

# 12



Josef arrived in Paris, at the house of his sister-in-law Terca. Terca was very wealthy. She owned a large shop with many employees, and Rywka was one of them and received weekly wages. Rywka and Sure'le lived in the rich sister's house. Josef drove up to them. A tall man with a distinctly Russian appearance came to meet him. He presented himself to Josef, "I am Vladimir, your brother-in-law".

Vladimir was indeed a Russian - the son of a Russian general, with whom Terca, the Jewish girl from Siedlce, had married here in Paris. Josef, albeit a socialist and not a religious man, was rather shocked by this sudden kinship. After all, Vladimir was alien in spirit to everything that was sacred and dear to Josef. More than once, Josef felt alienated in this wealthy home of the supposedly progressive general's son. More than once, Josef conceived that this very Vladimir had surely been a "White Guard<sup>1</sup>" in his youth, and had been involved with all those reactionaries and antisemites of all sorts in the "Black Hundreds<sup>2</sup>" in the old Russia, and here, all of a sudden, this [same] Vladimir was now becoming a very intimate person – his [own] brother-in-law!

After rejoicing with his wife and little daughter, it became more cramped from day to day for Josef to remain in his sister-in-law's opulent home. Indeed, he did not lack anything there - food and drink, and a finely decorated house - yet all this rejected him. What made him especially uncomfortable was the talk of his sister-in-law Terca and his brother-in-law, when they sat at the table for a meal. On the face of it, everything was civil. But remarks were cast throughout these supposedly civil conversations, giving Josef to understand that he could start thinking about doing something – to the effect that he had to start providing for his family, and that every person in today's times must be practical, and even egoistic. Otherwise, one could not exist. The beautiful ideas of a better world, of a better humanity, the love for the working class - all these were things that needed to be put off for a later time.

Sitting at the opulently decked table with every delicacy to eat, conversations regarding world issues would also often be held. And it was here, at the table, that Josef first knew the true character of his sister-in-law Terca. She was the one who set the tone of all these conversations, and with each day became ever more outspoken and aggressive in [voicing] her opinions.

Once, when they were talking about the various problems and perils, with which the years at the time - between the two World Wars - were so fraught (it was [regarding] the peril of the war that could break out between Fascist Germany and Italy against France, England and America), she came out with an expression which truly stupefied Josef.

---

<sup>1</sup> [TN: The reactionary "White Army" fought against the Bolshevik "Red Army" in the Russian Civil War of 1917-1923.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: "Black Hundreds: Russian 'Chernosotentsy'; reactionary, anti-revolutionary, and antisemitic groups formed in Russia during and after the Russian Revolution of 1905." (Encyclopaedia Britannica)]

Terca said, "The war hardly scares me. Those with capital have nothing to fear. The world will only be freed of all misery, once mankind itself is free. Until then, only those who possess capital are free. The individual is the one who plays the main role in society. The principal thing is the individual - and not society".

Josef was left sitting speechless. He had not contended with such words. Once he came back to himself a little from these statements, he began, politely and in a voice of restrained agitation, to defend the ideal of socialism in which he believed, "Only this ideal, and the realisation of socialism, is the sole answer to all the suffering of mankind", said Josef in a subdued yet tranquil voice.

But here his brother-in-law Vladimir came to the aid of his wife, the Jewess. This time, as earlier, Josef remained defeated. The strongest argument, used by both Vladimir and Terca, was, "Josef, just look how bad things were for you in Poland, when you were concerned with public affairs! You were forced to leave Poland and come to Paris to be able to feed your wife and child. Yes, Josef, start thinking more about finding some employment as soon as possible".

This last remark compelled Josef to remain silent, for what could he reply to that? Rywka clearly supported his statement and, in her heart, agreed with anything he said. But Terca's words got to her, too. He had to do something. True, Rywka was working and earning wages at her sister's shop, but this was by far not enough to maintain herself, Josef and the child.

Josef was moved to tears when his little daughter Sure'le would sit by his side in the mealtime debates. Sure'le would cling onto him, caressing and kissing him, and plead with her uncle and aunt not to shout at her father. In her charming, childish French, she would ask her uncle and aunt to have mercy on her father. Sure'le's intercessions for her father affected Josef even more and awakened, in him, all his paternal feelings of love and loyalty to his own flesh and blood. Josef decided he must find any work whatsoever!

