

THE LONG RIDE HOME

By CHAYAH SARAH CANTOR

(Concluded from last issue)

Avraham, a wealthy merchant off to visit the Maggid of Mezhirech, offers a fellow Jew a ride. But Avraham insults the hitchhiker, whom the merchant believes is unwilling to work for a living. Later the merchant discovers that this is Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, one of the Maggid's best pupils, and apologizes for his behavior.

The Maggid is unwilling to meet with the merchant, who has come with a satchel of coins as a gift; the Maggid states that he has an urgent matter to attend to with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who advises Avraham to travel an older rode back home, and to offer help if he hears someone crying for assistance. Avraham meets such a man, a non-Jewish count who has been beaten by Polish warlords. Avraham nurses the count back to health, and the count offers to repay Avraham one day.

"I hope some day to repay you," the count said.

"That is not necessary," replied Avraham. He recalled another passenger, Levi Yitzchak. "I am merely repaying someone else for his mercy."

The nobleman said, "And now, I shall have to contend with a greater foe than nature." He stared longingly at the carriage. "Once I am in the city, I shall purchase a fine steed and rally those of my subjects who are still faithful. With good weapons we will overthrow this evil relative."

"For such a venture you shall need money," offered Avraham. "One moment, please."

He rushed to the carriage and returned with the satchel. "Here. There should be enough, I think."

In bewilderment the count examined the gold coins. "But you are being far too generous. You have already been too kind to me."

"Again, do not worry," replied Avraham. "I am, thank G-d, wealthy. What are a few pieces? Besides, knowing they will go toward something worthy comforts me." He darkened. "I have a dwelling not far from Levertov. I pray that my wife and children are safe, that your cousin's army has not harmed them."

They departed at once for the next city. As they approached a stable advertising a fine horse for sale, the nobleman alighted.

"I shall leave here," he announced. "Thanks to your help, Avraham, I shall pursue my endeavor."

"And with G-d's help, you shall succeed," answered Avraham. "I hope someday to see you in your rightful place, free of this menace."

The two men parted ways.



With lightness of spirit Avraham Katz ordered the driver to proceed. He now understood why Reb Levi Yitzchak had commanded him to take an ordinarily dangerous and reckless path. Truly this disciple of the Maggid was a holy man himself, and Avraham knew he was guilty for having shamed Reb Levi Yitzchak.

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The air stung his nose with the smell of something burning. As the carriage drew closer, the charcoal skeletons of hovels appeared.

In a panic Avraham leaned forward. Through the window he surveyed the charred and gutted wreckage, the ragged widows and orphans, the cows and pigs wandering through what had once been people's living rooms.

Avraham threw open the carriage door and leaped out. All at once the driver, recognizing the danger to himself, flicked his whip and bolted toward the horizon.

"Stop!" Avraham called, but it was too late. Dismayed, he turned and resumed his dismal homecoming.



Near the town square, the synagogue crackled in flames and debris, while around the remains of Avraham's home a group of riders had dismounted. Laughing, dressed in the uniform of the *ariens*, they helped themselves to vodka and slabs of meat from what had been Avraham's pantry.

Anxiously Avraham surged forward, but he was restrained by clubs and whips.

"My Jews," he gabbled.

"There are none," intoned the leader. "They've been sent away." He sneered in hatred. "Your kind ain't allowed here anymore."

In horror Avraham gaped at the scenery, a wasteland of ruin. "My wife," he stammered. "My children. Where are they?"

The soldiers let him loose. Sadly Avraham foraged through the embers. Nothing remained — no people, no holy books, none of the family heirlooms.

"Clearly G-d had greater mercy on me than I would have ever predicted," he thought. "Had I taken the newer, more direct road, I certainly would have gotten here faster, but would have been murdered!"

It was a hollow comfort. He sagged onto a mound of stones. "I couldn't be here to save my family," he murmured, tears streaking down his face. "Perhaps G-d performed the ultimate kindness: by my rescuing the nobleman, I wasn't here to witness the agony of their destruction."

The *ariens*, watching in amusement, were too drunk to raise their swords against him. They allowed the anguished Jew to continue his sorry trek through the fallen village. Watching the remaining children sob as they straggled in the direction of Mezhirech, Avraham thought, "I have

no choice but to go there as well. Perhaps the Maggid will help me.”



