

Sample Translation

Moshe and Reizele

(Mosje en Reizele)

by Karlijn Stoffels

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Translated by Patricia Crampton

It is hot in the kitchen. I am up to my elbows in a bowl of batter and feeling ridiculous. I am the only boy in this women's domain.

Reizele turns a laughing face to me but I look the other way. After all it's her fault that I am here kneading dough instead of, well, instead of what? We're not allowed to go outside, except for the orthodox boys. They are allowed to go under guard to the synagogue to hear the shofar blowing.

I don't envy them. That hoarse sound gives me cold shivers.

We can't play football in the square either. It's too dangerous. In any case it is Rosh Hashanah. We have to think about our sins and make good resolutions for the New Year. The little ones have collected chestnuts and are busy fiddling with dolls and spinning tops.

'You've got enough batter for a whole regiment,' I say.

'It's dough, not batter. The difference is...'

'Do you know the difference between a bench vice and a bench lathe?'

A loud bang comes from outside. The pan trembles on the stove. I want to look out at the street but that's not allowed. I pick up a lump of dough and slam it down again.

'That's how my mother did it, too,' says Reizele. 'It rises better that way.'

'Where is Esther?' I ask, 'She usually follows you around, doesn't she?'

'She's sitting under the stairs.'

We were all quiet when he came in with her. Korczak in his military uniform, which he had put on for God knows what reason. Perhaps to feel heroic.

Behind him, at a safe distance, a pale little girl, looking straight ahead and holding her arms stiffly at her sides.

Korczak had found her in the street, covered with blood, and taken her to the first aid post. Later they had come back to him. Her house was in ruins, her father was dead and she had no mother. Could Korczak take her in? The doctor went to pick her up himself.

There is a waiting list for boarding and the admission rules are strict, but a lot of children have been brought in in the last few days.

She doesn't belong here. She's disturbed. She doesn't talk to anyone. Only Reizele is allowed to help her and sit next to her at the table.

I pull the sticky mess off my fingers and decide never to help in the kitchen again in the New Year. Now I must show my good will. The verdict of the children's court. What nonsense.

Baking gingerbread for a hundred and twenty children means you've got your day's work cut out for you. But the result is worth the trouble.

For this meal the tables are covered with carefully ironed white cloths. The candles are burning. Korczak tells the story of Abraham who was willing to offer his only son Isaac to God.

I have always been irritated by that story. Why didn't Abraham go and lie on the brushwood himself instead of almost scaring his son to death?

But the story is part of it all, just like the ram's horn and the honey cake. Not very much will come of the good resolutions for the New Year. On 27th September Warsaw surrendered to the Germans.

My hands are sweaty. If I get blisters I can stop. I wipe my hands on my trousers and blow on them.

‘Wimp,’ says Piotr.

I attack. This time I do not sprain my wrist. I jump about, throwing hard punches. Now and then he casually sweeps a few of them aside. When he has had enough, he catches me in a headlock.

‘When are you going to teach me the Double Nelson?’ I ask, panting.

‘When that’s finished.’

‘That’ is a pile of scrap timber which he has picked up. I pull out the old nails. We store these away in a safe place. Then I saw the planks to measure. We lug the whole stack up the cellar stairs. The rest they can do themselves.

In the square they are waiting impatiently to begin. The older boys and girls are given nails, which they can hammer into the planks with a stone. For the younger children there are branches with which to cover the huts. I play no further part in this. I am too old for the Feast of Tabernacles.

Zalevski tells the boys they must be quieter. If a patrol passes you don’t want to give them any excuse.

On the Day of Reconciliation we didn’t do much. Some of the children fasted and David told the story of Jonah and the Whale.

So now here we sit, in the belly of the stinking beast, a bit stuffy and cramped, but safe. No one knows when the whale is going to spit us out again, and in what country.

All the little ones have made drawings to hang up in the huts. When they hear the hammering outside they grab their drawings off the table, put away their pencils and get their jackets down from the coat hanger. Once they are outside they begin to run and shout, but not for long, because the neighbours opposite are quick to complain.

