

René Jean-Paul Dewil

The Family Vincius

# Vilna

## 1814- 1832

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## The Characters

Samuel Vincevicius	1748-1815	Married to Hannah Landau in 1765
Hannah Landau	1750-1825	Married to Samuel Vincevicius
Andras Munkacs	1750-1815	Married to Beila Tugendhold in 1770
Beila Tugendhold	1754-1820	Married to Andras Munkacs
Ezra Vincevicius	1770-1845	Married to Rebekah Munkacs in 1790
Rebekah Munkacs	1772-1848	Married to Ezra Vincevicius
Asa Vincevicius	1790-1860	Married to Leah Perlman in 1814, son of Ezra Vincevicius
Leah Perlman	1798-1880	Married to Asa Vincevicius in 1814
Rebekah Vincevicius	1816-1903	Married to Samuel Klaipevicius in 1836, daughter of Asa Vincevicius
Esther Vincevicius	1818-1863	Married to Finkel Kaunavicius in 1836, daughter of Asa Vincevicius
Max Vincevicius	1820-1900	Married to Sara Benavicius in 1840, son of Asa Vincevicius
Abraham Vincevicius	1792-1871	Married to Abi Abramovski in 1814, son of Ezra Vincevicius
Abi Abramovski	1792-1876	Married to Abraham Vincevicius in 1814
Iosel Vincevicius	1815-1895	Married to Sara Rausnitz in 1835, son of Abraham Vincevicius
Sara Rausnitz	1816-1903	Married to Iosel Vincevicius in 1835
Edek Vincevicius	1817-1897	Married to Rachel Levin in 1837, son of Abraham Vincevicius
Rachel Levin	1820-1910	Married to Edek Vincevicius in 1837
Sarah Vincevicius	1800-1878	Married to Antanas Svirskевичius in 1827, daughter of Ezra Vincevicius
Antanas Svirskевичius	1798-1873	Married to Sarah Vincevicius in 1827
Anton Svirskius	1832-1900	Son of Sarah Vincius
Paul Svirskius	1833-1898	Son of Sarah Vincius
Johanna Svirskius	1835-1910	Daughter of Sarah Vincius



**Present at the Birth of Max Vincevicius. 1820**

		Age
Max's Grand-grandmothers:	Hannah Landau	70
	Beila Tugendhold	66
Max's Grandparents:	Ezra Vincevicius	50
	Rebekah Munkacs	48
Max's Parents:	Asa Vincevicius	30
	Leah Perlman	22
Max's Aunts and Uncles:	Abraham Vincevicius	28
	Abi Abramovski	28
	Sarah Vincevicius	20
The Children:	Rebekah Vincevicius	4
	Esther Vincevicius	2
	Iosel Vincevicius	5
	Edek Vincevicius	3

## Leaders of the Nations

### Russia and Poland

- Tzar Alexander I (1777-1825) R. 1801-1825 Tzar of Russia, King of Poland-Lithuania, Grand-Prince of Finland, Dynasty Holstein-Gottorp-Romanov, married 1793 to Louise of Baden, Elizabeth Alexeievna. Son of Tzar Paul I and Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg
- Tzar Nicholas I (1796-1855) R. 1825-1855 Tzar of Russia, King of Poland-Lithuania, Grand-Prince of Finland, Dynasty Holstein-Gottorp-Romanov, married 1817 to Charlotte of Prussia, Alexandra Feodorovna. Son of Tzar Paul I and Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg.
- Tzar Alexander II (1818-1881) R. 1855-1881 Tzar of Russia, King of Poland-Lithuania, Grand-Prince of Finland, Dynasty Holstein-Gottorp-Romanov, married 1841 to Marie of Hesse (d. 1880, Maria Alexandrovna) and Catherine Dolgorukova (morganatic, Princess Yurievskaya). Son of Nicholas I and Alexandra Feodorovna.

The so-called ‘Congress Kingdom of Poland’ was created at the Congress of Vienna (1815), after the demise of Napoleon Bonaparte. Kings of Poland during this period of rule and afterwards, until 1917, were the Russian tzars.

### Viceroy of Poland

- Jozef Zajaczek (1752-1826) R. 1815-1826. Polish General.
- None 1826-1831 Poland was ruled by an Administrative Council.
- Ivan Fyodorovich Paskevich (1782-1856) R. 1831-1855 Russian General. of Ukrainian descent. Viceroy.
- Mikhail Dmitrievich Gorchakov (1793-1861) R. 1855-1861. Russian Artillery General and Russian Prince.
- Nikolai Onufrievich Sukhozanet (1794-1871) R. May 1861 - August 1861. Resigned due to bad health.
- Karl Karlovich Lambert (1815-1865) R. August 1861 – October 1861. Russian Cavalry General and Count.
- Alexander von Lüders (1790-1874) R. 1861-1862. Russian Infantry General and Count.

Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich of Russia (1827-1891) R. June 1862–1863. Second son of Tzar Nicholas I of Russia and younger brother of Tsar Alexander II.

Friedrich Wilhelm Rembert von Berg (1794-1874) R.1863-1874. Russian Field Marshal and count of Finland, of which he was Governor General from 1855 to 1861.

From 1874 to 1915, Poland was ruled by the Russian Tzars and Governor-Generals appointed by Russia.

### **Governors-General of the Vilna Province in the Russian Empire**

Alexander Michailovič Rimsky-Korsakov	R. 1806-1830
Mikhail Nikolayevich Muravyov-Vilensky	R. 1863-1865
Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman	R. 1865-1866
Aleksandr Potapov	R. 1868-1874
Eduard Totleben	R. 1880-1884
Pyotr Dmitrievich Sviatopolk-Mirskii	R. 1902-1904.

### **Prussia**

King Frederick William III (1770-1840) R. 1797-1840 King of Brandenburg-Prussia. Dynasty of Hohenzollern, married 1793 to Duchess Louise of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (d. 1810). Son of Frederick William II.

King Frederick William IV (1796-1861) R. 1840-1861. King of Brandenburg-Prussia. President of the Erfurt Union (1849-1850). Dynasty of Hohenzollern, married 1823 Elisabeth Ludovika of Bavaria (d. 1873). Son of Frederick William III.

Emperor William I (1797-1888) R. 1861-1888). King of Brandenburg-Prussia. President of the North German Confederation (1867-1871) and German Emperor from 1871 on. Dynasty of Hohenzollern. Brother of Frederick William IV. Married in 1829 to Princess Augusta of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach (1811-1890).

**Austria**

Francis I (1768-1835) R. 1804-1835. Emperor of Austria. Dynasty of Habsburg-Lorraine. Married in 1788 to Duchess Elisabeth of Württemberg, in 1790 Maria Teresa of Naples, in 1808 Maria Ludovika of Austria-Este, and in 1816 Princess Caroline Augusta of Bavaria. Son of Emperor Leopold II (1747–1792) and his wife Maria Luisa of Spain (1745–1792).

Ferdinand I (1793-1875) R. 1835-1848. Abdicated. Emperor of Austria-Hungary. Dynasty of Habsburg-Lorraine. Married in 1831 to Maria Anna of Savoy (1803-1884). Son of Francis I.

Francis-Joseph I (1830-1916) R. 1848-1916. Emperor of Austria-Hungary. Dynasty of Habsburg-Lorraine. Married in 1853 to Duchess Elizabeth of Bavaria (called ‘Sissi’, 1837-1898). Son of Ferdinand I.

**France**

King Louis XVIII (1755-1824) R. 1814-1824. King of France and Navarre. Married 1771 to Marie Joséphine of Savoy (d. 1810). Dynasty of Bourbon. Son of Louis XVI.

Emperor Napoleon I (1769-1821) R. 1815 Emperor of France. Married to Joséphine de Beauharnais (m. 1796; div. 1810) and Marie Louise of Austria ((m. 1810, d. 1847)

King Charles X (1757-1836) R. 1815-1830. Abdicated. King of France. Dynasty of Bourbon. Married 1773 to Marie Thérèse of Savoy (d. 1805).

King Louis-Philippe I (1773-1859) R. 1830-1848. Abdicated. King of France. Dynasty of Orléans. Married to Maria Amalia of Naples and Sicily (d. 1866).

Emperor Louis Napoleon III (1808-1873) R. 1848-1870. President of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic, Emperor of the French as of 1852. House of Bonaparte. Married 1853 to Eugénie de Montijo, Marchioness of Ardales (d. 1920).

**Great-Britain**

- King George III (1738-1820) R. 1760-1820. Married in 1761 to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz.
- King George IV (1762-1830) R. 1820-1830. Married (1) in 1785 to Maria Fitzherbert and (2) in 1795 to Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel.
- King William IV (1765-1837) R. 1830-1837. Married in 1818 to Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen. Son of George III.
- Queen Victoria (1819-1901) R. 1837-1901. Married 1840 to Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Granddaughter of George III.

## Vilna

### The Birth of Max Vincevicius. 1820.

The woman screamed stridently. The long shriek of pain and effort sounded to far beyond the closed doors of the large house. Only seconds ago, the fine dwelling of the Vincevicius family had stood peacefully, in silence, in nonetheless very noisy Gaono Street of the city of Vilna. Until moments ago, the only sounds heard had been the harsh din of the many carriages rattling down the street, the muffled shouts of the onion seller, the humming of tens of people running outside, and the shuffling feet of women in the rooms of the Gaono house, hurriedly preparing the bedroom in which the mother-to-be would soon give birth to a child.

Leah Perlman, whose time had come, lay huddled in white sheets in her bed upstairs. The bed was large and comfortable, her room wide and well aired. A fire blazed in the small hearth on the other side of her vast bed. All the fireplaces in the house had been lighted hours ago, to fend off the freezing cold that held Vilna in its dire grip since several weeks. The warmth should provide her comfort, in her bed and out.

The end of winter was near, but in a not so rare resurgence of cold, before the dark season would be chased by the first, slightly warmer sun of spring, a tough, steady freezing wind from the east had whitened again the roofs of Vilna. The people in the house did not fear such surges of winter anger. Gaono lay white too, the roofs of the houses bore a light cover of snow. In Gaono Street the snow dirtied by the carts, coaches and boots of the passers-by remained, and didn't yet melt away.

