
TWO SONS

By CHAYAH SARAH CANTOR

"It's coming."

The sentry took a deep drag from his cigarette, then flung it on the rocks and crushed it with a well-worn heel. Behind him a bush rustled, and a reddish-brown-haired man emerged, holding a rifle.

"How far?" the sentry asked.

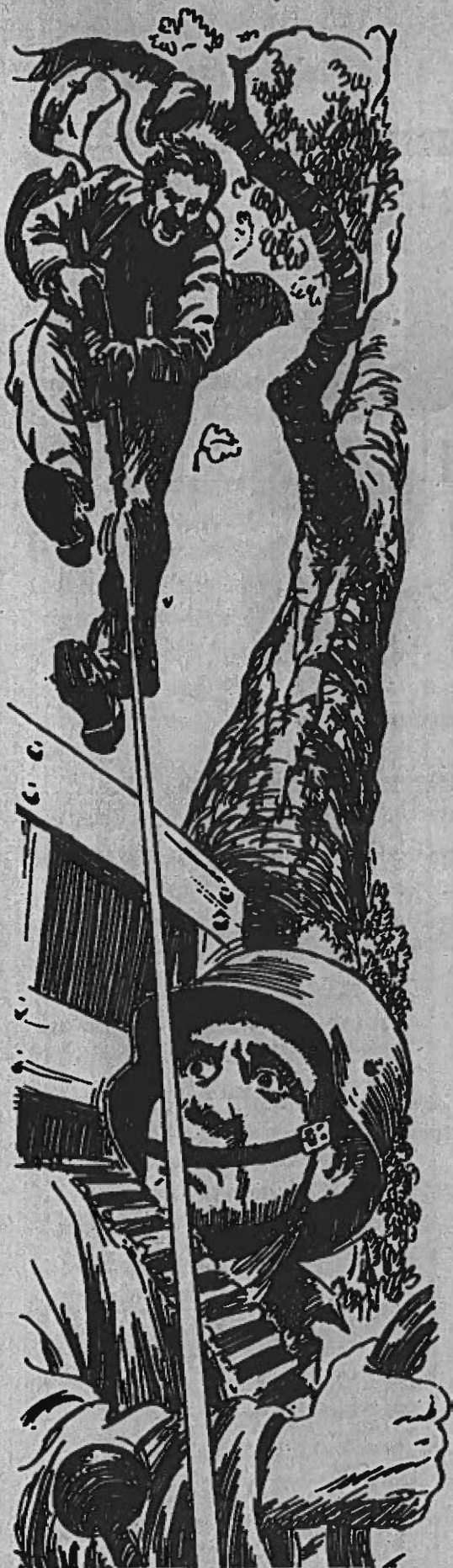
"Still a good two kilometers, sir."

The train approached slowly. In the front an SS guard was poised, machine gun thrust stiffly at his chest. Behind him desperate eyes peered through the slits in the boxcars.

The train lunged forward. A village church bell rang three chimes—right on schedule. Sasha could always count on the German tendency for precision planning.

The train came parallel to the paved highway and neared a junction. Suddenly the engine quivered, then exploded with a roar, showering the road with wheel pieces and chunks of fiery metal.

An SS guard raced out of the engine car, screaming, his back on fire, while another stumbled and fell off the train, shouting curses that could be heard a mile away. Sasha and the sentry were still crouched; behind them four other heads and rifles poked out of the foliage. With a finger to his lips Sasha motioned them downward. Instantly they dropped to the ground.



The guard spun around.

The other SS guards jumped off the boxcars and in an enraged babble of voices studied the ruptured engine. One of them pointed to a charred stack of dynamite perpendicular to the tracks, while the others inched closer.

Sasha hissed another signal. Quickly the partisans displayed the fine art of walking on their stomachs and zigzagged across the grass.

About one hundred yards from the tracks, they stopped. Another sign from Sasha sent them scurrying behind a gully.

There they waited. The SS men were now embroiled in a debate over whether to remain there and scout the area or to somehow transfer their human cargo to the highway. A convoy was due to pass by shortly, and could take the Jews to the concentration camps of the east. The boxcar walls pounded frantically, as people struggled to break free of their confines. But it was to no avail; the cars were bolted shut. The Jews were doomed to die.



