waste our time; let us get moving. We both still have much to do today." They proceeded to search letters, drawers, dresses and boxes, but did not find anything more related to Carlos.

Finally, Max went into the room shared by David and Anita. He felt disgusted and repelled by what he saw there. "I do not know how the Jews dare to wear these old rags, instead of fine or good clothes," he commented.

"It is because we the poor do not have enough money to buy good things," responded the Trunk.

"No, no. What they lack is not money, but good taste," insisted Max.

The Trunk felt that since he was also poor, then he did not have good taste either and wanted to change the subject. Max helped him, saying: "Look, Trunky, what a strange, pathetic and decadent painting they have hung on that wall! Balloons and tropical colors," he continued: "distorted images and triangular faces. In Germany, we have forbidden this Judeo cubist shit." Then he looked at the photograph of Emma Goldman that Anita had also hanged on the wall, above the bed: "And, tell me, Trunk, is not that a portrait of that communist Jewish witch from New York?" But the Trunk could not follow what Max was saying.

Carrying the photograph of Carlos in one of his pockets and once he was again in the street, Max recovered his good humor and his self-assurance.

"Now you may go to Parque España," he ordered to the Trunk. "Put a bullet on the President's balls. Do not let anyone see you. Remember, you must shoot from behind the bushes. Once you have shot him, run towards the National Liquor Factory. As agreed, there you will find Lieutenant Ramirez. He will hide you."

The Trunk had never failed in one of these "businesses," and again assured Max not to worry: "The assassination is going to be a piece of cake, boss."

Max went to the Legation, five blocks away from the Parque España. "I should hear the shots from my office," he thought.

The German diplomat went into his office and asked his secretary to bring some strong coffee. He was tired from the night spent with four different women and the adventure at the Jewish house. He attended to some unimportant businesses, constantly looking at the clock on the wall, at the left side of his mother's painting.

The only noise filling the room was the rhythmic tic-tac. "Nine thirty already," he thought looking at the dial. He felt that his heart was beating faster now. A few cold sweat drops appeared on his forehead. He had participated in numerous crimes, but this was the first time he had organized a coup d'état. "However," he thought, "This is no reason why I should be this nervous, sweating all over my body."

At nine forty, again he looked at the clock on the wall. His sweating increased and was flowing non-stop from his armpits. The morning was not hot and he could not understand why he was agitated so much. Suddenly, he realized there was something wrong. Each time he looked at the clock, Max felt as if he was losing control over his body. He was perspiring so much that now his clothes were also getting wet. He removed the jacket and the tie, but nothing seemed to control the sweating. As he was taking his eyes away from the clock, he finally realized what was the cause of his alarm.

"It cannot be!" he shouted, loudly moaning. His secretary was startled and came into his office. She saw that Max was in a panic.

"What is it, Mister Gerffin, what has happened to you?" she asked, anguished.

The diplomat had fallen to the floor and continued to sweat abundantly. She thought he was having a heart attack and in turn started shrieking, terrorized. Max was not unconscious, though; he lifted an arm and in a weak voice told her to stay quiet.

At about nine fifty, Max finally recovered his bearings and went out hurriedly. Once in the street, he began running like a madman. The pedestrians, leisurely strolling along the quiet streets of Barrio Amón, enjoying the morning sun, let him pass, like a raging San Fermín bull. Max lost all sense of space and time. His only purpose in life was arriving at the Parque España, before ten o'clock.

Meanwhile, the Trunk had already arrived in the park and was hiding behind the bushes. "Killing a president is easy, here in Costa Rica," he said to himself. Usually, the Costa Rican rulers did not use bodyguards. They went out walking, drank a cup of coffee in any cafeteria, did their daily shopping in the stores and without any concerns or precautions whatsoever, they attended their meetings.

Other heads of state in the region, thought the Trunk, were not used to these Costa Rican manners. For example, General Somoza, the Nicaraguan strongman, was normally surrounded by dozens of policemen and guards and he could never get accustomed to the "insecurity" characteristic of Costa Rica. Thus, when he visited San José, Somoza always brought with him his own security forces.

Actually, the country was an easy and tranquil place, where assassination attempts against Presidents were extremely rare. The more liberal the current president, the more he liked to present themselves as ordinary citizens. In the case of Calderón, he was more concerned about his personal security, but not enough as not to leave windows of opportunity, such as this visit to the Yellow House, headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Relations.

While the Trunk was thus meditating about national security issues, the President was walking toward the Ministry building and the hired gun aimed his pistol directly at his chest.

Some journalists met the President on the steps to the main entrance and surrounded him, asking all sorts of things. Apart from these media people, there were only two guards at the end of the stairs, protecting the big wooden doors of the Ministry. After a few more moments, the journalists began to withdraw, for they had other news to cover. Calderón was chatting with the Minister's secretary and the Minister himself, Don Alberto Echandi, was waiting for him at the door, with his arms open and smiling.

The Trunk steadied the pistol, always aiming at the President's chest. He inhaled deeply before pulling the trigger. But some desperate screams reached his ears at the precise moment. They came from the other side of the park, near where the Metallic Building was.

"Trunk! Trunk!" shouted the German consul, possessed now by a fury similar to that of a tropical storm. Both the hired gun and the Ministry's guards paid attention to the shouts. The Trunk put away the pistol and began running in the opposite direction. A few moments later, he bumped into his boss. Max was thus able to stop the assassination attempt.

"Pretend to be my assistant and that I was trying to locate you to help me at the Legation," was all Max could say before the Ministry guards arrived.

The policemen asked Max what was going on. Max took a deep breath and said, as calmly as possible and smiling: "It is nothing, officer. Please forgive my shouts; but I need my assistant here to run an urgent errand for me." At the same time, he presented them his credentials, something really unnecessary, since everybody at the Ministry knew him well.

President Calderón was totally unaware about the small drama, taking place in the park nearby. He said hello to his Minister of Foreign Relations and went inside the building to discuss the last details for the seizure of the German boats. Meanwhile, Max was walking away with his soul hanging on his shoulder. "But boss, Mister Gerffin," asked the Trunk, a bit scared now: "What happened?"

"It is just a change in our plans. That is all, Trunk: We are changing our plans," said Max, still confused.

Julius Cesar's disappointed emulous returned alone to the Legation and tried to sit at his desk. His secretary did not ask him what was going on, since she realized he was under the spell of an overwhelming anger. Max raised his sight and stared with a pair of sky blue eyes at his mother's painting.

It certainly was a copy of the one he had seen earlier, at the Jewish house.



## XXVIII

Albert Einstein liked to say that each small change occurring on Earth, even if it was miniscule, had an impact throughout the entire universe. Claudia's painting would not be an exception to this rule. Max could not allow the police to go into David Sikora's house, only to discover one of his mother's paintings right in the master bedroom. Given this mishap, he first had to inform Reinebeck about the most recent developments. Still, he had to come up with a last minute excuse to justify his failure. "I will tell the Ambassador that Calderón arrived at the Yellow House, earlier than scheduled." Reinebeck was furious. Before abruptly hanging the phone up on him, the Ambassador gave him orders to communicate with the ships and issue orders to have them burnt: "We cannot follow the previous plan and we do not want our enemies to find either the cargo or the documents," he angrily shouted. Max began to say, "Yes, Herr Ambassador, that is the best course of action..." but Reinebeck hung up on him. Max did not suspect this would mark the beginning of his own end.

On March 31, under instructions from their respective Legations, the crews of the two ships burned them. Of course, this fact did not remain unnoticed by the Costa Rican journalists. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, the anti-Axis *El Diario de Costa Rica*, in big headlines informed its readers that, "a few minutes before they were boarded by the Costa Rican authorities, both ships were burnt... and everything suggests that the officials in charge of the vessels were aware, well in advance, of our government's plans." *La Tribuna*, a newspaper closer to the Administration did not hide its concerns either, informing that the Government suspected the crews were alerted about the police operation in advance, because "telegraphic messages were intercepted by a US vessel stationed some miles away in front of Puntarenas. These messages were probably sent by Nazi spies in San José."

Calderón tried to dismiss the campaign against his administration, declaring to the press that he "trusted" all the officials and the rank and file of the national Army. He also denied claims that any police operation had been aborted, or that the captains at the Fella and the Eisenach had any "previous notice of our plans." However, two days later the scandal expanded, when the Captain of the Eisenach himself, declared that: "Our Legations gave us the orders to burn down the ships, rather than let them be seized by the Costa Rican Police and Army." This spoiled the President's declarations.

But the Costa Rican government not only faced an internal scandal; its international consequences threatened to become even larger. Thus, Calderón wanted the United States to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. Although Reinebeck traveled to San José to defend his fellow Germans, claiming their actions were motivated by "legitimate self-defense," all the crew members were imprisoned in San José, accused of three major crimes, namely: setting fire to the ships, resisting the authorities and attempting against the public order and security. The Government insisted on the need to incarcerate these sailors. On April 25, the Secretary of State of the United States informed President Calderón that he should keep these Germans interned, because "if these individuals obtained their freedom, they would become a threat to your country's security, as well as that of the other American republics."