The snow had heaped up in the streets of Vilna, especially at the places where the eastern wind whirled and hurled around unprotected corners. In the countryside, the snow filled the deeper sandy paths, so that the villages were hard to reach. Many were isolated from the cities.

It seemed everything made by man became smaller in winter, as if the isolated farms and the *shtetls*, the smaller villages, had shrunk, sunk back in the earth where they had emerged from. The world of man returned to the underlying sandy ground. The vast whiteness of the snow filled the land to the horizon with its only bleak, though wonderful, pure colour. One had to be a poet or a painter to like and admire the kingdom of the snow! Normal men and women left their houses only by necessity or urgency. Nature had claimed back its power over mankind.

Asa Vincevicius, the Jew, loved the peacefulness of Lithuania in winter. He knew well how life continued vividly in each farm, each tavern, and in each village. The Christians still moved outside to pray in their churches. The Jews still walked to their wooden synagogues and to the *besmedreshes*, to the prayer- and study-halls. In the warmth of their rooms, they opened their Bibles or an occasional volume of the Talmud, read and studied. Life slowed down in winter, but continued no less intensely than in summer. Men returned into their minds in winter, more than in the other seasons. Winter was a time for reflection, for introspection, for meditation about the forces of the universe and the stars above. The cities

too seemed to have shrunk, but here, in Vilna, the spires of the Christian church towers seemed to crawl out of the ground to reach to the heavens. The Jews might have envied the Christians for such signs of faith.

The centre of the Lithuanian town protected the Vincevicius family home of Asa, the father, in a cosy embrace. Warmth was in the city, the joy of being close and together for the family members who lived in the same street, and in the awareness of the sympathy and solidarity of their neighbours. This was an entirely different life than in the far more isolated villages and lonely farms of the countryside.

The house of Gaono felt warm in all rooms and corridors, in honour of the pregnant woman.

The men waited downstairs. They waited patiently in the finely decorated hall. Here sat Ezra Vincevicius, the new child's grandfather, the patriarch of the family. He would not have missed the first cry of his new grandchild. He had thought about what kind of blessing he would give to this one. A few loving words he would say, and wish the best. He might still be around to lead the child to his *Bar Mitzvah*, if God allowed, but not much longer. That the child would be a boy, he did not doubt anymore.

In front of Ezra sat Ezra's son, Asa. Asa was nervous. He wrung his hands now and then. Ezra had smiled at this, for it meant his son cared for his wife. The marriage of Asa with Leah had been a good one.

Around them played four children, two boys and two girls, always shouting and disputing, as children usually did. Iosel and Edek, the boys, Abraham's children, were five and three. They were Ezra's grandchildren. Little Rebekah and Esther were four and two, Asa's daughters, also Ezra's grandchildren. They played in a corner, halted their shouts now, impressed by the atmosphere and dignity and awe that had suddenly fallen over the house with the woman's first cry of the pains of birth-giving.

Once every while, the men and the children heard a woman running in the corridor to and from the kitchen. This should mostly be Sarah Vincevicius, Ezra's younger daughter, the aunt of the children, and sister to Asa. Also, Abi Abramovski, the mother of the boys Iosel and Edek, could move there. She was the wife of Abraham, brother to Asa. Abraham had not yet arrived in the main hall, though he also had promised to come. He would probably dash in much later, as he used to do at other family reunions.

The older women would remain upstairs, assisting Leah Perlman, Asa's wife, in delivering her baby. In the Vincevicius Family, whether you were born or whether you died, you were never alone. The two women who were in charge of the squadron of female assistants to deliver the child, were Hannah Landau, the oldest matriarch, seventy years old, and Beila Tugendhold, who was four years younger than Hannah.

Hannah ordered everybody about, as was her right and duty. The main task of bringing the child to life lay with the *bobe*, the midwife, who was the other great-grandmother. Beila had served as midwife all her life, and she was a good *bobe*. Everybody acknowledged her skill. Beila had to perform the hardest work now, a work of long experience, of knowledge and of skill of hands. She knew how to use her mind too, this Beila. Ezra often had asked for her council in family affairs, even though she was not a true Vincevicius. Hannah shielded Beila

from distractions. She was Beila's dedicated servant for once. She was also the recognised boss of Asa's house in this crucial hour.

Beila Tugendhold was a *bobe* of renown in Vilna. She had been the younger daughter of a family of midwives. In her had crystallised the knowledge and the experience of ages. She was a matron now, a woman of sixty-six and of considerable substance. She knew herself ill. A pain was eating at her breast. She had confessed the pain to no one, refused to see the gentile doctors, and would not even speak about her condition to Hannah Landau. Hannah was her older friend, the mother of Ezra, Beila's son-in-law.

Beila was still quite capable of concentrating her will on the woman who was to give birth, on Leah Perlman. She had known the Perlman Family quite well, and had appreciated the pious men who were the forefathers of Leah. This would be her last child to deliver, she surmised painfully. She wanted to honour a last time the Perlmans, and her son-in-law.

Hannah Landau stood at the foot of the bed in which lay Leah. The white linen had been thrown off. Leah's waters had broken. The younger women were cleaning up. Beila was working at the body of the little child, ordering Leah to push and push.

Hannah commanded everybody around from out of her strategic position, merely adjusting a basin that stood not at the right place, putting her hands to a towel spread too far from where Beila sat, near the pregnant Leah. Beila was a heavy woman with strong arms and hands.

Hannah was lean and thin. She had the stronger mind in the room. The two women, Beila and Hannah, formed an awesome duo of leadership contested by nobody. No man would have dared enter the room without their permission.

In the great hall of Asa Vincevicius, Asa and his father Ezra sat in chairs opposite each other. A low wooden table, finely carved in oak, stood between them. At every shrill scream, they sipped from their crystal glasses filled with brandy. Their eyes never left the vodka. The strong drink was one of Asa's best, a brandy made of grains, distilled in one of Asa's taverns. The vodka glimmered white through the many facets of the cut glass. The men turned and turned again their glass in their fingers. Normally, they should both have been at work and out of the house. Ezra lived a few doors closer to the river Vilya, also in Gaono. The men waited, dressed in their best modern clothes, dark trousers, white shirts and vests. They reflected silently on the vastness of the universe and the smallness of mankind in it.

Ezra Vincevicius was a strong man of fifty, a majestic oak in the forest of the Vincevicius Family. He was lean, yet heavy, a man with a chest like a barrel, powerful legs and short, though very muscular arms and shoulders. He still could lift weights younger men liked to split. Ezra was the patriarch of the family. More than anyone of his forefathers, he had ensured the wealth of the family, working on the legacy of his father and father-in-law before him. Ezra was a trader, a lease-holder of taverns and shops in the countryside, a brewer and a distiller, a man who headed several smaller cigar manufactories, and a man of substance in his community. He traded in everything that could be sold with a profit. He traded in the region of Vilna, where he and his family had lived for as far as he could remember, and also further on. The region he traded in was Russian now. The head of state was the Russian Emperor, the tzar, who lived in the capitals of Saint Petersburg and Moscow, cities where Ezra had never travelled to.

Ezra's land had once been the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This state had been formed by the marriage of a Polish queen and a Lithuanian king of the Jagielon line in the sixteenth century. By the Union of Lublin, Poland remained a kingdom then, and Lithuania a grand duchy, with a grand duke who owed allegiance to the Polish king. Lithuania was formerly called Lietuvin, the land of the Baltic Lietuva tribe. The land lay between the Nemunas River, the Niemen, and the Neris River. Lithuania was ruled from out of Kaunas, Kowno in Polish, Kevno in Lithuanian, a city to the north of Vilna.

Lithuania was a vast land, comprising not only the heartland called Lithuania, but also White and Red Ruthenia, Volhynia, Podolia and Kiev, the lands sometimes called Belarus and Ukraine, and still other, smaller regions. The grand duke had indeed ruled over lands from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, to the Crimea and to Odessa. Now, since 1795, all this vast kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, weakened over the centuries, had been conquered by the Russian emperors and empresses.

In order to assuage the envy of its powerful neighbours in the west, Russia had handed over smaller pieces of the vast kingdom of Poland-Lithuania to Prussia and Austria. Austria had received Galicia. Brandenburg-Prussia had gained Silesia and the Duchy of Posen, called Poznán in Polish. The partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had taken place in three movements from 1772 to 1795.

The Russian hold over Lithuania had happened when Ezra had been young and little. He now took the Russian grasp for granted. That grasp had only been broken during a short period after the French occupation by the troops of the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Terrible battles had then been waged, until Napoleon's armies had been defeated, in part also in these parts of the continent. A first peace between the French and the Russians had been concluded at Tilsit on the borders of the Niemen River, which also ran through Vilna. That peace didn't last long.

The town Ezra lived in was called Vilnius in the Lithuanian language, Wilno in Polish and Vilna in Russian. Ezra called it Vilna, but his language was Yiddish, a dialect of German interspersed with Hebrew words.

Ezra didn't care much for who ruled the country. He would accommodate with any head of state, with its government, its police, its army and its judges. His religious laws recommended this. His laws were the laws of the Jews, written down in the Torah and in the Talmud. Give unto God what is due to God, and give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Currently, the Caesar was the Russian Emperor Alexander.

Ezra Vincevicius was a man of the Jewish faith, a Jew, a *Yid*, a foreigner in the lands he was born in, as his father's fathers had been for many generations before him. The Vincevicius could not remember from where they originated from. From Israel and Jerusalem for sure, but where had they wandered in between?

The Jews living in these Lithuanian lands, in which they had been born, were part of a separate community in the vast Russian empire. They were no Poles, no Lithuanians, and certainly no Russians. They abided by the laws of the state, but they had their own laws by which they lived, and those laws were recognised by the powers of the land. The Jews formed

communities they governed by themselves. This was the *Kahal*, the community in Hebrew, with a government of rabbis, scholars and notables.