When the guards again turned their backs, Sasha slipped under the caboose and like a snake slithered up the side. He glanced ahead and froze. Wedged against a boxcar, a Nazi was lighting a cigarette.

"Dieter!" called a voice.

Cigarette still in mouth, the German strained his face, looking for the caller. Then he bounced off the boxcar and strolled toward his comrades.

Sasha climbed to the top of

But for some these were empty words. The relatively able-bodied staggered blindly into the woods and fields, weeping and gasping in terror. The rest crawled futilely.

the train and began to move forward, leaping from one boxcar to the next. Below him he could hear the sound of mournful praying.

He lifted his rifle. He inched further, till his lanky frame was close to Dieter's. As he rose, his arm swept high, then down, with blade-like swiftness.

"Now!" he called.

In bewilderment the guard spun around.

"Fire!"

The rifle blast ripped through Dieter, peeling away pieces of flesh. The others whipped out their rifles and aimed. But too late. The partisans pounced from their lair and pumped bullets into the field-gray tunics, which finally became still, having turned blood-red.

When all the Nazis were dead, Sasha slid off the boxcar and raised the latches. Scores of bodies somersaulted out, at least a quarter of them dead. Up and down the train he raced, unlocking the cars and freeing those within.

"Hurry! Run!" he screamed.

But for some these were empty words. The relatively able-bodied staggered blindly into the woods and fields, weeping and gasping in terror. The rest crawled futilely.

The partisans themselves left quickly. Only Sasha remained, glancing at the distant road and listening fearfully to the thunder of the convoy. It was impossible to rescue everyone; he would only be kissing his own life goodbye. He had no choice but to leave the sick and weak behind.

An emaciated figure sloshed through the piles of mud. His arms virtually embraced a wrapped-up packet, which seemed to weigh him down.

Suddenly he slipped and fell. The packet went flying out of his hands.

"Come on!" called Sasha, grabbing the boy's scrawny hand.

"My packet!" the boy screamed.

"Forget the packet!"

"I want it!"

Sasha shot another glance at the road. The convoy loomed closer now, and he could see the soldiers inside

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Sasha slid off the boxcar and raised the latches. Scores of bodies somersaulted out.

the trucks pointing to the empty trains.

The boy fumbled wildly for his treasure. With a click of disgust, Sasha scooped up the packet in one hand, and with another dragged the boy along. When the boy faltered, Sasha dragged him even harder. At last, panting, they cut through a grove, which opened onto a clearing.

Once they were completely shielded from sight of the highway, the boy collapsed to the ground. He hugged himself, feeling his arms, legs, torso, as if acknowledging that he was still alive. Sasha tossed him the packet.

The boy raised his head. The ear locks brushed against his dirtied face; the boy's head was without a skullcap. But the hair was a reddish-brown, just like Sasha's, and the eyes were an identical blue. A stunned Sasha narrowed his eyes in recognition,

and in remembrance of a scene four years earlier.



It was April 1939. The soldier, waiting in the corridor, swiveled his face toward the mirror. He removed his visored cap and patted his hair down.

He continued to primp himself. He still possessed a youthful countenance, though he was twenty-eight. His hair was reddish-brown, like an autumn field, and his mustache branched in two over his thin lips. He tugged it, wishing it might grow longer so he would at least look worldly, if not mature.

A woman appeared, head enswathed in a kerchief.

"Simcha Dov," she whispered.

"Sasha!" the man hissed.

Startled, she backed away.

No doubt this idea — of reuniting all the brothers — was a valiant attempt by Yaakov Yitzchak not only to step into his late parents' shoes, but to prove that the family was still intact.

"My name is Sasha," he repeated more gently. "Please, Hinde."

Nodding, she raised her arms. "May I take your coat?"

Stiffly he removed it. Examining the general's epaulets, Hinde asked, "Where are Sonia and Bronka?"

"They . . . couldn't come," answered Sasha.

The woman frowned. "Why not?"

"Sonia was invited to her family," Sasha gabbled.

"That is disappointing," Hinde said. "I set a place for them."

"Well, I did try to call you," Sasha replied, hinting that it was her fault, and not the holiday's, that the telephone couldn't be answered.

Quietly she opened the closet door. She pushed the shabby array of clothes as far to the sides as possible, and gave the general's coat a lordly space.