For his part, Max organized the German and the Italian communities. His best weapon now was to generate chaos. The campaign in favor of the jailed sailors included several components, such as the promotions of disturbances in the streets, the distribution of propaganda against the Government and also the collection of donations and presents for the incarcerated seamen. One of the pamphlets attacked the alliance between Costa Rica and the United States: *"But the policy of total and unconditional submission, followed by most of the Latin American rulers towards the yanqui State Department... made us realized that, sooner or later, Washington would force these submissive puppet governments, to adopt measures that destroy the tranquility and the hospitality characteristic of the Latin American people."*

While the Calderón administration faced its worst crisis yet, other actors played their cards. One of these was Miguel Pop, who had returned to San José with The Duster. The robust and attractive African American union leader knew Max better than anybody else and was aware of the businesses that led in his brother's assassination. On March 30, he met with Manuel Mora, the leader of the Communist Party, to warn him about a possible coup by León Cortés. But Mora did not pay enough attention to this information: "I am not convinced that Calderón is any better than Cortés, nor that he is worthy of our support," argued Mora, who added: "Taking advantage of the war, the big merchants and importers disguise their real costs and, moreover, they hide away the goods, just to manipulate the prices. This is a government for and by the rich," concluded the General Secretary of the local Communists.

But by April 1<sup>st</sup>, the communist leader had reconsidered his stance. Mora finally agreed that the open Nazi participation in the burning of the ships in Puntarenas and the demonstrations against the Government (incited by Max), indicated the seriousness of the situation. The Marxist leader accepted that Miguel had an interview with representatives from the Government, to offer them the Communist support, "in exchange for benefits for the working class." If the regime changed its position toward the workers, the Communists would mobilize the masses in support of President Calderón. Mora clearly pointed out to Miguel, that the "negotiation" required initial good will gestures from the part of Calderón. These included that Calderón promoted new social laws that would be known as "Social Guarantees," and which contained measures such as: a minimum salary; an eight-hour working day; the recognition of the workers' unions; the right of the workers to a decent house; minimal hygienic and security conditions at the workplace; reasserting the State's duty to provide free education for all; and that the national workers would have priority over foreign ones.

A second result was a change in the Costa Rican Catholic Church. Since the end of the XIX Century, Liberals such as Don José Sanchez had taken away from the Church, much of its former power. The Church monopoly over the wastelands, as well as its own taxes (the tithe or tenth part of harvests), were regarded by the Liberals as barriers against capital accumulation and, therefore, against the development of capitalism. In the 1830s, the Government confiscated those lands to give them to new coffee growers. In 1884 declared that all the education from now on would be secular. That same year, an executive decree

limited, with a few exceptions, parading religious images outside the churches. Finally, the creation of the civil marriage and the civil divorce consolidated this anti-clerical legislation.

Monsignor Victor Sanabria, the head of the local Catholics, had been educated in Europe and held advanced social ideas. The Catholic Church had much to recover and thus Monsignor Sanabria was yet another important player that decided to help the Calderón administration in exchange of political dividends since like the Communists, although for different reasons, the Catholics rejected the Liberal State. To Sanabria, the burning of the German ships was a clear evidence of an impending coup d'état and that Cortés would then regain the power. "We do not need another anti-clerical President. I must get in touch with President Calderón and make a deal with his government. But Calderón must pay a price for the support of our Holy Church. He must abolish the Liberal legislation," thought Sanabria. In turn, Calderón wanted and needed the Catholic support and would agree to their demands. In order to make a new ally, the President decided to turn the country, once again, into a Catholic nation.

Obviously, Calderon's and Hornibrook's political positions became closely entwined after the burning of the German ships. Anxious to provide the much-needed military support, the United States government presented Calderón with relatively moderate demands, namely, expelling from the Government the most conspicuous Nazis.

Calderón went beyond the American request, expelling from the national territory Baron Karl von Bayer and his family. He also dismissed Max Gerffin, Alberto Fortuniak and Wilhelm Hannekamp from governmental positions. Hornibrook was satisfied with these changes and explained to his Department of State that Calderón took such measures because he feared these individuals were "organizing a coup" against him.

On May 13, the United States government let its Costa Rican counterpart know that it had "found a way to solve" the problem with the German and Italian boats. It advised Calderón to deport the sailors, considering them "*persona non grata*," putting them on board the S.S. Stella Maris, an American ship on its way to the Panama Canal. Once there, "the United States will take care of the situation."

Reinebeck was in Costa Rica from April 6 until May 10 and let the President know his wishes to have his sailors sent to Japan. The German Ambassador did not want these crews to undergo interrogations by U.S. authorities. On May 16, the government of the United States agreed "not to impede in any way the departure of these crews to Japan on board the first Japanese ship arriving in Panama." Costa Rica was satisfied with the American answers and on May 20, declared a general amnesty in favor of these crews and expelled them from the national territory. In this way, the Calderón administration was hoping to look good to both beast and man.

Minister Hornibrook was elated. He wrote his weekly report to the State Department and sent all the documents he gathered from Yadira Dönning and David Sikora. The American diplomat recommended maintaining good relations with this woman and her Committee for the Nationalization of Trade, for after all she had alerted them about the spy inside

Calderon's administration. It was very important not to affect this organization's activities, at least until finding out who was the tattletale. After all, Yadira and her Committee did not have any participation whatsoever in the recent events and this demonstrated their neutrality concerning foreign policy issues.

Notwithstanding his recommendations, two days later Hornibrook received a phone call from the State Department. The tone was not diplomatic or nice. The furious voice of the Sub Secretary for Latin American affairs, Dwyre, shouted: "It seems that the tropical sun has melted your small brains. Find Mister Sikora immediately and tell him we want the rest of the documents in his hands. Did you not see what they say? He has a copy of the German plan to attack the Panama Canal! If you want to keep your job, then move your ass, you imbecile!"

And the American diplomat in Costa Rica had to move his posterior indeed. That very morning, he sent for the Jewish merchant, extending him "a most cordial invitation for lunch."

David was surprised with this news. Shortly after his first meeting with Hornibrook, he realized someone had broken into his house, taking away the copy of his passport from his bedside table and one of the two photographs that Elena had in the girls' bedroom, one of her fiancé Carlos, the other one of herself. "Maybe it was the Americans, trying to get the documents that Susanita gave me," he thought. Since he was member of a distrusting people, he had taken good care to hide his "diplomatic suitcase" in the chicken coop. He ran to the back yard, went into the henhouse provoking a major scandal of flying feathers and alarmed clucking, cleaned the straw and the chicken droppings from the case and left for the U.S. Legation.

He could not eat lunch because the insensitive American had ordered some Virginia ham, a forbidden food for a Jew.

"Thank you very much for your invitation, but I am afraid I cannot accept it," said David. "Oh! Please excuse me. I was not aware of your customs," apologized the diplomat.

Given that he was only able to eat some light salad and a couple of pieces of bread, David tried to expedite the meeting.

"What can I do for you?" asked the Jew.

"You told me, Mister Sikora, that you had some other documents which could interest us and now I would like to see them and, if possible, to keep them. You should be aware that my Legation has already sent a letter to the President and the Congress, protesting for the anti-Jewish legislation," said Hornibrook.

"And do you want me to give you the documents?" wondered his guest.

"Well, that is what you and I had agreed upon, I believe..."

The merchant passed the last mouthful of bread and opened the small case so that the Minister could take a look. This time, the Minister was really curious.

"Can you see what is in here?" asked David.

"Certainly. You have plenty of paper in there. But I wonder, what is inside that egg?" said Hornibrook. Apparently, one of his birds had left a present.

David answered with irony: "That egg is filled with secret documents... But you see, Mister Hornibrook, if you want to have these papers, you must do much more than just sending a letter to the President and to Congress. I need, in writing and signed by the President himself, a commitment to annul the Decree expelling the Jews," demanded David.

The next day, the American Minister conditioned all the military aid his country was about to provide to Costa Rica. After explaining to Calderón the position adopted by the U.S. State Department, the Minister did not mince his words to exercise pressure upon him: "I do not have any other option, Mister President. My superiors have put on hold the military aid and the loan that was requested." Calderón had no choice but to sign the letter and to suspend the execution of the opprobrious Decree.

Once the documents arrived in Washington, the State Department broke all its promises. The German crew not only had plans to take over the Panama Canal, but the documents also contained hundreds of highly sensitive information. Instead of sending the German and Italian crews to Japan, as had been agreed, on May 28, the U.S. government sent them to San Francisco, to be interned in detention camps.

Costa Rica complained because she had "promised to return the crews to their home countries," and Washington had made her "break this promise." However, although fully understanding Costa Rica's sensibility, the United States could not give away the secrets. On August 5, the press reported that the sailors were "practically prisoners of the United States, interned in Montana and South Dakota."

The German reaction was not slow in coming. On May 29, the German Minister presented a strong denunciation, accompanied by threats, against Costa Rica: "*In the name of the Reich government and following its orders, hereby I duly protest, in the most strong terms, for the expulsion of the German sailors effected yesterday. At the same time, I have received orders to let Your Excellency know, that my government puts all the responsibility on the Costa Rican government, for whatever consequences this illegal action may entail. Given the attitude of the Costa Rican government regarding this delicate and serious matter, the Reich government reserves for itself, the right to adopt all and any measures deemed appropriate, now and in the future.*" Max and Reinebeck insinuated retaliation against the Calderón administration. However, before it could materialize, the Germans lost their power.

Costa Rica's foreign policy became openly pro-American. On August 3, 1941, Costa Rica refused to close its consulates in the European countries and territories under German occupation.

The Reich had informed Costa Rica and most other Latin American countries, that by September 1<sup>st</sup>, their diplomats must request new accreditation from Berlin. However, to challenge Germany, on September 2, Calderón sent a note to Reinebeck, informing him, "My government considers all previous governments of the nations currently under German occupation in Europe and elsewhere, as legally constituted and as the sole representative of those nations." Therefore, continued the letter, "my government considers it unnecessary to close our consulates and embassies in those occupied countries. Otherwise, we would be recognizing the right to conquest, something that my government, together with the other governments of Latin America, fully reject." On September 9, Germany eliminated the Costa Rican consulates in the occupied territories. Berlin considered the position adopted by the Costa Rican government as based on "an unacceptable argument," and demanded the withdrawal of all its diplomatic representatives.