I am surprised at the children's orderliness. They never get a good hiding and the court seldom gives them more than Paragraph 100, a warning. Reizele is in the kitchen. Wouldn't I know it.

'On kitchen duty again?' I ask.

Esther looks at me sideways. She gets jealous when anyone else makes any demands on Reizele. Today she looks as if she has been crying and is even paler than usual.

'What are you doing in the kitchen? Do you want to knead some more dough?'

Reizele laughs happily.

'Never again.' I show her my red hands. 'I need some ointment, otherwise I can't go on tomorrow. There's no one here.'

She packs Esther off. She jabbars at her in her incomprehensible language.

'Why do you talk Yiddish to her? It's not allowed.'

'It makes her feel at home here. Things are bad enough as it is.'

'Desperate ills... She'll never learn that way.'

'So what?'

'So what? That's the way it all began, idiot! For centuries and centuries they've been living here and not a word of Polish comes out of their stupid mouths! They have never read a Polish book, never eaten Polish sausage, never worn Polish clothes. No wonder the people here think: get lost!'

'What about you? You're Polish through and through, and yet you're shut up here like the rest of us.'

'The just have to suffer with the unjust.'

'The just! Hark at that!'

'Reizele, it annoys me. I sit in the stupid tram, stuffed full of Jews, they shout, they wave their arms about, they chatter and chatter, and you can't understand a word of it. Then I think: speak the language of *your* country. Why aren't I allowed to hear what they're saying? And they stink.'

'Poor people stink. They eat badly and they don't have baths. And they shout. They live ten to a room, that's why they shout.'

‘If we ever want to have a chance, we have to accept Poland. Speak Polish.

And if some fellow wants to wear a stupid dress, let him do it at home.’

‘Their priests also go around in stupid dresses.’

‘They must be cracked too.’

‘Communist.’

‘If we don’t want to belong here we’ll have to go back to our own country.’

‘Leave Esther to speak her own language. We’re cut off here. We’re not even allowed to go to the public school any more.’

‘You have to look ahead.’

‘Oh?’ Reizele looks straight at me, I turn red. Just listen to me. The future!

Moshe Schuster sees the light!’

‘It stinks in here too,’ I say.

‘We’ve got herring.’ Reizele beams.

I see a pathetic pile of slimy fish lying by the sink.

‘Are you waiting for the Messiah to come and multiply them by seven?’

‘I don’t need the Messiah for that,’ says Reizele. ‘I can do it myself.’

On the floor beside the sink a big pan of boiled potatoes is steaming. A bowl of beets is cooling on the cooker.

‘Herring salad for the picnic,’ says Reizele proudly.

Camp fires, folk dancing and picnicking in the tabernacle huts, what does she see in it?

She reads my mind. ‘It makes me think of home. Just after I got here I never wanted to think about home, and later on I couldn’t remember anything.’

She gets out the vinegar bottle and opens a big jar of pickled onions.

‘Mrs Stefa gave it me. The last jar. Isn’t that sweet?’

She is the only person who can call Mrs Stefa ‘sweet’ without making you burst out laughing.

She takes down the big chopping board that hangs above the sink, drags the knife across the whetstone and begins to chop. With her left hand she holds the onions, which fly off in all directions when the knife touches them.

‘When I bake gingerbread for the New Year or fritters in December, or make gefilte fish, I remember everything. How my mother lit the candles on Friday, my little brother’s circumcision feast.’

We hear Esther calling in the hall. She probably can’t find anyone.

‘For her it’s the other way round,’ says Reizele. ‘Everything that makes her think of home drives her crazy.’

‘That’s another reason why you shouldn’t be speaking Yiddish to her.’

Reizele sticks out her tongue, but when Esther gives her the ointment she thanks her in Polish.

‘Give it to me,’ I say quickly. ‘I can do it myself.’

‘You’ll have to,’ says Reizele. ‘If I do it they’ll be eating herring salad with ointment.’