In Lithuania, there were two such communities, the community of Vilna one of those. The Jewish community collected its own taxes, which it handed over in one sum to the Emperor's government. The *Kahal* exercised its own judiciary system. The system of double laws, of the *Kahal* and of the empire, was complex. Jews could appeal to both for crimes and for the organisation of their life. Usually, they kept to the *Kahal*. The Jews paid special taxes to uphold the system. They did not have to serve in military service for the Russian army, for instance. Even the Russians expected no foreigners to fight for their country. They did not expect the Jews to be patriots.

Ezra was well aware the *Kahal* system was being stretched to the point of breaking. Still, it guaranteed a more or less peaceful life in this town of Vilnius. The worries the system imposed on the men were not brought on the heads of the children, and kept far from the women. It was the men's duty to brood over such matters!

The Russian tzars and their Christian Greek Orthodox Church did not like the Jews, for Jews had long ago crucified the Christian God, embodied in the figure of Jesus. So, Jews had been largely banned from the Russian empire by the tsars. The tsars had exiled all Jews from their lands since ages. When Russia incorporated most of the land of Poland-Lithuania, however, it had inherited the largest community of Jews on the continent, hundreds of thousands of Jews. More than two thirds of all Jews of Europe lived in hospitable Poland-Lithuania.

The capital of Lithuanian Jewry was Vilna. Half of the population of the town was of Jewish descent! Russia had quickly ordained that all the Jews of its empire had to remain confined to a defined set of territories, corresponding to the lands of traditional Lithuania. These were called the Jewish Settlement Areas. Jews could continue to live in parts of Poland, and mostly in these Settlement Areas, which still stretched from the Baltic to Odessa. Few or no Jews were allowed to live in Russia, though some of the wealthiest traders, traders of the first, defined class, receive the right to do so.

Ezra sighed. Another series of screams reverberated through the house. He sipped from his vodka, and remarked his son, respectfully, did the same. Asa's face had whitened. Was the cause the drink or the anxiety over the pains of his wife?

Ezra, old though he was, wore not the long beard, not the black caftan coat of the traditional, very pious Jew, and not the flat, black hat worn by the most observant *Hasidic* Jews. He was no *Hassidic*. He felt lucky his family had joined the Vilna *Gaon*, who had refused the ideas of *Hassidism*. He wore the clothes of the well-to-do city merchant, whether Jew or gentile. He was a simple rabbinic Jew, dedicated to his *Kahal* and obedient to the *Kahal* Council. He regularly attended the ceremonies in the synagogue, where he had received a decent place near the eastern wall, close to the notables. He put on his *teffilin*, his white-and-blue prayer shawl on those occasions, and he went there, usually accompanied by his wife. He kept a low profile in the community, however, so as not to incite envy. He had stopped wearing earlocks a long time ago. He had remarked the rabbis disapproved of this. Ezra had always remained very generous to the associations of the rabbis, so the rabbis withheld from scorning him in public.

Ezra Vincevicius had taken the habit to cut his earlocks, because he thought it offered him added discretion on his travels, added safety, as he blended in with the other folk in the villages. He had travelled much when he was younger, visiting his taverns and fields. He desired not to stand out as a rich Jew while riding in his small coach on lonely country roads. His son Asa had done the same.

When outside the Jewish quarters of Vilna, Ezra and Asa mixed with and disappeared in the crowds, dressed as any other man of the city, smart and well educated, sure of some power, worthy of respect, and renown.

When they approached their taverns, where they were expected as Jews, they easily transformed by throwing a prayer shawl over their shoulders and a long, black coat covering all. They put on the black fur-lined hat of the devotees. Ezra didn't like to display his wealth ostensibly. His coach was small and old, his horse of mixed blood. Nevertheless, coffers hidden in his warehouse of Gaono, near his house, in places only known to him and to his son Asa, held considerable amounts of golden and silver coins, the value of which regularly increased. More gold he had deposited in the bank of Vilna.

Asa Vincevicius was a serious-looking, though now anxious and nervous young man of thirty. He had married the beautiful, elegant, maybe more Prussian than Polish or Lithuanian-feeling sixteen-year old Leah Perlman when he himself was only twenty-four and still a student in the *besmedresh* of Vilna's Great Synagogue. He had not studied in a *yeshiva*, finally, preferring to study the Talmud on his own, helped only by the rabbi of the synagogue, who had seen a prodigy in him. He had also received help from two assistants of the rabbi, scholars or *rebbe*s, other Talmud scholars considerably older than he. They had been disappointed when he had expressed a preference for the simple working life. He had been eager to help his father, to ride out and learn what the real world was made of.

Leah Perlman's father owned a trading house. When his father-in-law died, Asa had continued the Perlman business. By the Perlman family, he owned houses near the Baltic Sea in Prussia. He traded internationally. He often travelled north, therefore, sometimes accompanied by his Leah to profit from the connections of her family, from the relations with other, reliable Jewish merchants on the Baltic coast. The Perlman name still opened doors in the north. Leah had become a considerable asset for him. She had also proven to be a loving wife. Asa and Leah had two children, a daughter of four they called Rebekah after Asa's mother, and another daughter called Esther, who was only two.

Asa had abandoned hopes on a direct male heir, until a few months ago, Leah had announced him with red-flushed cheeks and full breasts she was pregnant again. Asa had suspected this, but he had said nothing. Nevertheless, he agreed with the Babylonian Talmud stating, 'happy is the Jew whose children are sons, and woe the Jew whose children are all females.' The expected birth of a boy therefore filled him with pride and joy. He envied his brother Abraham, who had received two boys by Abi.

Asa and Leah had done everything they knew of ancient traditions that could bring male children into the world. Asa wanted the moment of birth to be easy for Leah. He would hate losing her, for he truly loved his wife. Asa and Leah had called on a *Hasidic* rebbe for special prayers, and they had given the issue quite some thought. They had considered asking a

*Hasidic Tzaddik* to intervene for them with God. But then, they had decided such an act far too much superstitious, rather than rational.

Leah avoided looking at impure animals, though, at fowl, at ugly and handicapped people, at ugly pictures. She had recited the best prayers out of her prayer book for Jewish women, and she had placed little papers with written down, selected prayers near her bed. Asa had remarked, smiling, these too were but manifestations of superstition, But Leah had rebuked him.

Leah went more often to the bathhouse, taking care to think only of beautiful things and fine concepts on the way to or from, and in the bath. When she stepped out of the *mikveh*, out of the ritual bath, she sang little songs to her child.

She did not sit down on doorsteps, she avoided drinking wine and vodka, did not eat liver and other food she had read could make births more difficult.

Asa refused nothing to his wife, lest it might harm the child in her womb or hurt Leah. Leah knew best. He granted her outrageous whims, over which she laughed herself and found ridiculous, but could not resist. These were merely the strange requests pregnant women demanded during their time of bearing.

Beila Tugendhold applied all the charms and blessings she had learned over the years in her long career. Beila placed a long dagger under Leah's pillow to fend off Lilith, the child-snatcher demoness. Asa had protested feebly also against this old custom, calling it pure superstition, but the women had shouted him down. Finally, Asa let the women have their way.

At the beginning of Leah's pregnancy, Beila emphasised to Leah it was crucial for her to sleep well and peacefully, and to be happy, to caress the child and to sing to him or her. Luckily, Leah was by nature a bright and joyous woman, who liked to laugh. She never complained.

Beila Tugendhold had known also another midwife, Malka Berlant, who was the most famous and best *bobe* of Vilna ever. Malka had even compiled books from all she had learned as a midwife, and Beila had read what Malka wrote. From this Malka, Beila revealed, that when a child sank very low in the womb before birth, the child might be a boy. Leah slept well, not more than usual, and the baby kicked out a lot in her belly. This confirmed to Leah the angel of God had already visited the child to command a soul into the little body. Beila had squeezed a drop of milk out of Leah's right breast. She let that drop fall on a stone. The milk spattered, which Beila told was a good sign for a boy to come. She also said she thought the child lay face up in Leah's womb, a further sign for a boy. That would be wonderful.

When he heard Leah tell him about these omens, Asa had run to the synagogue with a candle, said his prayers, and lit the candle in the synagogue in front of the ark. He had gone to the prayer-house, accompanied by two friends and by his sister Sarah. They did not have to go far, for Asa's house stood at the end of Gaono. Zyduk Street, the Street of the Jews, in which stood the Great Synagogue, was but the extension of Gaono. The four of them made sure the candle didn't blow out on the way back, for that would have been a catastrophe. The candle now stood, with a very bright, long, straight, yellow flame on a small table near Leah's bed. That also was a good omen, Beila declared. She made Asa proud with her words of praise.

While he now sat with his father in his hall, Asa reflected on what a son and male heir meant for him. A son meant continuation of his line. The child would be of his own blood, and of the blood of a fine, respectable mother. Without a son, his own, particular family would stop in name, a matter Asa knew he would grieve atrociously for, the rest of his life.

Ezra, Asa's father, could sit this hour with a lighter heart. Ezra's other son, Abraham, had already two fine boys, who had survived their early years. These were the two boys Iosel and Edek, who played at Ezra's feet. They both would continue the name of Vincevicius well enough. They seemed energetic, intelligent, strong boys.

Where the name of Vincevicius originated from, Ezra and Asa did not know. The name was a fine Lithuanian one, the patronym of 'evicius' prominent and recognised immediately by any Lithuanian, Jew or gentile. Could the first part, the 'vince' come from 'Vincent'? A rumour went in the family that Vincevicius was not a Lithuanian name at all, their ancestry not from an Ashkenazy - German – origin, but from a much, much older still Sephardic Spanish or Portuguese stock. Had Asa's family emigrated from Portugal to Lithuania? Whether this could be true, nobody in the Vincevicius Family knew. Ezra claimed such considerations held no meaning at all, and little interest. The Vincevicius family had been Lithuanian for as long as memory lasted.

Their language was Yiddish, and their origins therefore most probably, indeed, German, or Ashkenaz, as the name meant in Hebrew. The family had lived most probably in Germany, in one of the Jewish communities that had fled east when the crusader armies passed through the German lands bound for Jerusalem, slaughtering Jews on their way. How his forefathers had fled in time, how they had adopted or received a Lithuanian name, the very Lithuanian-sounding Vincevicius patronym, nobody recalled.