Finally, on December 8, one day after the Japanese attack against Pearl Harbor and before the United States did it, in a telegram sent all over the world, Costa Rica, "according to the principles of solidarity and defense of the Western Hemisphere... has declared, today at 11 a.m., a state of war between Costa Rica and Japan." On December 11, this Central American nation also declared a state of war with the Third German Reich and Italy. For its part, the Costa Rican Congress approved these war declarations and on December 10, by a vote of 34 against 10, authorized the President to suspend the constitutional warranties in the country.

Once Costa Rica was in a state of war against Germany, the United States changed its policy regarding the influence and presence of the Axis in Latin America. Formerly, the American policy simply advocated the dismissal of pro-Axis officials in the Latin American governments, while the new position adopted by Washington, openly and directly promoted the total elimination of Nazis and Fascists, from both the political and the economic life in the entire Western Hemisphere.

According to the State Department, this policy would be implemented by means of an economic boycott against companies or individuals doing business with the Axis countries. Also boycotted were companies owned by Germans, Italians or Japanese, or by nationals of the respective Latin American country, friendly toward the Axis. In turn, to execute the boycott, a black list would be prepared and on July 17, 1941, the Costa Rican government sent it to Washington. Initially, this list included 67 names of persons and companies, but later it was expanded to include up to 200 names.

On December 11, 1941, the Executive Decree number 47 forced all the nationals from Germany, Italy and Japan then living in Costa Rica, to request special permits to move about the country. On December 20, Calderón visited the premises of a concentration camp under construction. On December 24, the press was told by the Government that the inventory of Italian properties had started and that these properties would opportunely be given in custody to the Argentinean Legation. Three days later, the Executive Decree number 3 prohibited all commerce with the Axis countries. On January 7, 1942, all the nationals from these countries were required to present a signed declaration of their properties and possessions. On February 25, the Black List was published and it was

announced that a Coordination Office would, constantly control the companies and the persons included. In May 1942, it began the closure of German coffee mills and, in June, additional properties and businesses, valued at 60 million *colones*, were also closed down. On June 28, the Congress passed a law authorizing the Executive to expropriate, without previous compensation, the properties until then belonging to nationals of Axis countries. These properties were put under the administration of a Custodial Board.

Notwithstanding all this legislation and the activities of that Custodial Board, eliminating the political and economical power of the Nazis, proceeded slowly and faced obstacles, both bureaucratic and because, at the last minute, numerous Germans and Italians transferred their properties to their Costa Rican relatives or associates. It was not until July 1942, that the German power in Costa Rica received its final blow.

By then, the sectors allied with the government of the United States, the Communists, the Catholic Church and the anti-Fascists, had closed ranks. Calderón was dependent on them for each step he took. One of the agreements reached among all these sectors concerned the need to expel the Nazis out of the country. This procedure started on April 7, 1942. One hundred Nazis were sent to detention camps in the United States. But to give them the final blow, they prepared a Costa Rican *Kristallnacht*.

On July 2, 1942, a German submarine torpedoed the banana ship San Pablo, at the time docked in Puerto Limón, killing 24 Costa Rican workers. The press accused Germany: "Last night the first Axis attack against Costa Rica occurred." Several sectors, outraged by this attack, decided to march in the streets to protest. By July 4, the Committee to Unite Anti-Totalitarian Associations, the Union Liaison Committee (which included all the governmental unions), the Communist Party and the Republican Party, all decided to participate in the march.

The Government and the Communist Party had other plans for this demonstration. They wanted to provoke an attack against German businesses, on the part of masses out of control.

After incendiary speeches by Manuel Mora, who demanded "an iron fist against the (German) fifth column," and by Calderón himself, who said: "...my hand will not tremble... to adopt all the necessary measures," the crowd started to loot and to set on fire the German businesses. 123 stores were looted and there were 76 wounded persons.

The *El Diario de Costa Rica* recognized that the police did not intervene and that their orders were "to see the other way." By July 8, 350 persons had been identified as friendly toward the Nazi cause and were detained. 100 of them would be immediately deported to the United States. On August 19, all the coffee and sugar mills owned by Germans were closed down. More than 300 persons had been sent to detention camps in the United States by the end of the war. The Nazi plan for a neutral Costa Rica had failed.

In a similar fashion as how Max had saved himself during the night of the long knives, so did Yadira's Committee during the Costa Rican *Kristallnacht*. They both were shrewd

enough to stay away from the demonstrations that occurred in 1941 and in 1942. This would later help them to undertake their final struggle against the Jews.

However, Don Carlos did not send me this information.



## XXIX

Carlos was forced to yield. While holding his beloved in his arms, he thought how difficult it was to accept Feminism. It meant watching your language, particularly when speaking Spanish, so as not to exclude women by using universal masculine pronouns. Then, you had to regard women as partners in all decisions, as owner of an equal number of shares. It was even harder to accept Elena's wishes to be a professional and that she not be involved in a hasty marriage.

"My mother married hastily," she would tell her impatient suitor.

"But only the other day, were you not boasting that she met both her husbands on her wedding day?" wondered Carlos, not fully understanding her point.

"You have become just like another Jew, always answering with more questions," said Elena.

In any case, they reached an agreement: Carlos would divorce Yadira and then once the war was over, he would marry Elena. By then, his fiancé at least should have completed high school (she had had to drop out to work at the Market). "My father took me out of high school to make me work as a clerk and I shall not let any husband of mine do likewise," she said, ending the discussion.

For his part, he would use the time to complete his conversion to Judaism, in Mexico, where it was easier to accomplish it. To do so, he would complete his lessons with David and then would try to find a real rabbi in that country. After all, David was just an apprentice and interpreted the Talmud to fit his own preferences and interests. Carlos suspected that many of the tasks David required of him were ways to retard what was inevitable. On the other hand, David scared Carlos with the circumcision, telling him how, on many occasions, the man in charge of cutting the prepuce liked to drink and then failed with the knife, cutting much more skin than needed. "Poor Leoncio Xifer, during his *bris*<sup>97</sup> he lost half his *potz*," said David, terrorizing Carlos. "But you do not worry," continued Sikora, "your *potz* is much larger and the man will not fail." Carlos knew that it was not possible to convert without undergoing the feared operation and the more he thought about it the more he wanted to get away as fast as he could.

Notwithstanding these small problems, Carlos was still bewitched by the Jewish lady and agreed to wait and have the operation performed in Mexico. "Don David, if I must undergo the *bris*, I would rather have it done in a neutral territory, because you are such a rascal that I am sure you would even pay to have my balls removed. Besides," he added, "I do not think your lessons will end any time soon and you will not be satisfied until I can recite, by heart, all the volumes of the Talmud."

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<sup>97</sup> Circumcision

Carlos did have to reach an agreement with Elena. To her and to her alone, he admitted that the Torah and the Talmud, which he had come to appreciate so much, should not be interpreted literally. He realized that as long as Elena attended meetings at the Feminist League, he should avoid references to the obedience demanded from women. So much so, that in his daily prayers he no longer thanked God for having created him a male.

During the evenings, once the lessons with David were over, the young lovers had time to be together in Elena's living room. She liked to lie on her boyfriend's lap and talk about world politics, a topic they both were keen on. However, as the saying goes, "faces do not tell the heart's real story."

Carlos had told her unpleasant news: The Nazis had threatened to detain Claudia's companion and to place her in a psychiatric hospital. The Baroness had written a letter to both of them earlier, saying that she feared they would commit euthanasia against her friend. It was a common practice in Germany during those days. People with mental diseases were killed in gas chambers, ever since the Nazis came to power. Now, Carlos had found out through the grapevine that Claudia's worst fear - her partner's detention - had happened.

The Nazis claimed that getting rid of the mentally sick was a way to save money for the State as well as for the families involved. They also wanted to seize the castles where the hospitals had been located since earlier times. However, many healthy people were included in those "medical" programs, like Claudia's companion who was accused of lesbianism and therefore of being "mentally unfit".

"I fear the worst," Claudia had written to her son and to his friend; however, Max did not do anything to help her. Since the burning of the German and Italian ships, he had sunk into an alcoholic and drug crisis. Fortunately, the Baroness still had the protection for herself provided by her former husband, apart from her own rank and reputation. Elena was extremely worried for the fate of her painter's friend. That evening, tired after chatting with Carlos and brainstorming to find a solution for Claudia, she decided to listen to the radio, to relax.

Her parents went into their bedroom and the house came to a standstill. She sat on David's comfortable green armchair in the living room and at first listened to some romantic "*boleros*." She closed her eyes and started daydreaming: She and Carlos were walking through a beautiful forest, on a path close to a singing brook. They stopped and hugged and kissed with a very long kiss.... Now they were lying side by side, near the clear running water. She put her head on his strong chest and wanted to sleep in his arms forever.

The music continued playing in the background, but soon she began hearing voices. The daydream was over. She was back in her living room and had dozed off but was alert again. Some well-known politician spoke on the radio about current events in Costa Rica. Elena could not listen, it was past 10 in the evening and she was really tired, too tired even to go

to bed. The voice from the radio continued, but her eyelids slowly closed and she dozed off again.

The recently elected president, Otilio Youlate, was on the radio, calling all Jews to show up at the Central Park. According to the news, he would not allow them to have Christian pets, since the pets could be converted. To prevent it, all these animals would be sent to a farm in distant Guanacaste. "You Jews have 48 hours to pack your personal belongings, one suitcase per family. And then, all the pets must be removed from the houses and brought to the Central Park," were the instructions.