Sasha glanced once more at the mirror. Its edges were dingy, and the frame, which had once belonged to his grandmother, was broken off. Moving through the corridor, he passed a chipped vase — a present to his mother by his late father — an oil painting of the Vistula River, and a candelabra with one of its arms missing. The one citadel of cheer was the china closet, now covered up with sheets. Inside lay the year-round

silver goblets and chinaware.

The Seder table sprawled under a rusted metal chandelier. Everything was there: matzoh, wine. Plenty of bitter herbs, thought Sasha sadly. The person seated at the head of the table smiled and rose.

"Simcha Dov," he cried.

"It's Sasha," Hinde corrected him hastily.

The man paused. Then he added, "Where are your wife and daughter?"

"They couldn't make it," snapped Sasha.

More awkward silence. Finally the man replied, "Then I am grateful that at least you did."

He guided Sasha to an armchair. The wood was gashed, and the material around it was frayed and bursting out of the seams. Against his will Sasha compared the upholstery to the rose tapestries and French lace curtains that adorned his windowpanes. Little wonder that Sonia had refused to come.

His brother, Yaakov Yitzchak

In a sense, not one corpse had been buried a month earlier, but two.

Bertowitz, was draped in the black cloak of the Chassidim. As he turned around, the thick shock of side curls struck his profile.

After Hinde lit the candles and recited the blessing, she called, "Chaim Alter! Tzvi Aryeh!"

The sound of feet grew louder as two figures, aged eleven and eight respectively, bounded down the stairs. Just then came a knock at the door, which both boys hurried to answer.

The open door brought the sound of feminine laughter. Immediately Sasha recognized his other sister-in-law, carrying an infant, followed by his youngest brother, Mordechai. Mordechai sported the same chassidic cloak as Yaakov Yitzchak; he darkened at the sight of Sasha in uniform. Yaakov Yitzchak wisely steered him into the parlor.



Soon came another knock at the door, and another couple: Yisrael Mayer, the third son, and his wife. They were accompanied by four laughing children, whose names Sasha could not even remember.

"*Shalom alechem, Simcha Dov,*" said Yisrael tightly.

"It's getting late," Yaakov Yitzchak stammered. "We must begin soon. Nu . . ." he gazed at his wife in appeal. "Hinde, where are the girls?"

"With the baby," his wife answered. She hurried upstairs. Yisrael Mayer had wandered to the refuge of the parlor so that he could converse with Mordechai. The women had sauntered off into the kitchen, leaving Sasha alone.

There was no problem with the seating arrangement. Sasha remained next to Yaakov Yitzchak. No doubt this idea — of reuniting all the brothers — was a valiant attempt by

Yaakov Yitzchak not only to step into his late parents' shoes, but to prove that the family was still intact.

Leave it to Yaakov Yitzchak to be noble. At least he was true to his beliefs: he bore no grudges. Of all the brothers, he was the one who struggled to remain in contact with Sasha, no matter how minimally. The other brothers had given up on him, calling Sasha a "lost soul." Yaakov Yitzchak was the one who had persistently phoned, imploring him to come to the Seder.



It was almost over. During the whole affair the brothers had strained to even smile at him. Elijah's cup was filled, and the young ones hopefully clamored behind their fathers at the open door. Only Sasha remained seated, observing Yaakov Yitzchak's two sons. While Chaim Alter remained shy and quiet, as he had been during the meal, Tzvi Aryeh eagerly anticipated Elijah's arrival, and he turned to his uncle, wanting to share the excitement.

Sasha softened: of all the offspring, Tzvi Aryeh bore the unique Berkowitz stamp of modesty and pride combined. But just like Sasha, Tzvi Aryeh displayed the restlessness of the intellectually curious. No doubt Yaakov Yitzchak kept a close eye on the boy, wanting to avoid his own father's mistake with Sasha, and ensuring that his son not stray too far.

Their father's funeral was the first and last time Sasha had recited *Kaddish*. He was sixteen then; he had just returned from a meeting with the socialists when he found his father dead on the floor from a heart attack.