But what was he to apply himself to? This question never ceased to drill into Josef's mind. He did not know a profession, and did not speak the country's language, French. He would wander in the streets of the large and beautiful city of Paris. He would roam the streets day in and day out, seeking and searching, in a bid to find an employment – but to no avail!

The rich sister-in-law, Terca, procured an apartment for them - a modest, non-wealthy dwelling. Rywka went to work early each morning. Their little daughter stayed at the rich house. Auntie Terca was good to her sister's child. Terca had no children, and the little Sure'le brought her much joy. Thus, Sure'le had two mothers.

After Rywka left for work, Josef stayed at home. He now became the "housewife". He cleaned, shopped for food and cooked supper for himself and his wife, the provider. Josef now had time to think, and sorrow would assail him when he remembered his years in Warta. After all, life had had a meaning there. He had been active, and his work had brought benefit not only to himself, but to others as well. People depended upon his work, and he was appreciated for his activity. In the party, he found faith. Life had not been as desolate as it was now in Paris, in the poor apartment, not far from his rich, proud and haughty sister-in-law, who was

pressuring him and constantly demanding of him to do something, [and where] he was rejected by his silent brother-in-law Vladimir, who looked at him with the cold eyes of a stranger.

In the evenings, Terca and her husband would come to them in their impoverished dwelling and take him and Rywka out in their opulent automobile, and drive about a little in the bright, beautiful Paris streets. On the way, Terca would recount how pleased she was with Sure'le - how well she was doing at school and how beautifully she was already playing the piano. Josef would listen to this with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow - joy for his child, for his own flesh and blood, and sorrow because he was unable to maintain his child with his own earnings, that he himself should provide all the nice things Sure'le was receiving from her wealthy aunt.

Upon Terca's advice, Josef set out across Paris' Jewish quarters. Terca told him, "Josef, approach the first good Jew who speaks Yiddish and ask him about work".

Josef made the acquaintance of a Polish Jew from Łódź, who took him to a factory where they sewed trousers. But sewing trousers resulted in nothing - Josef was no good at this work.

Meanwhile, Josef started learning to become a typesetter in a printing press. He interested his sister-in-law in investing money in a brand-new business - in a Yiddish newspaper in Paris. Josef even already had the committee, the editors and the writers. Terca took on Josef's plan. The newspaper was published for a short time and closed down with a considerable loss of money.

What was he to do now? Where was he to put himself? For him, being in Paris became more cramped with every passing day. Everything here was alien to him - it was suffocating. He wrote long letters to his friends in Warsaw. He told them of his misery. He also corresponded with Miriam. From her, he received warm letters with comforting words, not to lose his faith in himself and to hope for better days. She advised him to return to Warsaw and apply himself to an employment of his calling.

And here Josef received a telegram, inviting him to come to Warsaw as soon as possible. A prominent position awaited him in the party. The Bund needed him. He had to be in Warsaw as soon as possible - within two or three weeks, in fact.

Josef had not expected this - a position in the party, in the capital Warsaw! That was something of which he had not dreamt. Fortune was finally shining before his eyes. He wrote, at once, to the effect he was accepting the party's invitation. He felt uplifted. He was ecstatic, and went about revived with glee.

Reminding himself of parting company with Rywka, and especially with his little daughter, he was saddened. His sister-in-law [tried to] talk him out of it. She [tried to] convince him that the good fortune there, in that Warsaw, was a temporary thing and meant nothing. Here, in Paris, was his family - his wife and daughter. Here, he would eventually find some employment. She would help him. She would do anything for him to be able to stay here. But Josef refused to listen to her words.

Rywka also attempted to talk Josef out of travelling to Warsaw. Rywka thought to herself, "Warsaw is drawing him". She had seen the letters Miriam had written to Josef. Rywka was not jealous by nature. She possessed a pride that is rarely found in women. Rywka did not insist. She gave in and wished Josef much good fortune. Let him travel on his own and, should he settle down, she would come to him and be a loyal wife to him. She was even willing to make a sacrifice - she would leave Sure'le in Paris and come to him. Josef wordlessly heard her out. He could not make up his mind. He sensed his "nest" in opulent Paris was falling apart. Shaking, with mixed feelings of joy and grief, of the longing and regret that he was feeling in advance, Josef left the city of Paris.