Carlos told Elena that, notwithstanding the thousands of complaints and questions, the President-elect would not retract his words and that he announced this determination just before last Sunday's mass. Moreover, Youlate had received support of the Christian masses, incited by Yadira and by Max: They were waiting outside the church, applauding and enthusiastically shouting: "We support your heavy hand against the Jews! Have them work on the fields!" Among those cheering were numerous foreigners, such as Jackeline Flecher, a Nordic woman who volunteered to help in the presumed agricultural farms. According to her, this task would help her obtain a promotion at her country's Embassy, where she worked: Her country had been invaded by Germany and was becoming more Nazi each day.

Elena suspected the worst. She had never believed the politicians' promises, much less those coming from Youlate. After all, he drank excessively and his main entertainment was accusing Jews of all the world's evils. On several occasions, she heard him claim that Jewish people were damned and should be expelled from Costa Rica.

Youlate constantly used his newspaper to publish libels: On one hand, Jews were described as revolutionaries and on the other hand as capitalist exploiters. "A Polish woman adulterates the milk she sells, to make more money from her cheese," claimed his newspaper one day. "Communist propaganda found in books property of an illegal Pole," was the headline the next day. People constantly read things against Jews and did not know what to think any more. Now, this journalist-turned-politician was attacking their pets for unknown ultimate purposes.

"Why would he want to take the pets away from San José?" thought Elena. What was even stranger was the fact that they would first take the newborns and the older ones. "If they want to put them to work, why would they first want the young and the old?" she wondered. However, the de facto rabbi of the community thought it would be better, as throughout the history of Jewish people, to accommodate the rulers of the day with what they wanted and not to offer any resistance. "What are they going to do with a bunch of pets?" asked the erudite in the synagogue, trying to address the community's concerns. "They will not kill them," he would answer to himself, smiling like a wise man. "This country is civilized and Christian. They would leave some pets with us," he insisted, reassuringly.

However, Youlate did not seem to make any exceptions in his radio speech. As it was usually the case, Elena's own mother did not trust the advice given by the religious men: "They are always seeking answers in the Talmud. But, even if it was the most sacred book, there is no answer for what is going on now. If it all depended on me, I would get a rifle and would start shooting. I would never collaborate." Other times, however, Anita simply could not conceive how anyone would want to hurt small animals, since they were "innocent" and "have not harmed anyone."

But Elena did not receive the support from her Christian friends and much less was she able to get a rifle. Apparently, the doors of the hall where the members of the Feminist League were meeting had been locked so that no one could provide weapons to the Hebrews. The women who were lucky enough not to attend the meeting the night the doors were locked, like Ana the foreign feminist, thought it would be better not to stain Feminism with unnecessary struggles in support of the Jews. She agreed that it would be better if the animals were taken away to Guanacaste. "We should not let the problems affecting some cats, dogs, or hen parrots take away the energies we need to carry on with the women's revolution," she used to say.

Elena had to leave her beloved dog Adolph's bed, plus two bones with Carlos, three collars and several other belongings. Although Carlos also opposed the decree, Elena did not want to endanger him and, aware that whatever they could do was hopeless at this point, she advised him to do as the de facto rabbi suggested. "It will be better if we obey the law, for then they will not bother us any more," Elena said, not really believing herself. Besides, she had a lot of work to do in order to auction off the store's clothes and, in this way, get some cash for her pet dog.

Many merchants at the Market got enthused with the last minute bargain prices Elena was asking for her goods. To top it off, the Government required them to buy the train tickets. "We shall not invest one single penny to transport the animals that belong to Jews," said a lawyer named Facio who, strangely enough, at the same time was a distinguished advocate of human rights. "I congratulate Don Otilio Youlate for trying to establish some order regarding this pet problem," said Facio on the radio.

When the pets arrived at the station of the Pacific Railroad, a tremendous uproar in different languages could be heard: shouts, screams, children crying and all the different calls and noises of the pets, apart from the noises coming from the locomotives.

"Dogs and cats on this line!" shouted the policemen. "Birds and the rest on the other line!" ordered the soldiers.

Notwithstanding the pleas and children's cries, the men in uniform would not budge. "Don Otilio has issued strict orders and under no circumstances will humans travel with their pets in the trains. He is afraid they might eat them or that they might take along Communist propaganda," explained an officer.

When Mrs. Mishke refused to give up her daughter's Schnauzer, which was regarded as a very suspicious animal, the wicked policeman opened fire against it. But he did not kill the dog at once and the animal writhed in pain on the floor. Mrs. Mishke's daughter tried to help her beloved pet. But another cop came closer and fired his pistol, finally killing the animal and then pushed the girl aside, shouting: "Why on earth can't Jews follow orders?"

While this pandemonium was taking place, some small animals tried to escape. Several lovebirds got in the peasants' pockets and thus were able to leave the platform. Seven hen parrots with long enough feathers managed to fly away. However, five were shot down by the police and died on the ground. Some small frogs, fast as fireballs, were able to get into the forest. And the most distrusting of the animals, the hamsters, hid in the sewers.

A few chickens were able to convince a soldier that they actually laid golden eggs and thus were able to stay home. Some neighbors rescued Siamese cats with blue eyes and white furs. "They are so pretty that it is a crime to send them to Guanacaste, where they would not be able to withstand the heat," said a devoted woman from the Church of El Carmen. Some fine-breed dogs were also saved. However, most other animals were not that lucky. The poor sheep (white, pure and innocent) were naturally tame and never thought that anyone could hurt them. They got in line without protesting. The owls, unable to see well during the day, could not hide because they did not know the terrain. The small tortoises, dependent on liquid milieu, could not react. And the situation was even worse for the small goldfish, trapped in water bags.

"To the trains! To the trains!" shouted the wild policemen and the soldiers, while pushing and shoving the innocent passengers.

The gendarmes used the trains that were normally used to transport cows. Conditions were terrible for the poor pets, which were accustomed to traveling in comfort with their masters. They were squeezed until about 200 of them were packed inside each car. Using their batons, the policemen beat any of them who dared to resist. Since animals from different species were packed together, communication among them was difficult. The hen parrots spoke something that the owls could not understand and the dogs and cats were completely at odds regarding their respective languages. They all started to show the effects of the heat, the thirst and the urgency to tend to their physiological needs. But there weren't facilities of any kind in the cars. Soon the smells of sweat, excrement and vomit became unbearable.

Once the doors were closed and the locks were in place, the little animals desperately began screaming, "Where are they taking us? What is the crime they are accusing us of?" they asked one another in dozens of languages. The train began its long trip towards an unknown destination. "Do you know where are they taking us?" a rabbit asked a hare. "I have heard they are taking us to work in the fields," responded the hare, not really believing it.

Many of them began dying hours later. The first to die were those more accustomed to freedom, such as birds. The pheasants, for example, perished inside the train. Nobody realized their death because they were traveling squeezed so much that they died standing on their feet. The quetzals, famous for their inability to live with humans, decided to kill

themselves. Each one pecked another until, as the heroes at Masada, the last one died. The one who remained last cut its own throat against a nail in the wagon. Three beautiful kittens hanged themselves using their own tails. A pregnant squirrel began her labor. A seal sat on top of the innocent newborn squirrels and killed them one after another. "If they realize you are giving birth, they will eliminate you," she told the desperate mother.

After an infernal journey, passing several towns where the neighbors came out to see the train (but not daring to save anyone on board), the pets finally reached the farm in Guanacaste. When the doors were opened, only half the pets remained alive; the rest had died of starvation. However, the most optimistic among them, used to putting on their best face for people, hurriedly rearranged their feathers or started combing their furs. "Help me with my crest," one rooster told another. They had but a few moments, because some ferocious and despotic pit bull dogs began barking, demanding them to come out of the wagons. Once again shots, shouting, screaming and crying were heard. "Males on this side and females and their offspring on the other side," ordered the Doberman, head of the campground. At the entrance, a big sign read: "Work shall make you free."

The head of the campground had a reputation for being disloyal and aggressive. He said to the startled and shocked guests: "Welcome to our Animal Farm in Santa Cruz of Guanacaste. Here, you have come to work as you were always intended and not to continue living as parasites and vulgar pets. Each one of you will have a job to do: the chickens to lay eggs, the dogs to guard the place, the sheep to produce wool, the hen parrots to sing and the rodents to eat the leftovers. Whoever disobeys the orders will immediately be shot by our pig squadron, trained in the best slaughterhouses of Berlin," he angrily said.

"But I am a graduate nurse. Do I also have to lay eggs?" asked a small, smiling female duck. The dog laughed hysterically. "Here we do not have room for professionals. We do not believe that a female duck may ever be a professional; her duty is just to lay eggs," was the answer. While she was feeling deeply disappointed, some boars from Frankfurt, in charge of watching the stables, elbowed and looked at one another mockingly: "What an idiotic female duck!" they said.

Once the speech was over, some pigs brought from Saxony, members of the Nazi Party and all of them firm believers in their genetic superiority, took the pets to the "disinfection chambers." These shower rooms had been used a lot by former travelers. The Nazis had adopted the gas chambers from the old customhouses, where the migrants' clothes were deloused, into more sinister uses. The pigs ordered that first the female pets and their offspring, together with the old, would receive a "special" treatment.

As was the case in the railroad station in San José, there was renewed chaos on the farm. Pets about to be separated because of gender or age differences were screaming loudly. They cried and begged not to be broken apart. But the pigs were determined to follow orders without exception. Giving the pets blows with the butts of their rifles, they pushed them towards the chambers.