Asa spoke several languages beyond his mother tongue Yiddish. He spoke Hebrew, German, Polish, Lithuanian – which was Ruski, old Ruthenian -, and some Russian.

Abraham too spoke many languages. Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Russian and less Polish, he spoke fluently. He could hold a conversation in Polish. He did not know Lithuanian or Ruski, but his wife did.

Poland-Lithuania, now under Russian administration, was a beautiful country of many cultures and many languages. Several religions equally co-existed, among which the Jewish religion.

Asa was not as tall or imposing, or as powerful a man as his father. He was lean and handsome of limbs and face, and seemed more to resemble his mother, a Munkacs. Asa was strong, in a wiry way. He too had good legs, he could run a long time, and he had arms that were neither too long nor too short. Ample, black hair crowned his head. He wore a short, black beard, which he entertained well, and his skin had weathered nicely. His somewhat dark face might have betrayed southern origins, as his mother's family had probably arrived long ago from Galicia or Hungary proper. Asa had travelled much these last years. He had been exposed to so much sun and biting winds, the elements had done their work on his face. He was a quiet man, used to travel alone, a man of few words. He too was dressed as a gentile man, not in a long, black caftan coat, with only a white shirt, and modern-looking trousers, a vest, no prayer shawl beneath the vest.

Asa was not an imposing person. He did not display much charisma or authority. Nevertheless, his eyes shone like steel. Many a man had shrunk away from that look. He was a cold, rational thinker like his father, with an implacable logic. He was also a very observant Jew, in modesty and humility. He didn't talk much about charity and about loving one's neighbour, but he poured money into various Jewish associations. He observed the Jewish feasts with respect. Asa attended to the ceremonies in the Great Synagogue of Vilna when he could, but he was on the road so often, lately, that he stayed a lot more out of his synagogue than in. He observed the Sabbath, and knew the local, small synagogues and prayer-houses all around Vilna.

Asa thanked God for his smart and beautiful wife, though his taste was different from most of the Jews he knew. These preferred plump girls. Leah was a fragile-looking, thin woman, but her breasts were full, her hips wide, her waist very thin, her laugh warm, her traits regular and fine. Leah had inspired him to love. Leah Perlman remained his greatest asset. He loved her unconditionally, sincerely and simply, with earthy feelings of belonging and desire.

To Asa's mind came the yellow flame of the candle from the Great Synagogue, the candle he had placed near his wife's bed. The candle represented a double hope. He fervently asked God to let Leah live first and all. He asked the child to live, be healthy, and be a boy. That was his private prayer, for which he promised more money for Jewish charity.

But could a Jew truly demand something of God, and expect God to listen? Jews had to obey the commands. The law God had given to the Jews as sign of his covenant was hard. Had God ever promised anything in return, such as to guard over his people? Why then, did the Jews not have a country they could call their own? Was the covenant hence not one-sided only? Moreover, Asa thought, the Jews did not really worship God. God was so mighty, a being so formidable in the enormous universe, nobody could comprehend His nature in the least.

It was easier to concentrate on the message. The Jews worshipped Gods' Word, therefore, the Torah, the messages in the scrolls that were kept on the altar in the synagogue.

While Asa had thus been reflecting, the screams upstairs had intensified. Leah's final work was on. More running steps could be heard in the corridors. Asa and Ezra could even distinguish the sharp voice of Rebekah Munkacs, the heavier and slower steps of Abi Abramovski, and the lighter, swifter running of Sarah Vincevicius. And then, suddenly, the screaming stopped at all. A sigh could be heard in the hall.

Beila Tugendhold held the head of the child in her hands.

Her first surprise came when the head turned and the features faced her. This child was handsome!

Beila exclaimed, 'how, but how beautiful she is! This must be a girl. She resembles you. How would you name her, Leah?'

A weak voice came from the other side of the bed, 'Micol. Micol is the name. Is it a girl?'

Beila's second surprise was to hear the disappointment in Leah's words. She looked up, and then understood. She had been a fool, once more. Couldn't she have shut up until she was sure? Of course, Leah expected a boy. Had Beila thought for a second, she would have known. Well, the harm was done.

Her third surprise came when the child turned, just as Beila would have wished it to do, in her hands. The child moved smoothly and gently. It seemed as if this baby knew instinctively what Beila wanted it to do, and that was very rare, too. Beila merely had to guide it. Beila gently drew, then, and the child followed. Beila took a grip on the shoulders, but Leah pushed hard, and the child easily slid entirely into Beila's hands.

Beila looked closely, and then experienced her fourth surprise, as she saw something she would not have thought possible with such a harmonious head and face.

'Leah, rejoice, it's a boy after all! I rarely saw a more handsome boy. He is fine in limbs and body. He is all right. He is opening his eyes, Leah, how rare is that for one so new? What name would you give a boy, Leah?'

Leah was weeping and laughing at the same time, then. She would not disappoint Asa, this time.

She almost screamed, as she sank back in the cushions, 'Max, he'll be Max! Oh, thank you, God! Max!'

The boy screamed loudly for her.

Ezra scraped his throat. He looked furtively at his son, not saying a word. Asa was looking at the ceiling, as if his sight could pierce the wooden beams.

Ezra took little Esther up from the floor. The other children had discarded her for a while.

They were engaged in a dispute over a doll. They too stopped, suddenly aware of the silence above.

Little Esther climbed up, to sit on her grandfather's lap. She placed her head against his chest, as if she wanted to sleep a little. She was merely scared, impressed by the moment. Did she feel the weight, the importance of what had happened upstairs?

The silence was not broken by one of the women from the bedroom, bursting into the hall with news. The front door in the corridor was thrown open brusquely, and in stormed a bear of heavy furs. Abraham Vincevicius had arrived! As always, he was late but still on time. Ezra and Asa saw the bulk of furs enter the hall, accompanied by much noise of grunting.

Abraham threw off his cloak onto a chair. He stood tall, immense. He shone the archetypal Jew, long, black coat under his furs, wearing the white *teffilin*, the prayer shawl of the pious man of the Book. He threw his hat under the chair of his furs. He filled the hall with his presence, bringing with him a wind of freezing cold that had to be chased by the fire in the hearth. His face was darker than Asa's, his beard fuller and more black and straggly. His face was possibly even more weathered than Asa's and Ezra's. His breath raked of brandy. He stretched and clapped in his hands, made broad gestures with his arms, as if they had been frozen tight and needed to be livened. He rolled his impressive shoulders.

He jumped to the hearth, grumbling, 'God, but it is cold outside! Real spring comes late this year! Everything all right in here?'

Abraham pushed his hands closer to the fire, before saying a word of greetings. Only then did he look around, becoming aware of his father and brother. He nodded to them, giving a greeting that was no more than a growl, and he sent a pearling laughter into the hall when he remarked the children. He threw Little Rebekah and Esther high in the air, to catch them

deftly, and deposing them again in a corner. The children screamed of delight and flocked to him.

The noise in the house henceforth would once more come from the hall. Abraham had arrived! Abraham had broken all tension. Both Ezra and Asa had to smile, now, but Ezra didn't particularly appreciate the way his second, wild son had so surreptitiously burst in.

'I'm still quite in time, I see,' Abraham called out with a deep voice. 'I met Little Sarah in the corridor. The child is born and well. The women are cleaning up the mess. You will have to wait some until the women have done their work and will allow us in. Women always lead men, isn't it? Mother and child seem to be well. Isn't that the most important news by far? Congratulations, brother!'

Asa felt slightly annoyed his brother had once more stolen the honour of the day. He would have liked the announcement of the birth to have been given with more dignity. He would have wanted Beila Tugendhold to bring him the child enveloped in linen, to place the bundle in his arms and then in Ezra's. He would have liked his father to say the first prayer. Now, he had to wait, the solemnity spoiled. He would have to recall the birth of his third child and maybe of his successor, in this abrupt way. But how could he refuse his brother his honest joy? Was it not Abraham always, who claimed the first role at feasts?

Abraham also had grown silent, noticing the other men did not much appreciate his enthusiasm. He continued warming his hands. Then, in the new silence, distinctly, the men and the children heard a baby cry out loud, a high and shrill tone.

Edek was surprised and pronounced, 'ho, ho!' His head pointed upwards. He looked at his grandfather, who said nothing, merely nodded, a smile on his lips. The boy continued playing.

Abraham turned to his brother. The men smiled at each other conspiringly.

'My sincere congratulations, brother,' Abraham said calmly, a stately grin on his face. 'That seems to me to be the cry of a male child.'

Abraham laughed openly, 'you did a good job, it seems, brother. You won't have to continue trying to make a successor, you scoundrel. Leah will quench your lust now!'

Abraham hesitated, but then he stepped away from the fire to shake his brother's hand. Asa stood from his seat and embraced Abraham. Ezra looked astonished at the scene. The brothers had reconciled in some way.

Asa said, 'I know you mean good, Abraham. Thank you. I do hope a son is born.'

'Of course, it is a son, bro. I know it is a son. Sarah told me, though she said I couldn't announce so yet. How are you going to name him, he?'

'Max Ezra Moshe,' Asa answered proudly. 'We will call him Max, officially. Had it been a girl, she would have been called Micol.'

'Aha,' Abraham nodded appreciatively. 'You chose a name that is Jewish, as well as gentile. And you added the two best names of Jewry. You do keep all your assets together, brother.' Abraham remarked. 'Do you want to make a goy out of the boy?'

Asa reddened. Something like this had come to his mind. He didn't answer. Leah Perlman had wanted the name, but Ezra had agreed, the more so when the older man heard his own name would be added, and the greatest name of Jewry as well.

Ezra loved his sons, with a love that was his major weakness in character. He loved Asa, his first, but he had never and would never acknowledge a preference, even not to himself. Abraham was too little of his own character. Abraham had been a mother's child, spoilt to the bone, maybe because Rebekah had perceived he would be her last. Both in the Vincevicius Family and in the Munkacs Family, the women did not have many children. 'We go for quality, not quantity,' Ezra had smiled when this subject came up in conversations.

Two or three children at most issued of marriages in the family. Ezra and Rebekah had been very surprised when Sarah, their daughter, had announced herself. Rebekah had been twenty-eight then, and Ezra over thirty. Sarah was a joy, now.