I smear it on my hands.

‘I don’t understand,’ I say. ‘Why don’t you remember anything about home when you fetch coal or draw the curtains? Why is it only when you’re cooking for feast days?’

Reizele gives Esther the huge masher and she bangs it down into the pan of potatoes with a great show of strength.

‘Have you no faith at all, Moshe?’

I shake my head.

‘So you think a human being is exactly like an animal? Like Spinoza says?’ She looks at me anxiously.

‘Exactly. Just like an animal.’

Her lips tremble. ‘Man is not higher or lower than an animal,’ she mutters.

I’ve done it again, now she’s upset.

‘But Moshe, why has there never been a Spinoza among the animals?’

Huh? I hear a strange, smothered sound bubbling up behind the potato pan.

Esther is laughing at me. Reizele can’t keep a straight face either.

She let me walk right into it. How often have I heard that joke before?

‘It’s got whiskers,’ I say feebly.

‘Your own fault. You’re keeping us from working. If you don’t want to help, clear off.’

‘I’d love to, but it’s a shame to let ointment get into the food.’

She brandishes her chopping knife and I make my escape from the kitchen.

That evening I sit with the others in the huts out front. If I don’t join in I get nothing to eat.

‘The herring must have swum away,’ says Mietek.

‘That was because it saw you,’ I say. ‘My helping’s full of it.’

To be honest I can only find a tiny sliver of herring but it tastes like seven times as much.

I hide the bag under my sweater and pull my coat flaps over it. At the bottom of the stairs I listen. No one. I run up the stairs to the dining-room.

Outside I can hear the low murmur of children who are trying to be quiet while they play.

The door of the workroom is locked. Hang it! I look around. No one in sight. I knock at the door.

‘It’s me, open up!’

Those silly birds spoil everything. Marysia opens the door, giggling. ‘It’s your boyfriend, Reizele.’

Reizele is not even listening. She is sewing furiously. Her foot moves swiftly up and down on the pedal of the sewing-machine and each of her hands is busy with a different task, but she doesn’t falter. You can see that she often plays the piano. Only now it isn’t notes that flow from her fingertips, but rags and cloths.

I empty out my bag and look suspiciously at the stack of wood. I have been busy for days, my legs itching at night because I wanted to jump out of bed and do more on the sly. I attacked the job with inordinate pride, and now I stand among the giggling girls and see what they see: door knobs. And not even beautifully smoothed and varnished, but coarsely chiselled and sloppily painted with black, red, and brown paint. Among them lie oval bits of wood which look rather like teaspoons with broken-off handles. How could I have thought these could become puppet-show dolls with wooden hands and wooden heads?

Tears burn behind my eyes. I push the jumble into a heap.

Reizele stands up. She takes the topmost cloth from the pile beside the sewing-machine. She has not made much more of it than I have. A shapeless doll’s dress with long sleeves and an odd, stand-up collar. And yet the tops look so fine. But that is not surprising, because Piotr made them. He turned them neatly on the lathe, added a filed-down nail, a lick of paint, and there they were.

‘I’m going to bash you over the head,’ says Reizele in a high voice.

‘Carry on.’ I turn despondently towards her.

An unmistakeable clown lifts his wooden hand and gives me a tap.

‘Just need to be glued,’ says Reizele. ‘A couple of strings, and voila! A genuine Polish marionette.’

They work the heads and hands into the dresses and soon they have a smart row of village policemen, nurses, Red Riding Hoods, and dragons.

‘I’m not going to bash you over the head,’ says Reizele. Suddenly she takes a step towards me and kisses me on the cheek. I start back and bump my head against the door. Marysia bursts into a fit of giggles.

I take to my heels.

‘Happy Hannukah!’ shout Marysia and Halina.

On the stairs Boruch bars my way. The stairs are wide and I try to slip past him but he jumps to and fro.

‘Don’t wear out your soles,’ I say.

‘No problem for me, you know that. I’ll just cut myself a new pair.’