The journey back was far more difficult. In the old days, Avraham had passively relied on his driver for directions as well as transport. Now, with the driver gone, he had only his own memory to guide him. Through the gullies and fields he stumbled, in confusion complicated by grief. The farther he walked, the farther he seemed to get from his destination; by week's end, he was grumbling.

“I'll have to spend Shabbos in a cave,” he thought. Or worse, a ditch. For Avraham could not find any signs of habitation. Devastation lay everywhere; the *arians* had done their evil work well. Avraham whispered a prayer: that the count he had rescued rid Poland, and its Jews, of the curse brought on by his wicked cousin.

By the next day Avraham was virtually walking like a corpse. Devoid of sleep, soaked with dew from sleeping on the earth, and encrusted with dirt and insect bites, he staggered toward a group of sheds near a fenced-off pasture.

“A farm,” he murmured. “Perhaps they will let me sleep in their barn.”

He had no money for lodgings. With his ragged clothes and unkempt appearance, he could only hope for human kindness.

He came closer to the farmhouse, and in a haze encountered two burly

men. One of them, conversing with his companion, stopped and turned to Avraham. The man raised his hand and glowered; the other man carried a horsewhip. This last item Avraham noticed just before he fainted.



They allowed the anguished Jew to continue his sorry trek.



When he came to, he tugged at his leg, but it jolted. Sitting up, Avraham found himself chained by the ankle to a hitching post. Below him the straw stank of mildew and horse droppings, and at the sound of whinnying he rubbed his eyes and surveyed his location.

A stable. He did not know how

long he had been here or how long he had been unconscious. Nor did he know what had become of the two men who had most likely brought him here. He only knew that he was trapped and very afraid.

Nearby a bowl of soup and a slice of black bread waited. The bread was stale, but he knew he had to revive himself. Although he in fact felt little hunger, he tore into the food with a certain gratitude. Apparently whoever had left it there did not intend to kill him.

Shortly later the door flew open. The two men wobbled in, laughing and reeking of liquor.

“There he is!” one of them exclaimed.

The other took a swig from a bottle. He then smashed it against the wall, alarming the horses, and grabbed the whip off its peg.

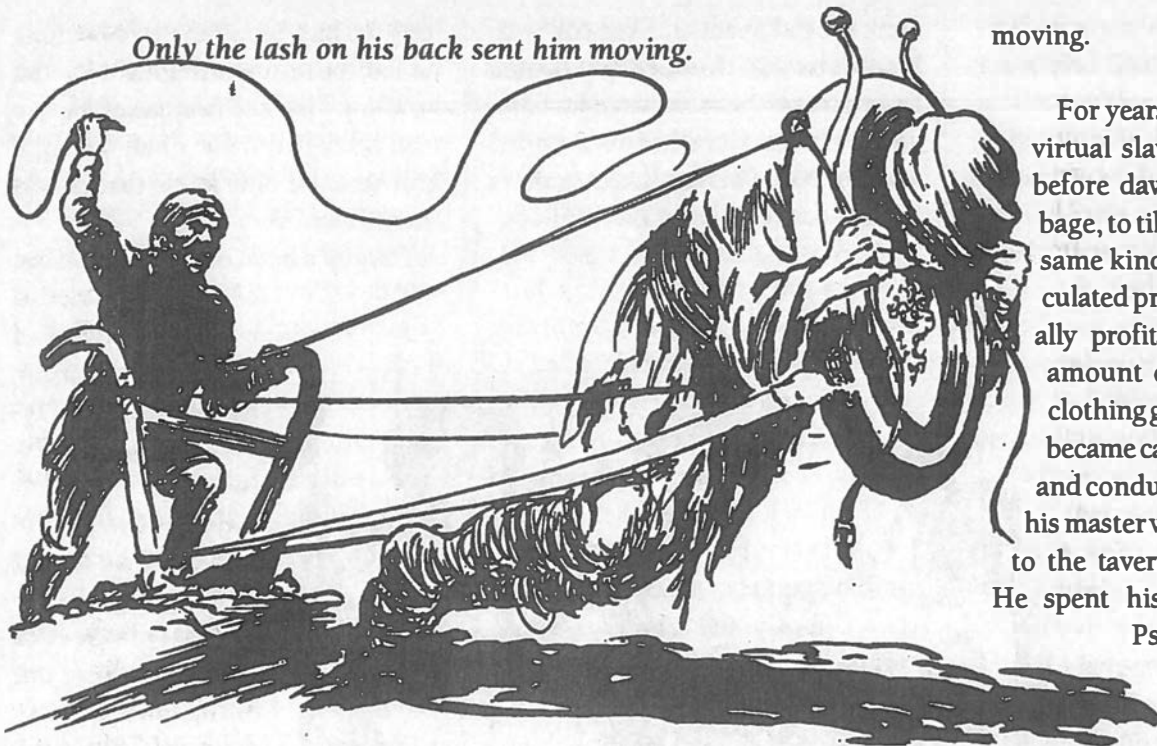
As soon as his companion unchained Avraham, the man cracked the whip just inches from the Jew's shoulder.