Abraham had been a difficult child, and more difficult even had been his adolescence years. He was boisterous, lively to be hyper-dynamic, running and screaming around all the time. Later, he had been the leader of most of the brawling children of Gaono, and then still leader of some of the worst hoodlums of the street. Yes, he had been a loud, obstinate, demanding child, who wanted to be refused nothing, and who entered into a crisis of cries and violent gestures when he didn't get his way.

Abraham had married, but his wild years had stayed with him. He was a grown man, now, but some of his business schemes were still outrageous. He managed Ezra's cigar business. He had inherited from Abi Abramovski's dowry leases of grain fields, and more at the death of his father-in-law. Lew Ezekiel Abramovski had been a trader in grains. Abraham had taken up this business too, as had Asa in a lesser way managed Leah's family fortune.

Abraham had quickly amassed a fortune. He managed his assets well. He showed much cunning as a trader, and he was not always very honest. He was no thief, but he knew how to turn a deal to his hand. He had many partners among the merchants of Vilna. He won great profits. He showed such a strong charisma! The other Jewish and non-Jewish merchants of Vilna appreciated him, despite rumours telling one could not always trust him. His schemes were often wild and dangerous and risky, but the profits he brought were large. The merchants had learned to watch his doings closely. Of course, with age, Abraham settled down somewhat. He took less risks. His fortune continued to grow more rapidly than Asa's, though. Abraham too was a pious Jew, though not a Hasidic man of the faith. He too huddled to the rabbis of the Great Synagogue.

Asa had been a little surprised to see his brother dressed today as a traditional Jew. He suspected Abraham dressed according to the men he met and dealt with. Had Abraham discussed deals with Hasidic Jews this morning? With Hasidic traders, you had better to show you were Hasidic yourself. Asa smiled once more. It was a day of peace. In his great joy over the boy child, he had reconciled at least a little with his brother. He was grateful for having achieved that, too.

Abraham asked for a drink. He didn't go for the cupboard himself. He opened the door to the corridor and shouted to the women for brandy and cakes to be served in the hall. One should feast early!

Abi Abramovski came running into the hall. She knew where Asa kept his flasks. She looked at Asa, and Asa nodded. Abi had brought small glasses from the kitchen.

From behind her slipped in Sarah, then, shouting, ‘it’s a boy! Leah is well and strong. The delivery of the child went rather easily. Beila told me to announce this to you. Little Max is shouting and kicking, and already at his mother’s breast. We need some more time to clean up. Leah lost some blood, but Beila assured us the birth went well. She could turn the baby the way a midwife should. All is fine! Leah is crying for joy. Beila says all is well. We congratulate the father. Beila will soon come down and present the child. We ask for some more patience.’

‘Well, isn’t that the finest news of the day?’ Abraham shouted. ‘Let’s drink on that!’ Abraham poured three large glasses of vodka. He handed one to his father, ignored Ezra pointing to his son, to the half-filled glasses on the table in front of him, and poured a lengthy draught. The three men cheered. The children ran to them to get at the cakes and biscuits Abi had brought on a platter. They began to dance and shout in the hall, nipping at the baked goodies. They had a new little brother and cousin. Abraham threw himself on the sofa and covered it with his bulk.

Asa looked at Abraham. He envied his brother the strength in the man. In any hall, people only saw Abraham. He was joy in person. Any feast with Abraham present, proved a success. Asa didn’t begrudge his brother such charisma. He tried to remain the older, quieter wiser brother. Which he was.

Asa had found out his brother entertained a mistress called Elzbieta Dobrovolski. He knew at which address this Elzbieta lived. The apartment lay in Pylimo Gatve, not far from the Vilna Theatre. She was an actress, but she hadn’t set a foot in the theatre since ages. She was Polish, and gentle.

Abraham’s wife Abi was the daughter of a wealthy trading house. Asa had to admit Abi was to the taste of many Jews, a fine woman. She was a wonderful housewife and a wonderful mother. But Abi was rosy of face, and plump. She had a rough skin, round features in her face, and she soon grew an ample body. Abraham probably liked Abi well enough, especially to serve him. Abraham had preferred somebody else, too, in his youth, but he could not have that woman. Ezra therefore forgave Abraham more than he should have. Abraham, by marrying Abi, had brought the renown and the fortune of one of the more substantial families of Vilna to the Vincevicius household and family.

The men in the hall still remained sitting there and talked. Soon, some form of lunch would be necessary in the house, but Ezra asked how the businesses of his sons were doing lately.

Asa began first, ‘our leases are providing us with fine profits. These last months, I took two more leases on taverns in our southernmost villages. We are expanding. Our total number of inns is grown to at over a dozen. I have been installing shops and hostels in most of them. The largest profits come from our distilleries, and from the selling of liquor. We need the taverns to boost our sales of liquor. In all our taverns, people can stay for the night and even for several days and nights. They can hold travelling families for the night. All of our inns offer additional services, such as covered space for coaches and horses. We sell fodder for the animals. We sell many other things useful on voyages. Many of our taverns are situated at one day’s travel from Vilna. It is at their first evening outside town, that people

realise what they have forgotten or not thought of for their journey. They find these things in our shops. The winter has been hard, which served nicely to our profits. We sell blankets and furs, cushions and linen.'

Asa concluded, 'Christians serve in all of our taverns. The owners seem to be Christians. These, after all, merely hold the taverns in our name. But I placed a Jew next to them. One Jew for two or three taverns suffices. The Jews watch out, count drinks, compare what is consumed with what is written in the books. They warn us when the accounts are not right. Then, I am implacable, and replace the Christians. I myself, follow up on our Jewish stewards. The scheme brings us more security, and it lowers our profile. Officially, we are not involved at all in most of the lease-holding for taverns and liquor distilleries. Our front men our Christians. It affects our profits, of course, but we earn sufficiently to pay for the middlemen and for the overseers. The system is tricky, as all sorts of dark plans can be used by the Christians and our Jewish stewards, such an outright collusion. Up to now and overall, I have been able to cope. Our profits have soared.

I trade in grains, too. And I trade in everything I hear is needed somewhere and we can provide, and is sold at higher prices where we bring it than at the place we bought.

I talked to other merchants from Vilna. I know more or less what everybody does, and how they think about me. I know what the Jews and the gentiles have in stock in their warehouses. My profits of trade are moderate, not as high as in the liquor business. I don't complain. I hope the money I laid out for you, father is sufficient. I was rather pleased with the profits.'

Ezra praised, 'I hope and pray God we can continue our trades and keep our taverns, Asa. You did well. I couldn't have done better. How about you, Abraham?'

'I don't think you can complain, either, father, about the funds I bring to the family. We gambled on major trade deals at opportunities. Our cigar business is thriving. I got more money out of trade than out of the tobacco manufactories, but the smaller manufactories are merely a front. We produce cigars of high quality. We have three manufactories rolling. Two of these are hidden, one is our front. I trade with other Jewish merchants, and with a few Christian Evangelic merchants. I picked out the men I can trust, men I meet often, drink and dine with. We discuss what trade we can organise. There is always somebody who has an idea, or heard of an opportunity. We put our assets together. At an opportunity, we talk about who can deliver the merchandise from where, who can provide the funds necessary to buy more, who will pack and transport the goods. Another comes up with names of potential buyers.

We bring our goods to the Baltic Sea ports in ships, in ships we own. We have three larger ships and five smaller boats to navigate on the Niemen. We can transport only in summer by water, but we store a lot of goods in hangars at the port of Memel, which is called Klaipeda by the Poles. Memel is a port of Prussia, but it is the closest sea harbour to where we can bring our goods by the Niemen. The port is also closed in winter. We need many papers. We can transport only in late spring and summer.

We sell to Riga, Königsberg, to Danzig, Hamburg and to Lübeck. Where our goods finally go to, we don't even always know. We deal in amber.

Nowhere am I the only dealer, working on my own. I always have partners. We share risks. Our name is well established. Discretion is our word, isn't it, father, as you asked. Anyway,

trade is bringing us higher profits than liquor, taverns and cigar manufactories. The risks are lower.'

Asa chuckled, and didn't like what he heard. Maybe he had been more careful than his brother. Higher risks brought higher profits, and he was risk-averse. He almost never worked with others. He didn't trust partners. Maybe he had been more traditional, sticking to what his father did before him. He wouldn't change his ways, though, and invite more risk in. He wanted to sleep well at night and have his hands totally free.

Ezra said some words of praise on Abraham's initiatives.

Sarah Vincevicius interrupted them all. She entered the hall, cheeks red of excitement, announcing officially to Asa, 'brother, a boy, a *ben zakhar*, is born to you.'

These were the magic words Asa had expected for so long. He was moved by his younger sister, who had uttered the right words and who stood solemnly before him. He embraced her, and then Ezra embraced Asa, and Sarah and Abraham, and all the anxiety of the past weeks fled from the house.

'And Leah?' Asa whispered to Sarah.

'Leah Perlman is well,' acknowledged Sarah as the official bringer of the message. 'She is weak, she has suffered, for the boy was big and strong, but she is happy. She sends you her greetings. Beila will bring the child down in a few moments. Afterwards, you can go up.'

The men cheered again, served more vodka, and Abraham pushed a glass also in Sarah's hands. She laughed and sipped, protested a little, but was glad with the drink. The men were still congratulating Asa, when the door opened again and Beila Tugendhold stepped in. Hannah Landau followed. Beila held a tiny child enveloped in white linen in her hands. The boy was not yet tied in swaddles. She proudly showed the young Max to the men and to the other children. She didn't allow the men to touch the newly born.

'What are you men shouting so loudly for?' she scolded. 'Leah did all the work, and you shout as if you have done it all. Well, you can start thinking about a *Sholem zokher*, the greeting feast of the male. Look at him, isn't he a fine boy? I rarely saw such a handsome boy child. He didn't suffer, this one. He is as handsome as his mother. A fine job done, Asa. Blessed be your house!'

The two women, the two matriarchs, stood in the hall and showed the child, praised his well-formed limbs and face, but wouldn't give him out of hands.