‘There’s no leather left, you know that quite well.’

‘I’m looking for Reizele.’

‘Best of luck,’ I say.

He stops me. ‘Slide down if you dare.’

I swing my leg over the banister.

‘Watch out,’ says Boruch, teasingly. ‘The doctor always used to slide down like that. Until he had to go before the court. He got a stern warning. One more time and he’d have to leave the boarding-house. You can imagine how scared he was.’

I stand on the stairs again and give him a shove. ‘Let me past. Now.’

‘If you tell me where Reizele is. Jan has been to the miller and he’s given us a bag of flour for the fritters. A whole bag of flour! And the hens have laid extra for the feast days. Zalewski always thought they were Jewish hens, he says, but now he knows for sure.’

‘We have staff to cook for us,’ I say loftily.

‘Do you think they’ve got time to fry a hundred-and-thirty fritters? And Reizele will kill me if she can’t do it. Hanukkah is her feast.’

And there she is.

‘In a minute,’ she calls to Boruch, and she’s gone.

‘You’ve got to hear this one,’ says Boruch. ‘A Nazi meets a Jew in the Old Square. “Swine,” says the Nazi. “Epstein,” says the Jew, and bows.’

He laughs loudly. I walk down the stairs beside him, feeling empty. The presents for Hanukkah are ready. The pious boys are sitting in the study room reading their scholarly books. The synagogue is closed but that does not keep them from their holy calling. In the hall the children are making candle-holders from bad potatoes, bits of putty and cardboard.

Jozef is sitting with them. He has not worked here long. It is no longer safe on the street. Patrols scour the town, looking for forced labourers. If you are lucky you may rake leaves or sweep streets for a few days. If you are unlucky you find yourself in a Nazi office and you get kicked and beaten. That’s why Jozef is here. If you have a job you are safer. He sleeps in the attic with the other carers. These days it’s no longer a problem for them to pick out the Jews on the street. We all wear a star. Sabina doled out needle and thread and everyone had to sew his own Star of David on his coat.

The Poles are relieved. The Germans are unable to distinguish a Pole from a Jew and sometimes beat up a Pole by mistake. That misunderstanding has now come to an end.

I walk up the square to the hen house. Those creatures should really be wearing a star now too.

‘Moshe! Moshe!’ Yossel comes down the steps. ‘Have you seen Reizele?’

‘No!’ I shout. What do they want from me? And why is that girl so indispensable?

‘We were going to play together,’ says Yossel. ‘But I can’t find her anywhere.’

‘Reizele is too old to play with you.’

He gives me a friendly smile.

‘We have to practise for this evening.’ He follows me in.

The dining-room is completely empty. It is housework time. A group of older boys and girls are cleaning up the yard behind the house. Reizele is not among them.

In the kitchen potatoes are being peeled and cabbage chopped, and sure enough, batter is being made for fritters.

In front of Boruch’s cubbyhole an orderly line of children stand with their shoes in hand, waiting their turn for a shine. No Reizele. In the doctor’s little office the scales are taking a rest from the morning weighing. We are all losing weight, the doctor says. So now he is out and about collecting money. The support fund provides an extra supplement, but it’s not enough. Korczak is running round the town. He has reluctantly taken off the uniform but he refuses to wear the star. If he goes on like this it won’t take a Paragraph 1000 to remove him from the boarding-house. They will simply come and get him.

There’s a noise coming from the girls’ dormitory, We are absolutely not allowed in there, but neither are the girls during the day. I open the door. Esther is sitting on the furthest bed, by the window. Reizele is standing beside her. She comes over to us.

‘She’s been sitting here like this for hours. She’s looking across the street to see if her father is coming to fetch her.’

‘Daft,’ I say.

‘I shall have to report her,’ says Yossel. ‘She’s not allowed to sit there.’

‘That’s telling tales,’ says Reizele.

‘It’s not good for her to keep to herself,’ says Yossel. ‘The doctor says so himself in How to Love a Child.’

‘There’s an exception to every rule,’ says Reizele.