After the *shloshim*, Sasha had advanced to the mirror — the same one with the broken corner — held

*He spoke to his family occasionally.
Although they lived in the same city, they
might as well have lived on another planet.*

out a pair of scissors, and with only a tinge of guilt snipped off his side curls. Then he packed away his Hebrew books and ritual objects, and announced to a stunned mother that he would go to gymnasium — the secular high school — and afterwards the army. In a sense, not one corpse had been buried a month earlier, but two — his father's, and his own Jewish soul.

But neither the high school nor the officers' training in the military opened its doors readily to Jews, let alone to one named Simcha Dov Berkowitz. Thus Sasha Borotsky was born: Sasha, who spoke perfect Polish, and who charmed everyone he met. Sasha, who drilled himself day and night, till he could brandish a sword, ride a horse bareback, and fire a rifle with flourish.

So magnificent was he that he made everyone believe there was one less Jew in the world. Soon he was promoted to first lieutenant. Then captain. And so on. Eventually Sasha married the daughter of the only other high-ranking Jewish officer; and when he wasn't commanding his own platoon near the Polish-

German border, he took tea with his wife and a few of the elite in one of the Uzadowska Avenue cafes, in his native Warsaw.

He spoke to his family occasionally. Although they lived in the same city, they might as well have lived on another planet. Yaakov Yitzchak, four years Sasha's senior, took over the leather business, while the other two brothers went their ways. Their mother did not outlive their father by too long. Emotionally she never recovered from his passing, and her second son Sasha could not exactly claim to have given her any *nachas*.

On her deathbed three years ago, right before Pesach, she had said those bitter words: "Simcha Dov, on Pesach we talk of four sons; so much you have acted the wicked son, for you think the trials and tribulations of your people have nothing to do with you. But you are actually the *tam*, the foolish son. Some day, Simcha Dov, I hope that life shall make you wise!" He hadn't reminded her that his name was Sasha.

Sasha returned to the present. Hinde, rocking her three-year-old girl, was placidly chanting the *Hallel*. While three of the brothers sang the holiday melodies, she put the younger ones to bed, then returned, while both sets of in-laws lingered to bid Yaakov Yitzchak goodbye. With a barely audible "Gut yontev" to Sasha, the other couples exited.

(Continued on page 28)

*He had managed to
refrain from
reminding her that
his name was Sasha.*

Two Sons

(Continued from page 7)

Sashayawned. "There's no need to get my coat for me, Hinde," he said. "I'll get it myself."

"Won't you stay awhile?" she offered.

Sasha laughed. "It's long after midnight."

"Perhaps you'll return tomorrow night?" asked Yaakov Yitzchak.

"I'm afraid that is impossible," answered Sasha. He made a slight bow to his sister-in-law. Then he turned to his brother. "Dear Yaakov, I am sorry to say that I wasn't impressed."

"Sasha, I assure you I wasn't trying to convert you."

"Oh, no, Yaakov. On the contrary, you failed." He tottered, perhaps from too much wine. "In more ways than one. Still praying that I'll return to the fold. Still hoping I'll someday grow my side locks long and trade in this nice tan coat for a darker shade."

Yaakov Yitzchak remained silent.

"But more than that," Sasha concluded ominously, "hoping I'll make peace with everyone."

"Father oncesaid that you must first make peace with yourself."

"Father said," Sasha repeated scornfully. He gazed sadly at the drabness of the

Seizing his nephew's arm, Sasha pulled him deeper into the woods.

house. "Yes, I see more and more of him in you. I can't say I've inherited anything from him. Except the looks, perhaps. Just like Tzvi Aryeh."

He shrugged, and lingered by the door, deep in thought. "But I see how you've chosen to take on Father's

role. And for that I must commend you, Yaakov. As far as this Seder is concerned, you've succeeded."

Outside a gentle wind stirred. Sasha remained implanted on the threshold, waiting for the crowds of Chassidim to pass before making his escape.

Stealthily he crept through an alley. Once he was out of sight he could hail a taxi, which would take him back to his home in the gentile section, on Marszalkowska Street. No doubt his wife and daughter would already be back.

Finally he flagged down a vehicle. Enconced inside, he heaved a sigh of relief as he left behind the Jews of Warsaw.

Nevertheless, he felt a chill.

Mechanically Sasha wiped the blood and dirt off his nephew's face.