'Stay away with your dirty paws, you scoundrels,' Hannah Landau shrieked. 'Don't touch the child! Beila must hold it.'

Everybody poked a finger under the linen to hold the little fingers of Max. Beila and Hannah slapped at hands, then told they would allow Asa, and Asa only, to the bedroom of Leah.

Asa went up the stairs in the corridor. He would have run, but held his dignity. He met his mother on the way. She congratulated him and smiled.

'Don't stay too long,' she warned Asa. 'Leah is weak, but she is well. Nothing is torn inside her.'

Rebekah embraced her son and patted him on the shoulders.

Asa went on, opened the door to the bedroom. He saw there was still a small fire smouldering in the hearth. He could at least help some, there. The floor had been swept clean. All linen

used during birth had already been brought downstairs to be washed. The room lay in silence. Some noise pierced in from the always busy and crowded Gaono. Coaches passed, coachers shouted. Life was out there, yet also in this room.

Asa approached the bed. He couldn't see Leah until he stood very close to her. She almost disappeared under the blankets. Leah brought an arm and a hand from under the linen. Asa pressed the hand in his. Her face was white.

'A boy at last,' Leah said feebly, but with a happy face.

'Yes,' Asa whispered, 'a boy! Little Max! Don't say too much. You must rest, now. You showed much courage. Was it hard?'

'Beila told me I would probably have no more children,' Leah darkened in mood.

'That might well be possible,' Asa agreed. 'In the line of my father and of my mother, and in the lines of your father and mother, larger families are not common. You have now three very beautiful children, Leah. They will honour you and continue the name. You can be proud and happy. I'm thankful. Please don't be sad.'

'I have always been a little sad after a birth,' Leah whispered. 'But this time, yes, my joy is much stronger than the sombre thoughts.'

'And so it should be,' Asa said, squeezing her hand.

'Do you truly love me?' Leah wondered.

'You know the answer,' Asa replied. 'I loved you from the first moment I saw you sitting in the house of my father. You know that. All that has happened since, all our hopes have been realised. God has sent us to each other. I also made up with my brother. We embraced in the hall.'

'I believe so, too. I love you. You must prepare for the circumcision, and before that you must arrange for the *Sholem zokher*, the feast of a boy born.'

'I will,' Asa laughed, 'but if you think I shall have anything to say in that, you are mistaken. Hannah, Beila and my mother are already talking about the feast. They are conspiring about those subjects. It will cost us.'

'We'll have nothing to say,' Leah smiled.

'No, we won't. but I love you. We'll have a wonderful family.'

'Please protect us,' Leah suddenly whispered in a serious tone. 'Pray to God, offer to the synagogue, talk to the rabbi. Ensure a place in Jewry for Little Max. Give money to the poor. Max will generate a new family. I am so sure of that. It appeared in my dreams.'

'So he will, so he will,' Asa nodded. 'And so will his sisters, Little Rebekah and Esther. Families are also continued by the girls, you know.'

'Yes, yes. I don't forget the girls. Of course. But Max's family will continue. He will continue the name, and for the father, the name is important.'

'That is true,' Asa granted.

Asa could have refused nothing to Leah now, though he never had refused her anything in the past.

He said, 'I love the girls.'

'I know you do,' Leah pressed his hand encouragingly. 'You have so much love in you.'

'Love comes easily with me and you. The girls resemble their mother.'

They whispered a few tender words more.

Then, Beila Tugendhold entered the room. She pushed Asa out. Asa joined his father and brother and the other women in the large living-room.

A few days later, once more in Asa's house, a *Sholem zokher* feast was held for the Vincevicius Family and their friends. It was a large party. The house was filled with laughter and clapping of the hands, and the sounds of congratulations. Little Max was celebrated. Food stood on the tables in dishes and cups, water, wine and the best liquor was served. Leah Perlman stood from her bed and participated for an hour or so. Abraham had the high word.

The night before the circumcision, Beila Tugendhold and Hannah Landau held guard on the child to ward off Lilith. They slept in a room next to Leah's and Asa's. The child slept in a cradle of their room, but when the child cried out, the women brought it to Leah to feed it. When Hannah slept, Beila guarded, and vice versa. The knife of the *moyel*, of the pious Jew who would perform the circumcision, lay on a small table near the child, as was the custom.

Eight days after the birth of Max, in the morning, the Family Vincevicius brought the child to the synagogue in Zyduk Street. It was still winter, and still cold, but the hardest frost had been chased by the first, warmer sun of spring. The baby lay enveloped in swaddles. Beila Tugendhold held it in her strong arms. No cradle was needed. Next to her went Hannah Landau. Leah insisted to come, and followed. Asa had gone to the synagogue first, to light many candles before the prayers. He had hired the best cantor of the town to sing blessings to the child.

When the Vincevicius Family entered the synagogue, the rabbi of the Great Synagogue in person stood ready in his white, ceremonial dress. He liked the pious Vincevicius Family. He wanted to honour them in his own way, personally. Births and circumcisions were his happy moments. He began to sing the passage of Nehemiah, stating how God had concluded a covenant with Abraham. Then, the cantor took over, to sing other prayers and passages from the Torah. He had a wonderful, high voice.

The circumcision was to be performed in front of the ark. The rabbi took the child from Beila's hands, but he made a sign to Beila to stay next to him. The godmother would be Rebekah Munkacs and the godfather had to be Ezra. The first place of honour remained for the *bobe*, for Beila. The rabbi would not perform the circumcision. His hand shook with age. The synagogue had provided for a new, younger *moyel*, who was allegedly very much up to the task.

In front of the ark, Ezra Vincevicius sat on a high chair. White linen lay in his lap. The rabbi placed the baby there. The *moyel*, also finely dressed in the most beautiful old prayer shawl of the synagogue, took up his knife. He inspected it, saw it was sharp and clean, passed it through a cloth, and showed it to the audience. He waited no longer, pinched the baby's foreskin, covered the head, and cut the skin very fast. Blood fell on the cloth in Ezra's lap. The linen turned red with a few drops. The baby started to cry. The *moyel* bent down, suctioned the blood with his lips, and together with Beila, he very deftly bandaged the child. Beila made the last knot. The young man smiled to Beila and thanked her, for she was more dexterous than he in covering the baby. The *moyel* took the linen from Ezra's lap, placed the small piece of cut skin in it, plied the cloth several times, and placed the whole in a fine,

engraved wooden box. This box had been provided by Asa. It had waited on the table next to Ezra's chair. The excised foreskin came thus to be placed inside the box.

The *moyel* turned to the audience, asking, 'who is the father of the child?'

Asa stepped forward. The *moyel* gave him the box.

The *moyel* whispered, 'bury this flesh of your son in a place that will remain undisturbed.'

Asa nodded of yes, took the box and held it preciously in his hands. He would bury it somewhere in the yard of his house.

The cantor began to sing his highest tones of praise. The ceremony came to an end. Once more, congratulations of *mazeltov* were exchanged. The family and later also the rabbi, the *moyel* and the cantor were invited to a feast at Asa's house. For the party, the women had prepared special cakes. The finest wines were served. Other baked goods, slivers of *kosher* meat, and chickpeas, seasoned with salt and pepper were served with slivers of *gefillte* fish. The feasting lasted until the end of the day.

Thus it happened, that Max Ezra Moshe Vincevicius was born, and introduced by his circumcision into the community of the Jews of Vilna. The times were happy. His parents loved each other, and they loved their children. The laughter and singing of the party could be heard in all Gaono.

A few weeks later, Beila Tugendhold died. Asa was horrified. A life had been born. Was another life necessary for his child's soul? If so, Beila's was a dignified one. Young Max would lead an interesting and fine life. He would be a good boy, a scholar and a trader like his father.

## The Coming of Antanas Svirskevicius. 1823

Before she passed away, Beila Tugendhold gave a present to Leah, a book written by Beila's friend Malka Berlant. The book was called, 'Di gliklekhe Muter', 'The happy Mother'. It was written in Yiddish and it was easy to read. Malka Berlant proposed for the Jewish mother to nurse her children herself. Leah had already done so with her two daughters. She nursed little Max.

The child grew. Everybody marvelled at what a fine child he was. Max was also smart! From early on, he learned to react to the moods of the people around him. He liked attention. He cried when nobody seemed to take care of him, didn't play with him, and when people let him alone. His piercing eyes took in everything that happened in the room he was in. His eyes followed movement. He soon reacted to all sorts of sounds.

After three months, Max screamed with anger when he wanted to say something to his mother or father, but his mouth and throat couldn't yet repeat or form the same words he heard grown-up men or women say. He hit out with his small legs then, and he moved his arms wildly. He learned to speak a few words at one year, and to crawl forward, then to run on all fours. He righted up and walked hesitatingly early on. He definitely wanted to make up his own mind. He could speak entire words sooner than other children.

At three, Asa and Leah began to talk about taking little Max to the first school of the synagogue. Max's time for the *heder* had come. Asa and Leah didn't doubt he would like school, for curiosity was one of Max's first virtues.

At that time, as every week, Sabbath neared. The Sabbath was a day of happiness, of rest and joy for the Jews, and of devotion to God. Asa Vincevicius and Leah Perlman upheld the Jewish tradition of a peaceful Sabbath. Asa was often on travel, But, as any good Jew, he longed to get home by Friday afternoon at the latest. Friday was the *Erev Shabbes*, the day of the eve of the Sabbath. Asa cherished the day of rest with his wife and the children.

The *Erev Shabbes* was a very busy day for Jewish women. Leah stood up early from her bed. She washed briefly, sprinkled some water on her face from the basin in the bedroom. Then she went down to the kitchen, to prepare further the dough she had already set to rise during the night. The dough was for the *hallah*, the Sabbath loaf. Leah afterwards cleaned the chicken and a large fish, also preparing those for cooking. Leah had to hurry, for after sundown on Friday, no fire was allowed to be lit by a Jew, and no work was tolerated. There was a way around these rules. Asa and Leah could call upon a Christian servant to perform the tasks of looking after the fires. Especially in winter, when it was cold outside, having several fires blazing was no extraordinary luxury. Fires had to be kept alive in the house. Viktor, though a gentile young man, was a polite friend of the family. He would help keeping the Jewish family warm on the Sabbath. For a few coins, he dropped logs in the hearths four times a day. He made sure the flames continued to warm the air.