Yossel frowns. ‘Where does it say that?’

‘Only the Nazis don’t make exceptions,’ I say. Now the clever-dick is completely tongue-tied. Just leave it to Moshe Schuster to shut up an opponent.

All this time Esther has not moved.

We go to the empty dining-room. Yossel gets out his violin and Reizele sits down at the piano.

‘In A minor,’ says Yossel. Reizele nods. He plays a phrase and then she joins in.

‘Rebbenu,’ she sings. ‘Oi Rebbenu...’

Yossel removes the violin from under his chin and replies:

‘What is it?’

‘I have no meat for Sabbath.’

I lean against the piano. Music is for girls and little boys, but I have nothing better to do.

It’s an appropriate song. We have no meat for Sabbath either. Nor for any other day, for that matter. Reizele has explained the position to me.

‘The Prime Minister...’

‘What Prime Minister?’

‘Sometimes the doctor calls Mrs Stefa “Prime Minister”. It’s from a book he wrote, Little King Matthew. It’s about a boy who’s a king. The children in his country get sweets every day and they have a flag with a four-leaf clover on it. Haven’t you read it?’

‘I don’t read children’s books.’

‘It’s been translated into at least ten languages. That’s why the doctor says we are safe with him. He’s so famous that if they do anything to us it’ll be in all the papers. Anyway, he calls her Prime Minister, when he’s in a good mood. And she calls herself Mrs Stefa. She says if you have had at least a thousand children in your life, you can’t very well be a Miss.’

Mrs Stefa never let you take bread from the kitchen, but the doctor said that children are always hungry. At the table you could actually take as much as you want. As long as you ate everything on your plate.

Now that rule has been scrapped. You are lucky if your stomach doesn’t rumble in the evening.

‘Rabbi...’ sings Reizele.

‘Yes, what is it now!’ snarls Yossel, so true to life that they all roar with laughter.

‘I have no fish for the Sabbath...

I have no bread for the Sabbath...’

When I hear clapping I suddenly notice that there are children listening. They have abandoned their balls, their marbles, their pencils.

Yossel whistles a tune and Reizele turns red.

‘We’re not doing that,’ she says.

He takes no notice and plays it anyway.

She accompanies him without singing. Yossel grins and plays a long solo. He rummages among his bits of paper, looking for pieces to play.

‘Don’t you know the words?’ I ask her.

‘Do you like the way I sing?’

‘No, not that, but music without words is even duller.’

‘It’s called “Reizele,”’ she says. ‘I can’t sing about myself, can I?’

‘What’s it about?’ I ask.

She blushes again. Yossel has found a new piece of music and is playing.

‘Her boy-friend is waiting for her. He whistles under her window and when she comes out she tells him that her mother said he mustn’t whistle. It’s not Yiddish.’

‘Ridiculous. And then?’

‘I had the text, but I’ve lost it. Yossel hasn’t got it either. I would give anything to find it. It’s such a lovely song. He promises her anything she wants, anything her mother wants. He will be pious, go to shul, say his prayers.’

‘What a mug.’

‘He’s in love with her. That doesn’t make him a mug. You are a mug. The man who wrote “Reizele”, Mordechai Gebirtig, is an ordinary shop assistant from Cracow. He can’t even read music. He thinks up his songs while he’s polishing furniture in the second-hand shop. He plays the tune on a flute and a friend of his writes down the notes. So he is not a mug.’

I run off. I have had enough of music.

In the evening Reizele is no longer cross. She sits next to me at the festive table.

The light from the candles shines on her face.

We have a bowl of thin beet soup before us and a stuffed fritter each.

Jozef told this evening's story, about the Jewish rising against Antioch, long before the beginning of the Christian era. He gave us more examples of Jews who opposed the oppressors. When everyone got too excited and the boys started going 'Bang bang, you're dead', soup was served.

The boys play games of chance with their new tops and the girls perform plays, in low whispers, with the marionettes. Suddenly there is music. We have already had one performance. Judita has rehearsed a play with the young children.