Tzvi Aryeh in turn studied this heroic stranger. "Uncle Sasha?" he whispered.

Sasha nodded.

The boy was too weary to even hug him. "I never saw you again after that Seder. I wondered if you would ever come back."

Sasha helped him rise. The twelve-year-old boy wobbled, like a newborn colt. Then he stopped in fright. From the distance came the rapid but muted sound of rifle volley.

The Nazi convoy



Soldiers were firing at Jews who had been unable to flee.

had parked off the highway; a band of soldiers was firing randomly but consistently at the Jews who had been unable to flee. Seizing his nephew's arm, Sasha pulled him deeper into the woods. There an assorted crowd had clustered.

Biting his lip, Sasha hoped to find his wife and daughter in the crowd. But, just as in similar situations in the past, he didn't. Why should he keep thinking he would? Because he hadn't been there in Warsaw to see them plucked out of their apartment on the Aryanside and crammed onto the trains by snarling officers. But to this day Sasha wondered: who was it that turned them in? And for how much money? What had their lives been worth?

Sighing, he shuffled toward the group of tents which had been set up by the partisans; his comrades were singing in celebration of their victory.

"Uncle Sasha."

His nephew held out the precious packet. The wrapping was frayed and stained with dirt. Quizzically Sasha took it from him, then fingered it. The insides felt stiff and somewhat brittle.

"Open it, Uncle, please."

Sasha did. Inside lay a half-dozen pieces of matzoh.

"Father managed to bake them right before the Germans came," explained Tzvi Aryeh tearfully. "Before they shot him, he wrapped them up and passed them to me. Said I would need it wherever I was going." His voice finally cracked, and he wept.

In anguish Sasha held up a piece. It was half-charcoal and mealy, and probably *chametzdik* by prewar standards. But it was unquestionably the symbol of Passover.

"I . . . forgot that tonight is the Seder," he said. "In fact, the second

Seder. It is a pity the rest of our family cannot be here." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps they will observe the holiday in the ghetto."

"The ghetto is burning," Tzvi Aryeh whimpered. "A revolt began last night!"

Sasha closed his eyes. In the smoky darkness his family paraded before him — brothers, sisters-in-law, nephews, and nieces. Ragged, gaunt; they turned accusingly to him, the wicked son. And you thought you weren't one of us, they jeered.

You're wrong, he felt like screaming. Only for your sakes am I brandishing the machine gun.

Sasha opened his eyes and caught Tzvi Aryeh's, the same shade of blue, peering back.

"I think tonight might be

different than other nights — different than that Seder night four years ago," Sasha said.

"So you'll join me for the Seder, Uncle Sasha?" piped Tzvi Aryeh. "We'll have plenty of guests." He motioned to the others, still dazed and wordless over their salvation.

Sasha nodded. "I'm afraid I cannot be as eloquent as your father was, Tzvi Aryeh. I think he was more a father than a brother to me. He never lost hope. If only I had tried to be more like him." He took a deep breath, and with a smile gazed at his nephew. "But tonight there will be two wise sons."

Off they wandered, the wise son and the wicked son, among the silent sons. Only the foolish had disappeared. JB