Leah started cooking for the Sabbath from Friday on. She was also used to clean the house. Her father-in-law and brother-in-law would pass the Sabbath with Asa, and Leah wanted to leave a good impression of her household to Rebekah, her mother-in-law. She swept the floors, scrubbed the kitchen tables and the benches, then dusted the furniture in the great hall. She also had to care for her two daughters and for her son. Leah washed the children.

A banging on the front door interrupted her work. Beggars had come to knock. Poor Jews asked for a little money and food. The money for beggars, Leah held ready in a tin jar. Often, she also offered a little brandy, not too much, while she listened to the gossip of the town. She handed over a few rests of the food of the week. She quickly sent the Jewish peddlers back on the street.

Leah then went upstairs. She placed clean clothes for Asa on the bed, and a bundle of clean clothes also for little Max. At three, he would go out with his father. Meanwhile, Asa had gone downstairs and grabbed a piece of bread in the kitchen. He drank milk. He went to his warehouse and worked some, there. He kept his books in order.

Asa entered the kitchen again early in the afternoon. Asa was in a hurry. He had to go to the bathhouse with his son. After a kiss and a quick hug, Asa left the house with little Max at his hand, two small bundles of new clothes under his arm. They walked to the bathhouse of Gaono. Asa had to put little Max on his arm and wear him. The boy found it less hard to sit on his father's strong arm, rather than having to run on his small legs to keep up with his father.

In the bathhouse, Asa and Max purified themselves by three ceremonial immersions in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath. They lingered a little longer than usual in the warm water, and then returned home. Asa wore a thick, black, velvet cloak. Spring had arrived late that year. The air of Vilnius was still cold. The feared eastern wind blew hard in the streets. Asa was glad Leah had given him a large, furred Sabbath cap. He looked whether after the bath he had not forgotten some coins in his pockets, for no money could be touched on a Sabbath. Little Max wore a long, black coat too, short trousers and warm woollen socks underneath. Once more, Asa had to carry Little Max on his arms and shoulders. That was what the boy liked. Asa clutched the small boy to him, so that Little Max would not catch cold.

When Asa and Max returned home, the two girls stood in their fine Sabbath clothes. Leah gleamed behind them. They too wore black, but a nice, shining satin black, covered with glittering pearls. Leah wore a silver necklace that hung low over her breast, her finest rings on her fingers, and a shorter pearl necklace tightly around her throat.

Many Jewish women shored off their hair after their wedding. They wore shawls in the week on their head, and a wig on Sabbath. Asa had not wanted Leah to crop her marvellous hair. It hung now low over her chest. Leah's hair was one of her prides. Not only did she like other people to see fully how beautiful she could be, how young and fine she still was. She also showed off with her hair, taking special care for it, as if letting the world know, 'see how my Asa loves me. He wanted me to be beautiful and to keep my own hair!' Nothing less was the truth.

When the meagre sun began to set, Leah lighted the candles in the house. In her hall, she had placed four silver candelabras, each with seven branches. She lit the candles in two of them, then went to light a few candles in the kitchen. Leah said the prescribed prayers in Hebrew, in praise of the Lord. She ended with other, private prayers. From that moment on, the Sabbath had started. No work was permitted anymore.

The lighting of the candles was the sign for Asa and Max to leave for the synagogue. Sometimes, Leah joined them, but not today. She set the table in the hall, so that when the men returned from the ceremony, all would be able to have the evening meal.

This was the meal Leah preferred, when nobody was in the house but her own family, her husband and her children. She could work an entire week on the restive moments of this meal.

Asa brought no guest home. He put off his coat, He muttered undisturbed his own prayers in the house. He said *Kiddush* at the table in the hall, words of consecration. Before eating, everybody washed their hands, pouring water over them three times, while father and mother murmured some more ancient, Hebrew prayers. Asa put on a lighter and smaller skullcap. He placed a still smaller cap on Max's head. After the blessing of the *hallah*, the blessing of the bread, the meal could begin.

Asa sliced the bread. He gave a piece to all who sat at the table. One dipped the bread in salt, and said a prayer, a Hebrew poem to God. At the table, Hebrew had to be spoken. The children, who did not yet know much Hebrew, pointed to what they wanted, or got it by themselves. Leah brought in the spiced fish first. She had kept it warm near the stove. Chicken broth followed the fish. Max liked noodles in his broth. After the main meal, Leah presented cakes and other sweets.

At the end of the meal, all poured once more a few drops of water on their fingers. The knives were covered by the napkins. Leah then sang two or three pious songs, prayers from her books. She sang beautifully with a high soprano voice.

Asa leaned back and reflected on how blessed he had been with a beautiful and dedicated wife like Leah. It was the time for him to praise Leah for everything she had prepared. The fish had been cooked to excellence, the chicken had melted in the mouth. The broth was tasty. The children agreed. They told what they had liked most in the dishes. Asa started on a few stories of Jewish lore. He always recalled a few nice tales from the Bible. The children liked this, for their father imitated the voices and faces of the main characters. It was not forbidden to laugh on a Sabbath!

Darkness fell. The flames of the candles reddened. They would soon extinguish. No one was allowed to blow out the candles on the Sabbath proper. All Jews had to avoid contact with fire. Asa only threw a few additional logs in the hearths, for which Leah scorned him. The children could not catch cold on a Sabbath eve, Asa protested.

On the morning of the Sabbath day, everybody sprinkled a little water at his or her face. Then, they all prepared to go to the synagogue. This time, Leah and the girls would accompany Asa and Max. The five of them put on their best clothes now. Then, they walked together up Gaono to Zyduk, to the Great Synagogue of Vilna. Asa loathed this. It was the custom, but every so often, Asa looked around to make sure Leah followed closely. He didn't

like his wife to have to follow him like a dog. He would have preferred to walk arm in arm or hand in hand with her, the children running in front. He acknowledged custom but grudgingly.

Asa and Max wore the traditional *teffilin*, the prayer shawl. When the family reached the synagogue, the group split. Asa and little Max went into the synagogue's main hall. Leah and the girls mounted the stairs to the women's sections.

In the hall, the benches faced the East. In the centre stood a railed-off platform, the *bimah*, and on the *bimah* throned a table on which lay the scrolls of the Torah. The rabbis would read from these scrolls later on. The rabbi would preach his sermon from behind that table, too. They would make the announcements to the *Kahal*, to the Jewish community.

Against the eastern wall throned the *mizrah*, the ark of the Torah. In a wooden cabinet, the rabbis preserved the Holy Scrolls. These contained the five books of the Torah, the first books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. In front of the cabinet hung an embroidered curtain. The scrolls were kept in gold-embroidered covers. Above the Torah cabinet hung a silver star of David, and two lions of Judah guarded the ark, one on each side.

Leah and the girls had not entered the great, inner hall of the synagogue. The hall was reserved for the men. The women watched from higher up.

Asa had bought two seats in the Great Synagogue, one for himself and one for his son. Next to him sat his father, and then Abraham and his two sons, six places in all. Ezra, Abraham and his boys had already arrived in the synagogue. They sat, admiring the scenery. The Vincevicius Family had their seats not in the first rows. Ezra had always sought humility. He and his sons sat at the end of what could be considered the section of the notables, of the good men and of the wealthy of the community.

When the rabbi entered, the men covered their head with their white prayer shawl, which held the traditional blue stripes at the end. They began to murmur the usual blessings and other prayers. The cantor sang a few of those prayers, too. While the men prayed, they slowly swayed. The cantor and the rabbi read out texts from the Torah and from the books of the prophets.

The rabbi then called forward one of the men from the first rows. This man would have to read additional prayers. It was not allowed to make the slightest mistake in the not too familiar Hebrew, so the man in honour had hired the cantor to pronounce the words for him. This was common practice, allowed, and also actively preferred by the rabbi.

Ezra, Asa and Abraham were seldom called to the *bimah*. They preferred it this way. When they presented large sums of money to the rabbi, they never forgot to mention they did not want to be called forward. The rabbis lauded the humility of the Vincevicius Family, though they would have liked to praise openly the family for its charity, which was exemplary.

At the end of the readings, the scrolls of the Torah were solemnly returned to the cabinet of the ark. The cantor sang more prayers, until the rabbi shouted the liberating words of, 'Great Shabbes!' in Yiddish, 'have a fine Sabbath!' The families could return home, their duty accomplished.

Asa and his wife and children went slowly to their house, followed by the family of Abraham. Ezra and his wife closed the Vincevicius Family cortège.

At Asa's house, Leah hurried upstairs to change in less fine clothes. She took the *cholent* from the oven, a stew, in which she had mixed portions of the rests of the chicken of the previous eve, the legumes and potatoes.

Asa and his brother and father drank a little vodka, and Leah served a sugary brandy to the women. They ate. Leah served more *gefillte* fish.

When Asa leaned back, satisfied and satiated, happy in the particular peace of the day, all waited for the cooked cakes and pudding. Leah had prepared a special flavoured pudding this time.

Asa looked through the window of the hall. When he had arrived home, he had remarked a man lingering at his house. The man walked past his house, and then came back. He slowly paced up and down Gaono. He appeared several times, strolling past Asa's windows. Asa didn't think the man was a Jew. He was no peddler. The man was dressed in a modern-looking, splendid gentile vest, trousers and a heavy, furred cloak. He had a large, equally furred hat on his head. He walked with his hands on his back. At times, the man drew off his hat, and opened his cloak, as if he had it warm. The air was less harsh in the afternoon. Asa wondered what the man was doing. What was he spying about in Gaono?

When the pudding was about to be brought in, Asa suddenly stood from his chair, murmured and apology to his wife and his sister. He went through the corridor to his warehouse. He opened the gate to Gaono wide, the panels into the interior, and he waited. He looked furtively into the street. The man was still walking, head down, strolling with an absent look and mind, into his direction. Asa waited patiently a few seconds, standing one step inside, until the man would reach his gate. When the man passed, he remarked too late the gate was open. He saw Asa standing on guard like a Cerberus, also hands on back, legs a little open. The man was startled. Asa noticed the man was quite young, in his mid-twenties. His clothes were indeed well knit, of expensive wool and satin and rich furs. This was not a poor beggar having come to Gaono for a piece of bread and a few coins!