Korczak sat there laughing, as if he had written it himself. Perhaps he had. It was certainly childish enough. A tall girl was disguised as a Hanukkah candle. She wore a roll of blackout cardboard round her and had a stalk on her head. The other children, arranged in order of height, played a candle which got a little shorter every evening. Why was she so stupid as to burn herself up? asked the long candle. The little one gave a sermon. It's better to spread light and burn up than to give nothing at all, when you're a candle.

Codswallop. I eat my fritter as slowly as possible so that I still have something to do when the music plays. But it doesn't come to that. A bell rings, there is a banging on the door, and Korczak and Mrs Stefa run up the passage.

We all sit stock-still.

Nothing wrong, they say, a little later, but all the same we have to clear up and go to bed.

It was a patrol, of course.

They just love to ruin feast days. They get even more people off the street and knock down everyone they meet. Even this small pleasure is not granted to us.

Oh well, I don't like music anyway. I finish off the fritter in two bites.

We don't have to tell tales about Esther. Krystyna has already done it. On the notice board in the passage she has written: 'Esther is always sitting in the dormitory. And she's sitting on my bed.'

Esther is insufferable. She refuses point-blank to speak a word of Polish and since Reizele no longer wants to talk Yiddish with her she acts dumb. She comes to the table to eat, she goes to school, and for the rest, she shirks.

Today Esther is appearing before the children's court. The accuser is Krystyna, a stupid child who manages to stay fat in spite of the shortage of food.

The third party, the chairman of the bench, is me. Some idiot or other thinks I have improved my life, that I am doing good work in the carpentry cellar and don't fight so often. As a punishment I am allowed to be chairman.

There is no question of refusing, so there I sit behind a ridiculous green baize cloth with an ornamental hammer in my hand. My fellow judges sit on my right and left.

I don't have to use the little hammer. There is silence. Even in the protective belly of our whale we see enough to know that things are getting worse all the times. Jews are being thrown out of their shops. Everyone has to hand over his savings. Jews and Poles are no longer allowed to do business with each other. There are notices on Jewish shops, so that Germans no longer have to search when they feel like breaking glass and looting stores. Thanks to all the regulations, more and more people have no work. The streets swarm with beggars, barefoot children, women who spend all day hawking a sack of green cabbage or a few eggs.

The occupiers know all about nutrition, too. They have scientifically established that Germans need 2,500 calories per day, Poles 600 and Jews 184.

And then there are the raids. They don't take children away for forced labour, at least not yet, but when we hear the thunder of boots we creep along close to the

wall. Out of the corners of our eyes we see people being rounded up and chased on to lorries with whips and sticks.

We only feel safe in the boarding-house, and we are strict with each other.

Everything here has to be in order. A whole list of complaints has been lodged with the court. I have it here before me.

Daniel has given Henryk a bloody nose. He gets a warning and has to do one household duty for Henryk.

Two girls arrived too late for potato peeling, and then did it so fast that there was more peel than potato. And there is already so little to eat. They are not allowed to work in the kitchen any more and that is a real punishment. At least in the kitchen you get something slipped your way from time to time.

Mietek has come home late, twice. That is serious.

The whole staff stayed up and everyone was frightened.

‘I wanted to see the river,’ says Mietek.

There is nervous laughter.

‘You must take the court seriously,’ I say, ‘You know very well that at a time like this we can’t send you away. You mustn’t take unfair advantage of that.’

I can’t punish Mietek. No one can tell him anything. We don’t know what to do.

The doctor takes over, something he otherwise never does. He was rattled when Mietek didn’t come home.

‘You left us all in anguish. That was punishing us. Next time you don’t come, we won’t be afraid for you. It will leave us cold.’

Mietek looks relieved. This is a bit of luck.

The doctor has not finished yet.

‘This also means that we shall not come and look for you. Did you know that they’ve picked up Jozef? I went to the prison and paid them. We shall not do that for you. After all, you are simply sitting on a bridge somewhere, looking at the river. Well, enjoy yourself, Mietek, and best wishes to the fish.’