Other guards used deception, promising that once the pets had taken their "shower" they would get some hot soup and something to eat. Since the pets had gone days without water or food, these promises were exciting. Still, some pets could foretell their destiny, aware of the fact that if they were not good for working, then they would not be needed any more. However, it was too late now to do anything. One pig said to another: "Once they are here, there is nothing they can do."

The pushing and shoving continued all the way to the shower rooms. Several dogs -pets themselves- helped to remove their furs. The poor minks and sables were left naked while the pigs could not wait to grab the treasure they were leaving on the floor. As they were doing so, a Shar-Pei with very sad eyes told a pretty chicken: "As soon as you get into the chamber and the "shower" begins, take a very deep breath." The bird thanked him, because she sensed what would happen. However, some female turkeys that overheard this conversation scolded the chicken, telling her not to pay attention to what Chinese dogs had to say, since they were a bunch of tattletales. These turkeys believed that the wrinkled dogs were somehow paranoid.

Still, the chicken knew better. "These animals have suffered just like us. They must know why they are telling me so," she explained to the turkey hens. Some cats refused to take a bath, because they were afraid of the water, but the alligators looking after the showers forced them to get inside. Once some 500 pets were inside, the metal doors were closed. While they waited for the water jets, they could hear shouting coming from the bathrooms. A blue sphere began to grow in the middle of the room. Crystals falling from the ventilation system above were thrown to them as smoke projectiles. As it expanded upwards from below, the victims realized it was a poisonous gas.

"They are killing us!" could be heard in different languages. The prisoners piled up, banging at the doors, trying to open them.

Terror spread and many of the pets began urinating and defecating. Others attempted to climb on top of the smaller ones, trying to breathe whatever little air there was left. In this way, they crushed and killed the others. Soon, a layer of bodies covered the floor. The women tried to stand up and to put their children on their shoulders, to prevent them from breathing the poison. But the cloud continued to grow and inexorably surrounded them all.

After 20 infinite minutes, the banging, the begging, the praying, the crying and the shouting began to recede. The pets started to die. After 30 minutes, the hall was completely quiet. The silence was broken when the big metal doors were opened from the outside and a pack of wolves, following orders issued by the pigs, got inside looking for gold teeth or dental bridges. They took these valuables and carried the bodies to the ovens. An hour later, the nice and beloved pets had become a dark and smelly smoke coming out of four tall chimneys.

"It can not be true! It can not be true!" Elena was screaming, when Carlos woke her up from her nightmare.

She was sweating abundantly, breathing with difficulty and had a terrorized look in her eyes. The German man had never seen her this way. "What happened, honey? What terrible thing came to you in your dreams? Those screams were the most terrible I have ever heard!" The young girl looked at him, pierced by the most intense pain a heart may ever feel. "It is so terrible that I cannot repeat it!"

She started crying and sobbing disconsolately. Carlos called Anita and David and the three of them tried to calm Elena down. They had to give her some special tea made from sour orange, peppermint, linden, chamomile and anise. This remedy was Elena's when she was a little girl, especially during the year she was paralyzed. During her crisis, David and Anita would put Elena on their bed, between the two of them and try to reassure her that all was well. This time the tea had only a very short effect and Elena was not calmed. Neither Carlos nor her parents could convince her she had only had a bad dream.

Carlos decided to leave and have Elena remain in her parents' hands. "Please, have only sweet dreams this time," he begged her before kissing her goodnight. Anita would stay in Elena's room until she went back to sleep and she promised to take care of her daughter. "Don't worry, Carlos," she consoled him. "She will feel better tomorrow."

Early next morning, Elena woke up crying again. She did not eat anything but put on the first dress she found and went out running like a fireball towards the Market. Minutes later, she passed in front of her fellow Jews' stores, like a somnambulant. Many of her female friends were there, all poor Jews like herself, all dreaming of a better future, trying to sell a few things to spare their children from what they themselves had had to endure.

She saw Dona Golcha, the *yenteh*, who was not a bad person even though she was always trying to snoop on other people's lives. As always, this woman was filling a crossword puzzle and, at the same time, was writing in her diary scoops to her favorite story based on Dona Anita's adventures. Elena also saw Dona Guita, a perfume seller who liked to flirt with the peasants and the policemen and who longed to run away with one of them. Then Dona Soberta, the Cuban woman who prepared concoctions, the only Jewish witch in the country who combined the powers of the *dybbukim* with those of Changó; Dona Patricia, the shoemaker that hoped to emigrate to Palestine; Dona Tula, who sold blankets and was addicted to lottery games (she always played the number of the day that she arrived in Costa Rica); and then Ana, Eugenia and Maria, the beautiful sisters who had been unlucky in love, daughters of Dona Sara, the jewelry-store owner. There was also Dona Rosa, who sold herrings and shared Anita's socialist ideas and hoped one day one of her sons would become a congressman.

She also saw Dona Marisha, a crazy Russian woman who sold radios and other electric appliances, who hated Stalin and who organized the first Yiddish choir in Costa Rica. Next to her was Dona Sarita, the Polish intellectual proud of her capacity to read Polish, Russian and Yiddish and who regretted not having a son who one day becomes a national politician. Close by was Dona Sisa, who lived in Puntarenas and smelled like sea algae.



Elena saw these and many other fellow Jewish merchants who left the Old World carrying one or two dreams in their suitcases and who ended up selling them in the streets or in the small stalls of the Market. "May God have mercy on us," she silently prayed.

When she arrived at La Peregrina, Elena did not know what to do. As she continued thinking about her nightmare, one event worsened things: A big rat came out of the butcher's shop and hid behind some brooms. This time, the young girl took courage from her own fears, seized a stick and attacked the animal. She hit it so hard that the rat did not have time to run away. It began vomiting blood and then died at Elena's feet. The woman never liked to cry, but for the second time in a few hours, she could not hold back her tears and felt the loneliest woman in the entire universe.

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As Elena ran towards the street, Susanita did likewise but in the opposite direction. Desperate, he was looking for the witch's house. Susanita felt dejected, because Max was in the midst of an alcoholic and drug crisis and did not want to see him. Besides, The Duster did not receive him well either, since she hated to prepare love potions to attract such evil men as Max. But her customer would not stop and The Duster was already getting dizzy with Susanita's pleas: He needed his lover back and was ready to do all he could, first of all pestering The Duster, demanding to be armed with magic spells and potions. "Make Max return to me, make him mine again," cried Susanita, demanding the most powerful love elixir. "That man is so perverse that I am sure he was responsible for yesterday's bombing of that boat, the San Pablo," responded The Duster. Besides, the witch knew her party was planning to take revenge the day after next in a general demonstration against the Nazis. "Susanita will probably have a corpse back if I make him a love potion," she mumbled, not to be heard. But she did not want to say a word about it, since it was supposed to be "top secret." The witch decided, therefore, that it was better to play along and make the elixir for Susanita.

However, Susanita confessed that he was feeling guilty since he had disclosed his lover's plans to David Sikora. "The Pole's daughter has become "a very good friend" of Don Carlos, the German physician, if you know what I mean.... Thus, not all Germans are enemies of the Jews," said Susanita. For her part, the witch felt uncomfortable somehow since she had informed the Communist Party, betraying Susanita's trust. But, given that after all she was an ethical witch, she now wanted to correct the small moral indiscretion, warning her friend: "Dear Susanita, I have some reports from the Communist Party, which is planning a protest over the sinking of the San Pablo, that they might burn down the German businesses," she said. "Perhaps you should warn your friends...." added the witch.

Since Susanita would have doubts about betraying Max, The Duster devised a plan.

"I will send him to the shop across from David's store to buy the necessary ingredients. It will make him watch Elena and Carlos and feel guilty," she thought. Thus, she gave Susanita the "strongest" prescription available to recover Max's love. "You will find all the necessary ingredients at the herbal locale across from Sikora's store, in the Central Market," she told Susanita.

"Buy one sheet of parchment, one red pencil, two red ribbons of 30 centimeters each and one empty bottle of wine with its original cork. Then, copy the following poem on the parchment, using the red pencil, but do not write his name. Below the poem, write a place and a time where and when you two might meet. Then, put everything inside the bottle, close it with the cork and bring it here to me. I will then complete the secret procedures. Here is the poem you must copy:

*My heart has searched with each single beat  
A love that is both fiery and neat,  
A love like the sea, infinite and soothing,*

*A love I was not sure for me would be waiting,  
Not until the day when thou I could see,  
Although a foolish fear separated me from thee!  
So please, come and receive all my heart,  
At ten o'clock, at Morazán Park."*

Just as The Duster ordered, his agent went to the Market to buy the ingredients at Dona Friggabertha's store. She was part Jew, part Cuban and part "Santeria" merchant who sold all kinds of ointments, love potions, herbs and esoteric paraphernalia. "The list Susanita is carrying with him is so long," thought The Duster, "that he is going to be at that store for quite a while."

Dona Friggabertha excused herself for a second to go into her storage room and get some ingredients. Meanwhile, Susanita could not stop looking at the store across the passageway. He saw the girl, arranging piles of clothes and his heart melted when he noticed that Elena was crying and wiping away her tears with the only skirt Susanita had ever seen her wearing.

"She is really beautiful," thought Susanita, "but she only owns a single dress. Could I not warn her of the impending danger?" Once again, Susanita could not hold the information he possessed and he decided to walk to La Peregrina.

Elena was agitated and nervous over the terrifying nightmare she had the previous night. When the homosexual came in to say hello, Elena noticed his anguished face and said: "I just had a terrible foreboding; I hope you are not carrying bad news."