“C'mon! Let's go!”

Painfully Avraham rose and hobbled forward, prodded along with kicks and curses. He crinkled his eyes in the flood of sunlight as he stepped outdoors. There a group of peasants waited.

“Here he is,” announced the whip holder. “A beauty, ain't he?”

Only the lash on his back sent him moving.



moving.

For years Avraham remained a virtual slave. He learned to rise before dawn, to empty the garbage, to till the hostile earth. The same kind of mind that had calculated profits and losses—usually profits—now gauged the amount of seed for crops. His clothing grew tattered, his hands became calloused. Yet his speech and conduct set him apart. When his master would invite him along to the tavern, Avraham declined. He spent his spare time reciting Psalms and crying for heavenly aid.

Fortunately the farmer allowed

“Where’s the rest of ’em?” shouted one.

“Dead,” huffed another. “Finally got what was comin’ to ’em, the animals. Because of the Jews, the *ariens* came and burned down my cottage.”

“Make ’em pay, then!” belted the whip holder. With the whip he pushed Avraham’s face forward. “Take a good look, lads. Bet ’e could put in a good day’s work, if you train ’im hard enough. Who wants ’im?”

“Me!”

“Me!”

The men haggled, while Avraham cringed in rage and humiliation. At last, hands tied, he was placed on a cart and whisked away. His “owner,” a peasant with a red eye and a face to match, glanced at him and spat in obvious disgust. Then he hopped into the front seat.

They arrived at a farm much smaller than the one where Avraham had been taken prisoner, with thatched-roof sheds and children crawling in the mud. The peasant’s

wife, seated on a log, was plucking a newly slaughtered goose. Her obese and sweaty body strained against a bloodstained apron, and she opened a mouth deep red with gums. “What is that?”

“Our new servant,” growled the peasant. “A Jew.”

“Are you out of your mind, bringing him here?” the woman screeched. “After all that’s happening. He’ll bring a plague on us. They’re diseased, the Jews; we’ll get sick. Or worse, the *ariens* may come after him!”

Ignoring her, the peasant untied Avraham and shoved him toward the stable. Exhausted, Avraham collapsed onto the straw.

The next day, he awoke to kicks.

“Get up,” the peasant shouted. “Time to work.”

He dragged Avraham outdoors, where a plough stood, and he threw a harness over Avraham’s frame.

“The mare is sick,” he muttered. “In the meantime, you’ll have to do.”

Confused, Avraham stood there. Only the lash on his back sent him

Avraham to retain his observances. Every morning after milking the cows, Avraham crept behind the shed to pray; likewise in the afternoon, after splitting wood. In the evenings, after his third set of prayers, he even found time to study a Jewish Bible he had secured from the wreckage of the surrounding pogroms.

The *ariens* continued to wreak their havoc. They remained the conversation piece on many a lip, Jewish and gentile. One winter evening, while nibbling his own frugal but kosher meal, Avraham overheard the farmer and the neighboring peasants discussing this menace on horseback and an impending civil war. The farmer’s friend, in particular, had run off to join a regiment.

“They’ll make him a captain, I bet,” the farmer declared, and he stiffened in a sort of salute. “Just think, lads. He might even be a hero.”

“A hero,” another snorted. He gulped down his vodka and stared at the barren hills. “Anyone who’d throw those *ariens* off our backs is a

saint, as far as I'm concerned."

"Mark my words," cried the farmer. "A new day will come."