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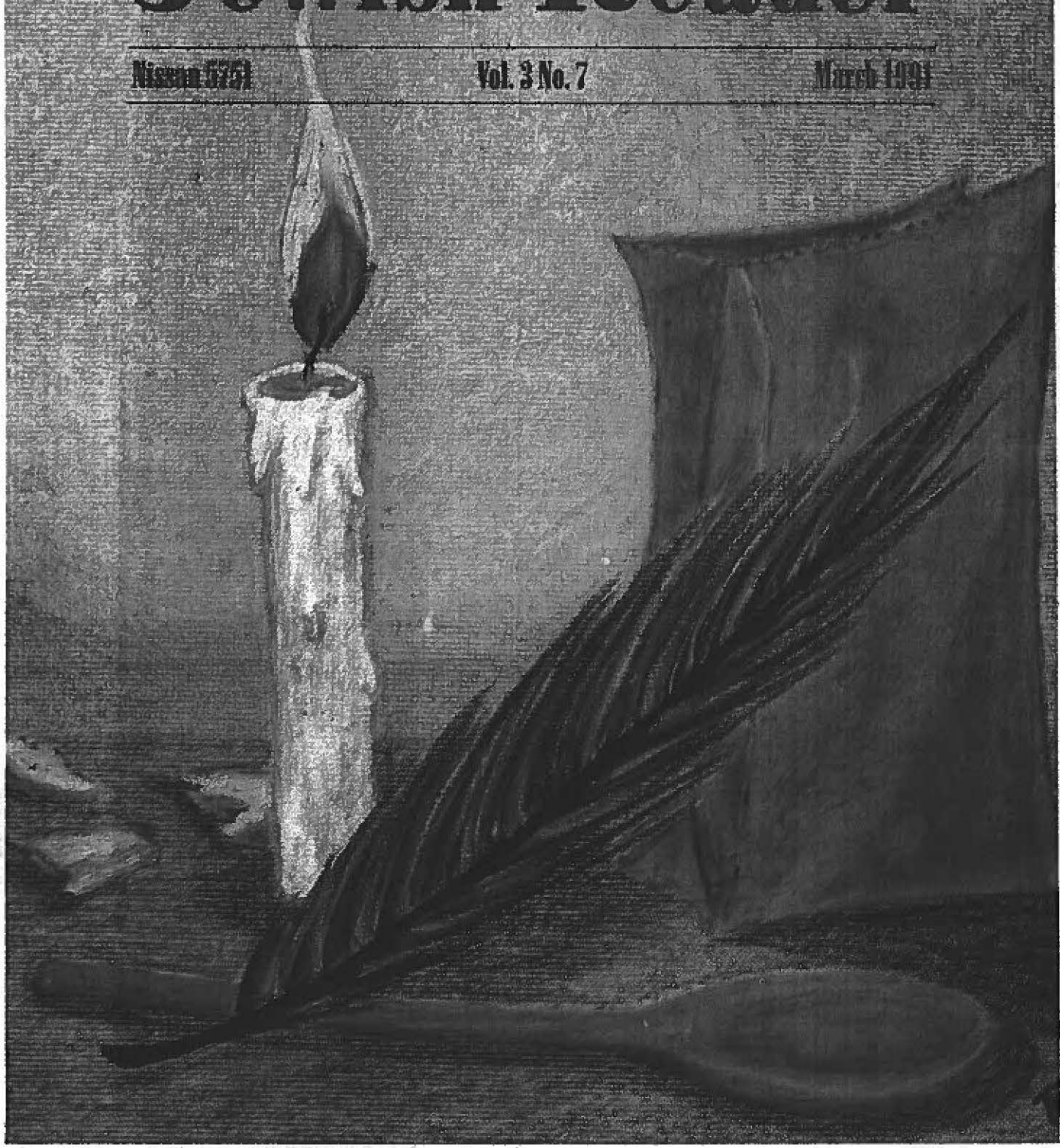


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TO OUR READERS

The Pesach holiday serves as the backdrop for "Two Sons," this month's lead feature.

The first night of Pesach marks the forty-eighth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In the dark night of Nazi Europe, brave Jewish fighters stood up to the Germans, who wished to empty the ghetto and send its inhabitants to death camps. For six weeks, the undermanned, outgunned Jews battled against overwhelming odds. Eventually the Nazi animal triumphed, but the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters has been imprinted on the collective consciousness of the Jewish people.

Those of you who enjoy surprise endings will like "The Peddler," a story of turn-of-the-century Russia.

We are pleased to announce a winner in our Writing Contest. Tirtza Meystel, of Chicago, Illinois, has written a provocative essay about the influx of Russian Jews into our schools. We hope that not only kids, but adults too will take her advice to heart.

On that positive note, we wish all our readers a happy and kosher Pesach!

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MAIL ROOM

The Ba'al Shem Tov

I thoroughly enjoyed your recent story about the Ba'al Shem Tov, "Three Tales" (Shevat). As a parent, I have always been inspired by tales of the Ba'al Shem. This tale is a particular favorite, with its message of repentance and its promise that Hashem gives everyone a second chance.

I hope that in the future you will feature other stories about the father of Chassidism.

Mrs. Marilyn Gross
Lawrence, NY

"At Mama's Knee" is taking a Pesach vacation, and will return in Iyar. Also next month, the winner of the Teves Torah Contest will be announced.

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