"Elena, tomorrow they are planning to burn down the German stores. Warn Carlos!" said Susanita, as he rapidly tried to go back to the other store because Dona Friggabertha had come out after him, eager to sell the requested ingredients.

The Jewish woman could not just stay there and do nothing. She began running after Dona Friggabertha and came out on the other side of the Market's passageway. She had to pay two important visits. First, she would return Yadira's favor.

She hurriedly walked along Central Avenue, until she reached the fine clothing stores close to the Universal Bookstore. Somehow fearful, she looked at the big sign outside to make sure this was the right store: The Cheapest. The Jewish clerk went in stealthy, looking for Yadira's face. The woman could not be her friend and yet, she could not be her worst enemy either. She therefore was a sort of Haitian zombie, half alive and half dead, something between good and evil.

Elena looked at the fine commodities brought from New York, hanging on several plaster mannequins, the latest fashion craze for show windows. Unlike her Jewish business, this store did not disclose the prices of its clothes. According to the owner, it was "bad taste."

Yadira looked at her as if The Devil himself in the guise of a woman suddenly had appeared in her shop. If once she had helped her rival, now she was determined not to become her friend and even more not to socialize with her. But she did not have time to even open her mouth to say so, because Elena immediately began to speak: "I am here to thank you for the favor you did for us and to advise you to take all these goods away from downtown San José. If the Communists attack your business, trying to burn it down, you can find refuge in Don Moisés' hotel, just around the corner."

Although Yadira wanted to know exactly what was going to happen, Elena could not give her more information. "Just as you once said to me, do not repeat this information, because they would know who told you about it." The young woman left the store, while Yadira, flabbergasted, thanked her.

The second visit was to the hotel owner. Around the corner from the store, there was Don Moisés Burstin's small hotel. Elena requested him to help Yadira and Carlos and she asked him about her dream. This man was a Zionist, founder of the organization bearing the name and created in 1932, before even the Israelite Center itself. As an activist for many years and a cunning politician in numerous exploits, he had a good sense of the situation and was her best bet to know whether her dream represented some warning or premonition.

Don Moisés indicated that he had no qualms whatsoever to provide refuge for some "good" Germans. But concerning her other worry, Elena would not like his answer. When the girl told him she was worried for her family, Don Moisés asked her who had escaped to the Russian hinterland and who had stayed in Poland. "Well," she answered, "the family stayed in Długosiodło, even my grandparents. The only one who escaped to Siberia was cousin Mordechai."

Don Moisés got straight to the point: "They are all probably dead by now, except Mordechai."

For his part, Max received Susanita's message, probably also carrying bad news: "This crazy man wants to tell me only bad news!" he thought, as he injected yet another dose of heroin. He had started to drink excessively when he felt that events were getting out of control. The previous year his country invaded the Soviet Union and it earned him staunch enemies among the workers and the Communists. Then, new foes emerged once Germany got into a state of war against the United States. Even the merchants who initially supported him were distant now. Yadira did not answer his telephone calls and had turned pro US; Max was expecting the worst. The concentration camp built near the La Sabana Airport and Park, at the west end of the town, was finished and the German diplomat knew who would be incarcerated there. Susanita's message would surely confirm his suspicions, he thought.

When at Morazán Park at night, Susanita warned him about what would happen, Max pretended not to consider it relevant. He promised he would take care of himself and that he would call him soon. He knew there was little he could do to prevent the vandalism, yet he hoped to take advantage of the chaos to fly away to Panama. Before departure, he would take revenge against the friend who had betrayed him. Next day, the Nazi decided to leave

Carlos's photos over his desk at the Legation office. In this way, when the Communists broke in, they would find evidence of his friend's Nazi past. But Max would not wait for the red hordes. He asked Rodrigo, his old partner in crime and escapes, to prepare the car and the luggage to go to the airport and take a plane to Panama. There they would take a boat to Colombia and then they would sail to Germany.

But things would get complicated for the Nazi leader. During previous few weeks, Lieutenant Elizondo found out who the accomplice was in his nephew's murder. Rodrigo was detained and tortured and forced to confess his crime. With the promise of reducing his sentence, the police gave him the opportunity to work for the Costa Rican intelligence services by watching all his boss's movements. When Rodrigo informed that Max was planning to run away that July 4th, the police caught him as soon as he left the Legation building.

The day of United States independence was total chaos in San José. There was a parade in support of the Allies and to protest the German attack against the ship *San Pablo*. Once this event was over, the Communist hordes attacked the German and the Italian stores and businesses. As if by magic, the police disappeared and let the looters do whatever they wanted. The mob started throwing stones and looting the places and then they moved on to beat the owners and anyone looking German, finally setting fire to the buildings. Just as happened during the plague in Egypt, somebody painted the buildings with blood so that the "innocents" could be spared and the guilty duly punished. Each Communist leader carried with him a map with the names of the "Nazi" stores and businesses.

The German Legation was devastated and its documents confiscated. Some Germans and Italians were kicked and beaten in the streets. Some others were beaten before their stores were attacked. Some of them were able to hide with other foreigners, even with Jews. Such was the case of Carlos and Yadira: When a furious mob was after them, they ran and hid at *La Peregrina*. Carlos was too blond to find refuge in stores owned by Latinos and his only chance was with the Poles. They requested political asylum of Don David, who had no objections to protect his friend, although for a moment he considered handing over Yadira to the mob.

"Of course, of course! That is what friends are for," said the shopkeeper, suggesting they should pretend to be his employees.

Mrs. Dönning could not have anticipated that in order to disguise her Nazi affiliation, she would end up as a clerk selling brassieres at a Jewish store. While Carlos started praying like a Jew to deceive the seditious, his wife looked after a peasant woman asking for a size 40A brassiere. In her own fine store, Yadira sold U.S. sizes, from *Small* to *Large* and did not know this other measuring scale: Did they use the "A" to indicate whether the breast is excellent or abnormal?

"Who gave you a level "A" for your breasts?" asked the mistaken clerk.

"My husband does not grade them as in a school examination; he simply sucks them," answered the customer, not understanding Yadira's tactless question.

Blood began to run through Central Avenue and the demonstrators did not seem contented until some 100 stores were burning out of control. The mobs trashed the Germans, be they Nazis, Communists, or just plain folks unconcerned about politics. Looters came out of the stores carrying hoses, radios, car tires, clothes, tools and even wall clocks for offices. A woman tried to defend her business and was kicked by four thugs, who shouted: "Down with the Nazis," as they were taking all the money from the register drawer. A fat woman, a member of the Communist Party, grabbed the jewels worn by two German girls, shouting that the proletarian revolution had already started. However, she put the jewels in her purse and then told her daughter: "Take this home and hide it. If by tomorrow there is not a workers' revolution, then we will keep them until Socialism arrives."

"But Mom," replied her offspring, "should you not tell the comrade, head of your cell?"

"The only thing I will tell, if you continue contradicting me, is the news to your father that you are pregnant," answered the Communist woman.

Although Carlos was, during the assault, able to save himself, he was arrested the following day, for "complicity" with the Nazi Party and then was sent to the concentration camp built near La Sabana, the large park surrounding the city's airport. It all had been perfectly planned, to the point that the beds had the names of the presumed Nazis even before their occupants arrived.

There he found Max, who had been detained at the airport nearby. Some 100 other Germans joined them. They and others would eventually be sent to detention camps in Texas. Carlos knew it was not a secret that most of them supported Hitler and their country in the war, but not all of them were Nazis or even anti-Semitic, just as in Germany where some polls had indicated that not all the Nazis were anti-Jewish. Moreover, an important group of Nazis did not hold any animosity towards the Hebrew people. He and Elena used to discuss how human behavior was unpredictable.

When she talked about the women's sorority and how they were more tolerant than men, he in turn told her that in his country it was the women who more strongly supported the Nazis. Contrary to what could be expected, the National Socialist Party always got more votes from women than from men. "Those who in Germany have protected the Jews have been men in a larger proportion than women. We may never make generalizations about a people or a group, Elena. You find all kinds or persons in all of them."

According to Carlos, many fanatic Socialists and Christians had supported Hitler, whereas some Nazis hid Jews. "I know a Nazi lieutenant who married a Hebrew girl and passed her off as an Arian," he had told his beloved. "Nonetheless, he, a Christian German on his way to convert to Judaism, was incarcerated as a Nazi follower."

In the camp, while he saw hundreds of his fellow Germans around him, he remembered his last conversations with Elena: "The Nazi Party is a monster," he had said, "but it is not easy to say how it managed to get to power. It is a dark chapter that prevents us from repeating the easy answers and the categories of "the good" and "the bad" that we are so accustomed to. Those persecuting and betraying the Jews are not only the German Nazis. There are collaborators, dirty accomplices, everywhere. When it is convenient for them they will deny their support and because of it you will never find them in a jail or a concentration camp."

When Elena found out her lover was incarcerated, she ran to the concentration camp to plead for him. However, evidence against him was abundant and strong: He was present during the creation of the Nazi Party and his wife was a member of its feminine wing. Since she was a Costa Rican and her father a prominent Liberal, they did not do anything to her. But there would be no clemency for her husband.

"No, *señorita*," said the director of the camp to Elena, "it does not matter that he was about to convert to Islamism, to Judaism, or to Buddhism. He stays here because I have orders from above."

David tried to convince the American Minister that it was a big mistake, but Hornibrook was not convinced of Carlos's innocence. "I very much want to help you, Don David, but I may not act against the orders received from the State Department and your man is indeed on the Black List. Let us wait until he is in the United States and once he's there it would be easier to request a revision of his case," he continued. Even Anita, who was not too sympathetic towards Carlos and his relation with her daughter, also tried to do something, so that the Israelite Center would give her son-in-law a recommendation letter. But it was of no avail. Carlos would be deported with the rest.