"A new day," Avraham mumbled. He sighed. How much longer had he to wait for that day to come? It would take a saint to free him from this prison.



Winter ended. As the days began to warm, the snow thawed, revealing patches of green and brown field which awaited planting. Sack slung over his shoulder, Avraham trudged up and down the furrows, reaching inside the sack and sprinkling them with seed. At the sight of a combined human and equine shadow, he looked up.

The rider waited. Something about him seemed familiar to Avraham; the silken breeches and brocaded tunic bespoke the finery that Avraham had encountered in another life.

Instinctively he bowed low, ashamed to appear in such rags. Perhaps this person could look beyond them, at Avraham's inner self.

"What may I do for you, my lord?" he asked.

"I am looking for a Jew named Avraham Katz, the son of Nachum," replied the nobleman.

"I am he!" cried Avraham, his heart beginning to beat faster.

The figure dismounted. "Do you not remember me?"

Avraham studied the visage, and his eyes widened. "Are you . . ."

The figure nodded. "I never forgot the day you saved my life and rescued me from a grisly fate in the forest."

"Sir, indeed I'm grateful that you are well." Avraham sighed, pointing to himself. "I'm afraid it is my turn to encounter misfortune."

"That is why I have come," an-

swered the count. "The gold you gave me serviced me well. I was able to redeem my fortune and amass an army. I have just overthrown my evil cousin, and I have put the *ariens* in their place. The countryside will soon be free. And so will you. I was looking for you."

"Free," whispered Avraham. "Free at last." He stared miserably at himself. "Liberation, sir, is easier than what follows. My family is gone. My money, too. My life is ruined."

"Fear not," answered the count. He smiled and withdrew something from his tunic: a pouch bulged with the shape of coins. "There was something else I never forgot."

He threw it to Avraham. Grateful, the Jew clutched the pouch and opened it. It contained exactly the same amount of coins he had once given to the count.

"I said I would repay you, didn't I?" the count continued. "A nobleman always keeps his word."

Avraham blessed the count profusely. "I shall be free to go," he whispered.

Then he stopped. Go where? His town, and its people, were no more.

"My town, perhaps, is gone" mumbled Avraham. "But not Mezhirech."



It was a well-dressed Avraham Katz who appeared at the rebbe's door, but it was neither the Maggid nor the town of Mezhirech. After pathetically wandering through the

Polish countryside, which was recuperating from the warfare, he learned that the Maggid had passed away, and that a new rebbe had taken his place, a rebbe who made his home in the town of Berdichev.

So it was there that Avraham had arrived. He waited in the corridor, clutching the satchel of gold coins he had long ago attempted to give to the Rebbe's predecessor. He hoped it might appease the new rebbe, especially since Avraham knew very well who this man was. It was the same man he had so cruelly insulted years earlier.

Reb Levi Yitzchak entered the room. This time he wore finer garments than what Avraham had seen those many years ago on the roadside. But the man's face, beaming with love and gentleness, continued to dominate his appearance.

"Welcome, Avraham," he declared. "You're finally here." He turned and called a few words to

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He spent his spare time crying for heavenly aid.

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(Continued from page 7)

his servant. The latter exited through a side door, and soon returned, accompanied by a woman and several adolescents.

Avraham gasped. "Chanaleh!" he cried. He ran to his wife and family. In disbelief he studied his children, who had been toddlers the last time he saw them.

He turned to the Berdichever Rebbe. "How on earth . . . ?"

"They came here after my master died," Reb Levi Yitzchak explained. "The Maggid directed them here. He cared for them in your absence."

"But I thought the whole village had perished!"

"Oh, no," his wife spoke up. "We were hiding from the murderers!" She added proudly, "I even made off with much of my jewelry. So I had plenty with which to support us."

She frowned. "We looked for you, Avraham. We asked people everywhere if they knew where you had gone. But no one did. What happened?"

Tears rained down Avraham's face. "They would never have recognized me, the way I looked." He sighed. "I went through much, Chanaleh. I am

grateful to be back alive."

"How did you look?" the Rebbe asked knowingly.

"Appalling, to say the least," Avraham said. "A common laborer, in rags and sweat. In that state I had to survive for years. No one would have known me. Finally, a nobleman I had once rescued remembered me and showed me kindness."