The doctor goes away. I’ve never seen him so angry before.

Mietek shrugs his shoulders and stands up with self-assurance. ‘Can I go now?’

‘Naturally,’ I say in a friendly tone. ‘It doesn’t matter to us if you want to go.’

He looks round rather uncertainly.

Krystyna puts up her chubby hand. Everyone looks at her and Mietek sits down again, in silence.

‘If I go to the dormitory, even if it’s just to get something, I get reported! And you...’

She stops. Esther is not even listening. She has found herself a place, by the window as always, and is staring out. There is nothing to be seen there. The trees are still bare and the sky is grey. We all look at Esther, but she doesn’t answer.

What am I to do?

Reizele stands up. ‘We can’t really handle this. She doesn’t talk to Mrs Stefa either, and the doctor is busy. If it goes on like this she’ll have to go into hospital.’

Esther doesn’t move.

I strike the table with the hammer. ‘We’ll suggest to the staff that Esther should go to a more suitable place.’

There is total silence. These days leaving the boarding-house is like jumping off a ship in the middle of the ocean.

Esther has not turned towards us, but is looking over our heads.

‘I have to sit by the window,’ she says. Her voice is strangely clear for someone who has not spoken in weeks. Perhaps she has been practising in the lavatory.

She speaks so slowly that I can understand her Yiddish.

‘Papa says: Esther, you must stay here by the window until I come back.’

She smiles. ‘And then I shall come and pick you up in the car and we will go and eat in town.’

‘I don’t want her sitting on my bed,’ shrieks Krystyna. I hammer on the table and look daggers at her.

‘But it’s taking so long,’ says Esther. ‘And there’s such a noise everywhere. I must go and look for him.’

Reizele puts an arm round her and lets her go on. And then she suddenly begins to scream.

‘I’ve missed him! I have to stay by the window! I’ve missed him!’

No one can stand it any longer.

‘Your father is dead,’ shouts Boruch. ‘Dead, dead, dead! Stop this nonsense!’

‘She has to get off my bed!’ yells Krystyna. ‘It’s all a big show, she has to stay away from my bed!’

Esther screams louder and louder. Yossel walks towards her, with that calm, elderly gait of his, and, quite coolly, slaps her face. Hard.

‘No hitting!’ I cry, hammering on the table.

Esther has flown at Yossel, scratching and biting and punching, and Reizele can’t hold her back. Yossel falls to the floor, Esther falls on top of him and goes on punching and kicking. It takes four boys to pull her up.

Reizele sits her down on a chair and holds her tightly. Now she is only sobbing.

Krystyna is standing up again. ‘She has to...’

‘Yes, yes,’ I say. ‘We do know. She has to stay away from your bed.’

‘She can sit on my bed,’ says Halina.

‘My bed is by the window too. But Krystyna can’t sit on it, because she would fall through it.’

Laughter.

I use my hammer once more.

‘I have a suggestion,’ Halina goes on. ‘The fact that we’re not allowed to go to the dormitories is all well and good, but everything has changed now. We can’t go outside any more. The school is too crowded. We need more space.’

There is clapping.

‘You know what the doctor said,’ says Reizele. ‘We have to keep it fresh and clean here! Otherwise, we’ll get sick.’

Shouts of boo.

I bang on the table.

‘Proposal accepted,’ I shout. Applause.

I can always earn my living as a judge.

‘You would be a good Mordechai,’ says Judita. They are doing another of those childish plays for Purim. I thank her for the compliment.

Marysia is Queen Vashti. She has draped herself in a net curtain and put on a paper crown.

Ahasuerus is wearing a Persian rug.

Esther is queen of the feast. She no longer sits and stares out of the window, and she is working hard at her Polish. The first sentence I hear her speak still sounds rather shaky, but we can easily understand it. She stretches out her arm, lifts her head, and in her clear voice, tells King Ahasuerus: ‘Let my people go.’