But bad news came not only from Burstin. Cousin Fanny, who had arrived just the previous week, brought even worse news with her. Upon a request from Anita, Don José Sanchez was able to get a Costa Rican passport for Fanny, as a desperate means to get her out of the Warsaw Ghetto. The former maid to German millionaires had been able to escape from Germany when her employers were detained and taken to a concentration camp. When Anita found out that she was hiding in Warsaw, she asked her coffee baron friend for help. Don José suggested that her cousin could come to work at one of the new agricultural enterprises.

Initially, he was able to get her a Costa Rican passport and a visa, issued by the country's Consulate in Warsaw to work at the Tenorio Project, a colony of Jewish farmers in Guanacaste. With the passport in her possession, Fanny was able to get out of the ghetto and establish mail communications with her family in Costa Rica. They helped her get the money to pay for a one-way ticket to Costa Rica on board a ship carrying German and Austrian Jews. Nevertheless, once they were in Puerto Limón, the new Costa Rican government did not allow the passengers to come off the ship because President Calderon did not approve the Tenorio Project and, besides, considered the visas to have expired. The Government explained that it no longer recognized any Costa Rican passports issued from

European consulates under German control. Moreover, according to the customs officers, the Hebrew immigrants were coming for quite different purposes: They would not undertake any agricultural tasks.

While the Ministry of Foreign Relations determined what to do with them, Anita was able to get a permit, so that she and her daughter could visit their cousin. Again, Don José had come to their help, obtaining the required safe-conduct for the two women. "I had to tip several officials because the Government does not want visits, neither journalists nor friends, on board that ship," said he.

Fanny was very happy to see her relatives again after enduring a hellish experience in Warsaw's Ghetto, together with several hundreds of thousands of other Jews, all confined in a small area and condemned to starve by the Nazis. With wide and terrified eyes and a broken voice, Fanny told them about the horrible crowding, the lack of food, the rampant pests and diseases and the death of thousands and thousands of elderly people and the sick and she began to cry without a stop.

They all stood still, until she recovered somewhat and continued: "The Germans treat us like dogs; they have set the world back to the Middle Ages.... Even the Stern family, for whom I used to work, has been taken away to concentration camps, where living conditions are even worse," she commented. She felt blessed: "I am one of the few that has been able to leave the Ghetto, thanks to this passport," she said, while showing everybody the small dark brown document that accredited her as a Costa Rican citizen. However, if the current government would not recognize it, she was afraid they would send her back to Poland. "And there," she said firmly, "I shall not return. I would rather drown here in these Caribbean waters than return to the ghetto in Warsaw. I do not know what the Nazis want to do with us Jews, but I am afraid we will not be alive after the war. Hitler has in store very evil plans against us, so terrible that we are not capable of even imagining them," she warned.

For her part, Anita promised her cousin to leave no stone unturned in Costa Rica in order to let her stay. Although her friend Don José did not have very good relations with the Calderón administration, nonetheless he was influential and had promised to help.

However, things did not come out as they expected. The President would not grant the permits, so as not to upset the local merchants who were opposed to the immigration of "new peddlers." And then, without allowing time for the legal and administrative procedures and the public debate to take place, he ordered the Austrian boat to sail away.

Two days after her visit to Puerto Limón, Elena was informed that all the passengers, including her relative, had been forced to return to Germany. She felt the world was coming to an end and that it would break up into thousands of pieces.

While Carlos was on board a ship to be interned in a concentration camp in the United States, Fanny was going to one in Germany. However, she realized the similarities ended there. A few days later, the press said that Hitler had decided to kill the European Jews. An



important German industrialist, with connections inside the Reich, made the disclosure, during a visit to Switzerland. Anita could not accept it and told Elena that nobody could believe such news. "It is simply impossible that in our civilized world they might be planning to kill millions of Jews! How are they going to do it?"

Elena, for her part, possessed a different kind of knowledge. This is the only way to explain her actions at the end of that year: She married Adolfo, the Jewish man chosen by her father, according to the tradition. Elena hid her plans from her mother until the last minute. "Mother," she said, "please, make me a wedding dress in such a way that I do not look too much the bride - without too many fringes. I am marrying the man father chose for me, just another *shidduch*."

"But daughter, have you gone completely insane?" scolded Anita. "Do you not realize that previously arranged marriages are a real pest for us Jewish women and that we always end up sheared? If you marry the man chosen by your father, you will end up as bitter as I did. David cannot differentiate a chicken from a duck and notwithstanding his love for the Talmud and his cult for intelligent people, he is going to get you the richest and most ignorant man he may find, because in this way he will not have to pay part of your dowry. Your father is as good a matchmaker as Stalin himself, whose marriage with Hitler ended up with the most catastrophic divorce for the Socialists," said her mother, enraged.

"We the Sikoras are part of the universalistic Jewish people," replied Elena, "who think that nobody will be free until we all become free and, moreover, that in this century we have lost the battle."

Elena suspected her Polish Jewish people were in real danger in the hands of Carlos's nation. "Elena, darling. It is one thing for the nationalist to defeat us and something quite different having you sacrificed like Joan of Arc to save an amorphous mass that calls itself 'the people'," retorted her surprised mother. Anita had ceased to believe in Socialism as well as in the other modern movements, including Zionism. "I have had enough with nationalism," she said to her daughter, "be it German, Jewish, or Polish. I want to be treated with the same rights, as everyone and I do not plan to go to Palestine to continue plucking chickens, supported by a male. Once they build the new Israel, the Zionists will treat us like second class citizens."

"No, mother", rebuked Elena, "we do not have room there. We the Sikoras will again disappear and will end up in the bottom of the sea, like Itil from Khazar, where we all lived in peace and tolerating religious diversity. If Hitler does not win the war, we the Universalists will be but an insignificant minority in the midst of an ocean of Zionists and religious fanatics," she responded.

## Epilogue

“It cannot be! It cannot be!” I screamed with desperation.

“You had another nightmare,” answered Hector, trying to calm me down. I woke up covered in sweat and with the awareness of having emerged from the worst dream possible. I had fallen asleep after having spent all night working on my computer. I had written a novel based on events that I had not witnessed and places I had never visited. I asked my partner to read what I had written. When he finished it, dawn had already set in.

“Your novel has nothing to do with reality,” he said to me. “Your mother never had an affair with a German man; your grandparent's home was conservative; Don David never frequented gay bars, nor did he ever get involved in politics, nor did he save the Jewish community from any impending disaster,” continued an increasingly moody Hector. “The story about the Nazis is pure fiction and there never was an attempt against President Calderon, nor was a bomb ever found in the synagogue,” he added. Hector was concerned I had wasted my time writing such trash, when I had been committed to write an essay on Costa Rican democracy, which was long overdue. “Your secretary will pick up your essay tomorrow afternoon,” he insisted, “so start working on it.” My lover reminded me that they had already paid for this essay, whereas my novel would not produce a single penny.

“Am I happy to hear that!” I responded, as I dried the last sweat drops from my forehead. “Last night I thought it was real,” I added. “Perhaps,” I said directly into his ear in a whisper, “some *dybbuk* possessed me and wrote the novel.” I was part of the generation born after the Holocaust and perhaps this was just a paranoid attack, I said to myself. After all, my country was fully democratic and these events probably never occurred. There is no anti-Semitism in Costa Rica - I thought - and we even have Jewish politicians who are running for the Presidency. How was this story possible?

In spite of the fact that we agreed some Jewish little devils had performed a trick on me, Hector wanted to know what had happened to Carlos, how things developed after his return to Costa Rica and how the story ended.

“If you say it never took place, why do you want to know?” I responded.

“You made me read this novel all night long and I am curious to find out the ending,” he insisted.

The truth is, I myself did not know. I had fallen asleep or I had awakened around 1942 and no “*ovot*”<sup>98</sup> could help me find out what took place after that,” I explained to him.

I decided to go wash my hands seven times, since this ritual cleanses the soul from the worst *shedim*<sup>99</sup> and forget this nightmare. “Perhaps they continued to see each other,” I

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<sup>98</sup> Spirits who advise mortals

<sup>99</sup> Evil spirits

suggested to my friend, hoping to satisfy his curiosity. But Hector could not understand Elena's behavior and did not approve of her decisions.

“Why didn't she fight for her love?” he inquired, suggesting that Christians could be immune to Polish devils. He wanted a good reason and an easy answer that would allow him to go back to sleep, but I was aware that sometimes we make choices without giving them enough thought.

“If my mother was really a good fortune teller, then she could have predicted that because of the *Shoa*, Jews and Germans could not live together. “This novel,” I added, “is really postmodern; it does not end, nor do its stories come to any resolution. Why don't you continue it?”

“Because it is *your* nightmare, not mine and I did not write it,” he responded, as he declined my offer.

“Well, I also did not imagine the whole thing, since more heads had gotten into this adventure,” I had to admit.

We did agree on something: This novel should not be published. It was politically incorrect. None of the communities would approve of the story and most people would be offended by it. I promised Hector that I would delete it later, since I wanted to go back to sleep and recover from such a long night.

Some noise made me aware that uninvited friends had come to visit us. I got up from my warm bed and went to the kitchen to find out who was having such spirited conversations. To my surprise, these people were not alive. I ran immediately to hug my mother, whom I had missed so much.

“Mother, what are you doing here?” I asked her.

“I came with the rest of the *mishpoche* and the characters of your book to spend some time in this country that has such a wonderful weather,” she said with a beautiful smile.