"In spite of your appearance," Reb Levi Yitzchak said, nodding. "He recognized the goodness within."

Avraham brightened.

"Yes. In fact, those were my thoughts, Rebbe, when he and I met again.



"Chanaleh!" he cried. He ran to his wife and family.

He recognized me, in spite of my appearance. He said he had specifically looked for me. I am grateful he knew how to find me, under the garments."

"A pity you didn't," the Rebbe said softly.

"I don't understand."

"When you gave me a ride you were arrogant toward me," the Rebbe explained, in a voice filled not with anger, but with sorrow and sympathy. "You considered me too

wretched for mere courtesy, because of the way I was dressed. Although you offered me a ride to town, you did so only as an obligation. But in that merit were you spared a greater danger."

Avraham hung his head in shame and remembrance.

Reb Levi Yitzchak continued. "After you had snubbed and derided me in your carriage, the heavens decreed that you were to die before you returned home! In deep concern I approached the Maggid; together we discussed a way to reverse your destiny and save your life."

Avraham gasped. It all came back to him now — the abrupt end of his visit to the Maggid and the talk of "pressing matters." He would never have guessed that he was the subject of that discussion.

"Our Sages say that charity saves a

man from death," the Rebbe continued, "and so we had to think of a way for you to spend your money. Therefore, I ordered you to return via the old road. There I knew you would meet the count, whom you then saved from the *arians*."

"But Rebbe," Avraham argued, "at the time I saw you at the Maggid's, I expressed shame. Surely that should have saved me?"

"Yes, it might have," the Rebbe answered. "But how sincere was your shame? Or rather, how unconditional? Was it only because you realized who I was — the Maggid's student? It is easy and quite natural to respect a Torah scholar. But the average Jew — or worse, a poor person or beggar? Might you have reacted the same way if I were a common man?"

"Obviously not. You exhibited a sort of selective honor, an honor based on my position. In doing so, you failed to notice the soul under the garments — a soul you share with millions of others, with all Jews.

"I realized, too, that such haughtiness required more than the giving of charity. The only way for you to learn to feel for one less fortunate was to place you in that situation. You may call it vengefulness, but it was actually an act of love. I did not wish to punish, but to instruct. Only by what you went through could you learn that every Jew deserves kindness, not scorn."

Avraham cringed. "Now I feel truly penitent, Rebbe. I am deeply ashamed of how I acted."

The Rebbe beamed. "The heavens have just decreed that your penitence has been accepted. For truly the road you have just traveled, the road in every Jew's heart, leads to humility. And charity helps him along the way." **JR**

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Unshaken As The Continent

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Someone in the crowd grabbed Moshe's hand and began pumping it wildly. "Mazel tov!"

Moshe yelped when he heard the voice, and he crushed the speaker in a bear hug. "David! When did you get home?"

"I told you I wouldn't miss the *bris*!"

With one arm around his brother and the other rocking the straw basket that cradled his children, Moshe's

happiness was complete. "Tell me, David," he asked his brother. "In all your travels, have you even seen anything as strange as a *bris* in Chief Wakatiku's long house?"

David looked at the clapping chief and the dancing Indians; heard the music of tambourines and tom-toms accompanied by songs in an unknown language; smelled the dishes of kosher duck and beef cooked with corn and cabbage; and witnessed the Jews sitting cross-legged on rugs of bearskin.

"No," he replied, laughing, his head shaking in wonderment. "I have never seen anything stranger." **JR**

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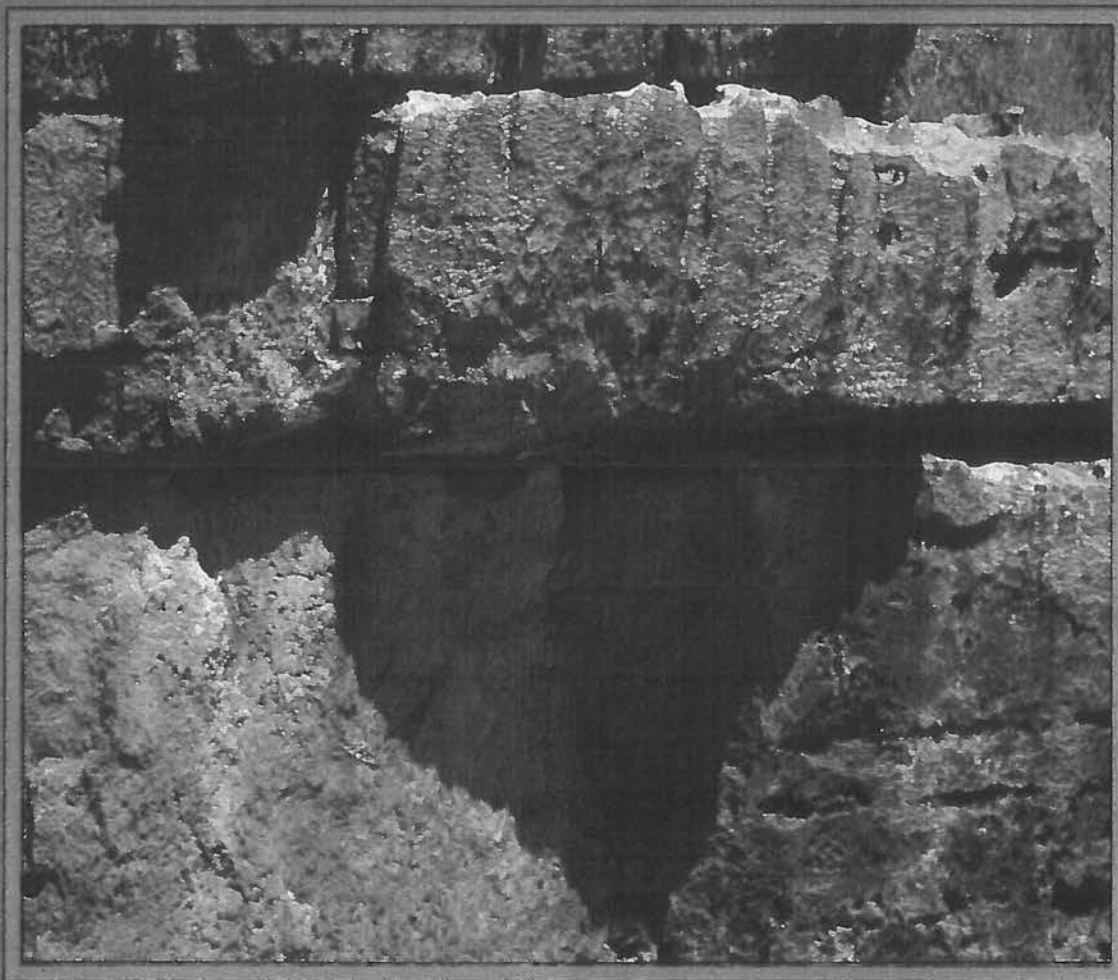
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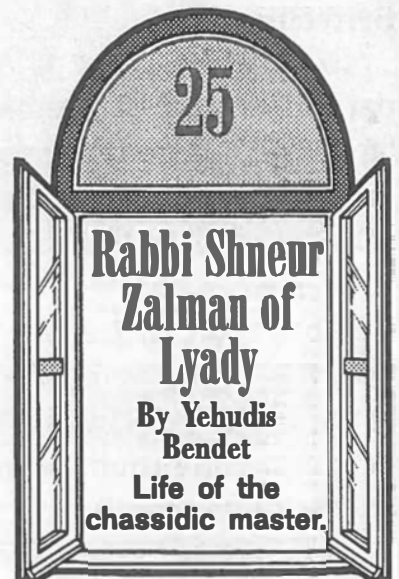
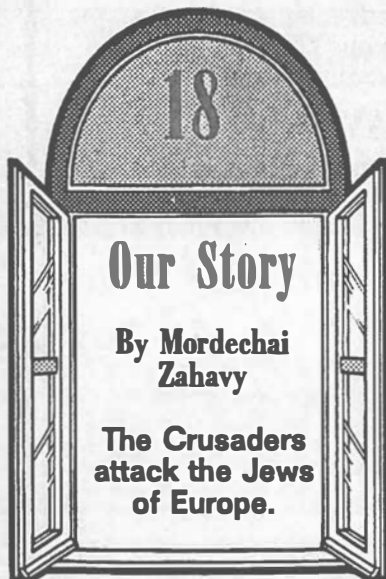
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