The other visitors came one by one to embrace me and to kiss me or shake hands. I said hello to Don Carlos, Don Jose, Gloria, Susanita, The Duster, Lady, Miguel and many more. Don David told me that some could not come to visit. Samuel was in Israel and had a problem with his leg that made the trip impossible; Fanny was waiting to be reincarnated pretty soon and had no time for socializing; others were not allowed to get away from Hell.

The Costa Rican politicians, despite being dead stiff, also did not attend, since they still practiced their profession and wanted to remain neutral.

“We are always running for office,” former President Calderon indicated to me, “and we don't want to get involved in ethnic problems.

“Don't you ever retire?” I asked him, shocked to see how much someone could get addicted to politics.

“Never,” he responded. “As a matter of fact, we are now working on a petition to outlaw Elias' chariot from the heavens, given the contamination it produces,” Don Ricardo Jimenez informed me.

“At least you have enough Costa Rican *politicos* to help you out,” I replied.

“Are you kidding me?” he responded with a laugh. “These men are interested only in seeing how they can rip off the Heavens' Treasure. Right now, since there is a process of globalization and Hell and Heaven are becoming integrated, these Mafioso are trying to make a fortune selling air conditioners to the Devil.”

“What is Don Otilio doing now?” I had to ask him.

“He runs Heaven's bar,” replied Don Ricardo.

“Do people drink in heaven?” I inquired with surprise.

“Only when Mother Theresa is out shopping,” was his response.

The characters and I decided to discuss how they liked or did not like the novel and what had been their experience in it. Anita was the first one to talk. She admitted having liked the experience but not the salary.

“How come we have no contract and no royalties from its sales?” she inquired.

“But Grandma, you are dead. What do you need money for?” I replied.

“A woman always has her expenses,” she retorted. “Life here is getting very expensive and we get only the basics for our spiritual needs. I like small luxuries and articles imported from Hell. I have been so bored that I opened a small store to repair Angel's wings and with the little I make I buy some nice stuff. A merchant never stops her work,” she said and winked at me.

Anita acknowledged being upset with the plot, because she thought her relationship with Don Jose “was not fully developed” and “had been cut short.”

“The reason I could not write more about your love affair, is that Don Carlos did not provide me with enough information and I had to rely on Dona Golchas' diary,” I explained to her. Anita was not satisfied.

“You should have inquired more and not depend on that awful woman to get the facts. How can you rely on a diary written by someone who feels envy for your grandmother? The fact is that you do not care about me,” she continued, trying to make me feel guilty.

“Moreover,” she added, “how dare you write that I was bitter! I would like to see your face had you lived in Poland,” she warned me.

Don David was furious with me. As a good Sikora he believed no one should write anything bad about the *mishpoche*. Besides, he felt his reputation in Heaven had been damaged.

“Since it came out, many of the *Yids* in Heaven no longer speak to me. They say that had they known I taught the Talmud to a Nazi, they would never have let me in.”

“But grandfather,” I inquired “do you still fight in heaven?”

“Until your grandmother came in, things were peaceful, but not anymore,” he said with sadness. “She changed the rules and many people are now asking for asylum in Hell, where things are supposed to be better,” he said.

My grandfather explained to me that after his wife's arrival, many souls started to question some celestial rules. She even dared to establish an opposition political party, advocating reforms in the visitation hours, sexual abstinence and men-only praying groups. Don David was even more upset, because the new party took away many of his privileges, accusing him of not having being frank about the relationship with the German.

“They reported I had revealed information to Don Carlos and they took away my entrance pass to Emilia's bordello in Purgatory. Things got even worse when your grandmother started to mistake some angels for chickens and opened a restaurant specializing in wings.” Don David complained to me that since Anita's arrival, Heaven was no longer what it used to be and that he was planning to cross the border to Hell, where people lived better.

I thought Max would be more critical, but to my surprise he liked the book. “You spiced up the plot with some good sex,” he said. Nevertheless, he did not think his sexual life was as promiscuous as I had written and he believed that those years were wild to many people. The Nazi did find objectionable that I had indicated he was indifferent to Ernest's death.

“I did love the man, but I could do nothing to protect him from evil.” More questionable, he thought, was my story about the pets. “There were no gas chambers in Guanacaste and the killing of the animals is a figment of your imagination,” he said.

“Where are they then?” I insisted.

“Did your own mother not tell you that the pets were hiding in many Polish sofas?” he responded with a tinge of sarcasm. The man, finally, thought that a Jew shouldn't write a story about him: “You will never be objective.”

Yadira was more disgusted. She emphatically denied ever having a relationship with Max.

“I fought for my principles and you try to stain my reputation by making me look like a cheap whore,” she screamed. “I was never a Nazi militant. I only wanted to protect Costa Rica's economy from the Jews. You may say what you want because I am still alive,” she continued, “but wait until I die and you will see how I will come to haunt you for the rest of your life.”

If Yadira was enraged, more so was Pepe. “I was always discreet and now you come and tell every single soul that I was a homosexual, something that my family considers an abomination. I have asked my descendants to sue you for libel and get as much money as they can from you. You will not see a single penny from this trashy novel!” he swore to me and showed me his fist. I tried to win him over by telling him that, in my story, I cleared his reputation for being a squealer. It was of no avail, since he thought being gay was worse than being thought a spy. Miguel, who was also unhappy because I included his affair with The Duster, seconded him.

“In those times, we men could have sex with queers without being regarded as homosexuals,” he indicated to me.

As both men looked at me with fury, Paquita also questioned my integrity for portraying her as a “dumb broad” who did nothing about Pepe's sexual secrets.

“I always suspected what was going on, but Pepe did perform well in bed and I was more concerned with my reputation than with his homosexuality.”

I did not please Susanita either. The man was disappointed with his description, since I made him look like a friend of the Nazis and a sex fiend, something he regretted with all his heart. He also did not like that I wrote he had warned Max about Costa Rica's *kristallnacht*. The Duster came to his defense. The witch admitted that Susanita had a big mouth and probably was unable to keep it shut. Nevertheless, “the queen was not bad and only tried to save her lover.” The Duster was also unhappy with my novel, since it made her look like a murderer and I had forgotten to add “how distraught I was when I found out I had killed Giorgio with rat poison.”

“What happens is that you are homophobic yourself and we queens look terrible in your story,” the sorcerer complained. Ramon, on the other hand, fully denied his participation in the Italian's murder. “You are totally unfair in how you described my behavior and that of the United Fruit Company. We could not provide the *tútiles* with wine and macaroni, as they demanded. Mr. Keith was always willing to help and the banana workers were Communist troublemakers.”

Sick of so much whining, I decided to look for my mother and Don Carlos. “For a Momme,” she said with love for me, “it is impossible to be objective. I know some members of the Conservative Jewish Community are saying that you ruined my reputation and made me look bad. Notwithstanding these views, I like what you did with my story. I was a feminist and I detested the way I was treated as a woman. They never valued what

we did as women and we had to struggle for too long to get our rights. I do not mind at all to let the world know that I was not what people think I was.”

Don Carlos also supported what I had written. He took me to the garden and told me not to worry about the critics. “They will never be happy; who cares what they say?” he consoled me. I was more interested in finding out what had happened between him and my mother. “Don Carlos, please do tell me how did the story end; my friend Hector will not let me sleep until I find out.”

“I loved your mother until the day she died. I was emotionally destroyed when I came back to Costa Rica and found her married to your father. I could not understand why she blamed me for something I had no control over. She repented afterwards, but it was too late; we never ceased to see each other. We still do.”

I saw my mother walk toward us in the garden and I could not help asking her what had happened to her relationship in the other world. As she was going to respond, I heard a noise and started to wake up from my sleep and realized I had dreamed everything. I was relieved that this ordeal was coming to an end, since the *kvetching*<sup>100</sup> was getting into my nerves.

I had a mission to accomplish, which was to delete this novel from my hard disk. Instead, I would write my essay on Costa Rican democracy and send it through e-mail to my publisher. But machines are machines and my laptop did not seem to operate well. Some sort of problem had made the Outlook Express send thousands and thousands of copies of my novel around the globe. I was getting responses from people who wanted to publish the story as if I had intended them to do so.

I tried to stop the endless delivery of my file, with no success. Many technicians came to fix it and found strange viruses in its operating system. One of the experts told me this was a very weird infection, since the virus not only was unknown to everyone, but also spoke in Yiddish. “Are you being serious?” I asked, since I had never heard that a computer virus could utter a word.

“It talks, because I have studied it and every time you get e-mail from a publisher with a good offer, it accepts it and writes back “*a dank*<sup>101</sup>”. But when the proposal is for little money, it responds “*Kush mich in toches*<sup>102</sup>!” I have never seen anything like it! he added. “I have tried to undo this action, but every time I intend to write your name, the computer gets very hot and seems ready to explode. You'd better get an exorcist and not a poor computer technician like me,” he said as he ran to the door, leaving his bill on the way out.

At first, I did not know what to do. A *dybbuk* had gotten into my computer and I no longer lived in Poland, where there were experts in exorcism who could help me. After many nights without sleep, an idea occurred to me: I would send e-mail to [Anita@heaven.com](mailto:Anita@heaven.com)

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<sup>100</sup> Complaining, whining.

<sup>101</sup> Thank you

<sup>102</sup> Kiss my behind

and write the following: “OK, Grandmother, 50-50 on the royalties, yours to set up the Emma Goldman Foundation for the Poor.” This plan paid off and next day I got my answer: “*Zaier gut*<sup>103</sup>.”

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<sup>103</sup> OK