Asa scraped his throat and launched a greeting, with a loud voice. The man merely nodded at first. The man looked like an innocent by-passer to Asa. But why then, was he strolling to and fro? The man stopped. He nodded back to Asa a second time. He touched his hat. A smile appeared on his face.

He surprised Asa by asking, 'good afternoon, dear Sir! Would you by any chance be called Asa Vincevicius?'

'I am Asa Vincevicius,' Asa acknowledged, his suspicion aroused.

Asa didn't know the man. He was pretty sure he had never see him before. How then, could this young burgher know his name, and where he lived?

The young man still stood in front of Asa, thinking, seemingly weighing options. He looked a little shy. He was making up his mind, but he kept nodding.

'A fine house you have, Pan Vincevicius, in a nice neighbourhood. I didn't think Gaono was such a lively street. Nice day, isn't it? It should be a little warmer, though.'

'It should,' Asa agreed, and said nothing more.

The two men stood waiting, awkwardly, at a loss of more words. The young man looked at the sky.

‘I must seem awkward to you,’ the youth then continued, smiling charmingly.

He put his feet a little more forward. ‘It is Sabbath. I shouldn’t bother you, really. I was looking around a bit in Vilna. I don’t know this town very well. Usually, I stay more inland, you know, often at Kevno. I merely wanted to find out where your house was. I got your address from friends. I would like to talk to you, if you please. Maybe I can come back tomorrow. Could I return, perhaps, at ten or so in the morning, tomorrow? I won’t disturb your Sabbath that way. Let me present myself to you. My name is Antanas Svirskevicus. I am a steward of the Radziwill princes. Oh, I am not very important. I am but a very far relative of the Radziwills. Prince Radziwill sent me to the land of Vilna, in his own words ‘to learn what kind of trade is going on in those parts of the world’. I am still learning, you see. I found out you were one of the largest lease holders of Radziwill lands in the environs of Vilna. Could I come and talk to you? No particular aim, you know.’

The young man stepped boldly forward, up to Asa, and extended a hand. Asa thought the youth was quite harmless. He too smiled, then, and shook the hand. He felt the grip easy and firm. It was the hand of an honest man.

Asa liked the boy instantly. He rather thought he was not very well indicated to teach anything to a steward of the Radziwills. Asa would have avoided the company of any steward of a member of the *szlachta*, the Polish highest nobility. Such men could be ruthless. Jews like Asa had rarely to expect niceties from gentile landowners. The young man was probably sent to spy on him and on other Jews of Vilna, who were in business with the Radziwills. Yet, Asa had nothing to hide. The man’s eyes looked innocently at him, as if he was not aware of any wrong. Asa held the grip a few seconds and scrutinised the young man.

Antanas Svirskevicus felt even more uneasy, then. He was nervous.

He repeated, ‘I am not here to spy or to mean you any harm. I truly only would like to learn what lease holding of land and taverns is really about. Please excuse my stupidity. I apologise.’

The man bowed to Asa.

Asa smiled, ‘yes, it is our Sabbath today. We, Jews, don’t work on Sabbath days, but talk we can. We have finished our lunch. We are about to have our desert. You must be cold from walking in the street. Why don’t you come inside, and have a piece of cake and pudding and a tea with us? You are welcome.’

‘I truly don’t want to disturb you in any way,’ the young man asserted. ‘I realised too late what day it was, when I saw the street quiet around the Jewish houses, despite the crowd. I have been a fool. I can come back tomorrow.’

‘Don’t bother, and don’t be shy,’ Asa assured him. ‘we can talk more tomorrow, all right. Hospitality is a virtue with us, Jews, especially on Sabbath Day. We are used to have people we don’t know too well at our table on Sabbath.’

‘But,’ whispered the young man, then, ‘I am Christian Catholic!’

‘Catholic or Jew,’ Asa insisted, ‘you are quite welcome.’

Asa found the young man’s politeness a little too fussy at that moment.

Asa said, ‘you’re a man, aren’t you? Please come in, and you can tell us some interesting stories too, no doubt, about how the world is doing. Our women love gossip! You seem like a man who has travelled wide. Do come in,’ he laughed harder.

Antanas Svirskėvicius nodded a consent. He stepped in. Asa opened his arms, pointed to a door in his warehouse and corridor. He first closed the heavy panels of his gate, then shoved Svirskėvicius gently inside the corridor. He passed the young man, and opened the door to his hall, where his other guests sat. He stepped in. He let Svirskėvicius pass. The hall fell silent. ‘I bring you a guest,’ Asa told his family. ‘I present you Pan Antanas Svirskėvicius, a steward of the Radziwill princes and landowners. I and our guest have to talk some. We will do that tomorrow. He can make acquaintance with you, all right, now. We’ll have an honoured guest at our table yet, this afternoon.’

Asa pushed Svirskėvicius forward, and pointed to a chair near the door, at the table. The young man remained standing, hat in hands, uttering more apologies. Sarah took his hat and coat. She bade him to sit. She had to push him down. The young man would sit between her and her brother.

Asa interrupted the youth, waving further apologies away, ‘no more excuses, Pan Svirskėvicius. May I present you? This is my wife Leah. My children here are Rebekah, Esther and Max, the latest. Next to you will sit my sister Sarah. In front of you sits my father Ezra and his wife Rebekah. Next to her comes my brother Abraham and his wife Abi, with their children Iosel and Edek. So, now you know us all.’

The eyes of Antanas Svirskėvicius turned from one to the other. He nodded.

Sarah returned. Antanas’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Sarah indeed looked splendidly today. Her beauty shone. She was barely of a younger age than the Svirskėvicius young man. Her eyes lingered on the steward. She inclined her head a little sideways, as if studying the young man. He offered her a hand, which she shook briefly. Antanas also studied her. Asa was perplexed. The young man continued to look straight at Sarah, into her very attractive, very blue eyes. He took in how blond her hair was, in contrast with the dark hair of most Jewish people.

Sarah’s lips and mouth were small, her nose long, though just a little hooked the Jewish way, her ears small, well-shaped and hidden a little behind her long hair. Her golden hair, he noticed, was lighter on her head than where it hung in ample, broad curves, on her breast. Her eyes flickered a little. Her eyebrows were long and black. She wore a long necklace of gold, with a large amber stone on her chest. Antanas looked more closely. He saw a dragonfly caught in the amber.

Antanas thought, ‘who is this marvellous dragonfly? Am I the dragonfly? Why is this girl not married yet? She has to be quite older than sixteen, well into her twenties. Jewish girls marry early! Her hair hangs low; she isn’t married yet. Maybe bespoken?’

Sarah was tall, lean, not plump at all, and Antanas surmised she was very intelligent. She held her head high up, yet moved it rarely. Her eyes still flashed at him. A short smile drew at the corners of her lips. Did he perceive sarcasm? What magic was shining from this young woman?

‘Heavens,’ Antanas thought, ‘a Jewish woman! I am actually admiring a Jewish girl! What could come of a relation with me and a Jewish beauty?’

He drew away his eyes, aware again of where he was. Everybody must have considered him very strange. Disappointment showed on Sarah's face. He looked back at her. Maybe that was a mistake, for Antanas became aware the hall remained looking at him in silence. Antanas perceived everybody was looking at him and at Sarah, also the children. He reddened. He looked at Asa. He scraped his throat.

Asa had been watching the young man and Sarah. He looked, fascinated. Sarah watched and watched and didn't draw her eyes off the Svirskевичius young man. She now seemed to challenge him. A small, sarcastic twitch began to form on her lips.

'Heavens,' Asa was thinking, 'a goy and Sarah? Not in my home!'

He already regretted having called this Svirskевичius man inside, to his hall.

Asa asked, 'you said your name was Antanas Svirskевичius. The full name is Lithuanian, like ours, the first part seems Polish to me. Are you by any chance related to the illustrious, noble Polish Svirski Family?'

Antanas turned to Asa, 'we think of yes. The Svirskis do not recognise any relationship, though. I suppose our family is not in any straight line linked to the Svirskis. I do may use the title of count, but the Svirskis definitely prefer us as far as possible from them, rather than close. I have an uncle, who did recommend me too the Svirskis and to the Radziwills. That is how I got my job as steward of the princes. As I said, I can claim the title of count, but I never use it. I must assure you of the fact you see no very wealthy person before you. I have no great fortune. I was but a poor student. Funds were sent to my parents, maybe sent by the Svirskis, maybe not. I am not familiar with anyone of the *szlachta*, of the Polish highest nobility. I am pretty well alone in the world. My parents have deceased, I regret to say. An uncle paid for my studies and lodging. He was my tutor. He paid my studies out of the small heritage and out of some anonymous money, I assume Svirski funds. I am also not intimate with the Radziwills. I want to do my job as best as I can, though.'

'What then, exactly, is your job?' Abraham asked, the suspicions clear in his voice.

'In the end, Prince Radziwill told me he wanted me to dress a correct list of his lease holdings. He isn't sure all his data are right. Then, he would like me to provide him with added income from opportunities. He wants to know what trade is profitable from out of his Vilna lands. I think I could do that simply from the inventory of his possessions, and maybe formulate a few judicious proposals. I don't think I shall need to come up with hare-brained schemes. I know nothing, currently, of what the Radziwills do with their grain, forests, lands, or with their leases. I came to Vilna to study, mainly. Could you help me?'

'How did you come to my brother Asa?' Sarah asked.

A conversation was developing between the Svirskевичius young man and Sarah.

'A wonder is happening,' Asa thought. 'Sarah never talks with young men.'

Svirskевичius looked very reluctantly away from Sarah. He had to, for Leah brought in long plates with cakes and a large bowl of pudding. The bowl was of the finest crystal. A Jewish star of David was cut on both sides of the bowl. Sarah stood from her chair, so that Antanas remarked how tall she was, and how tiny her waist. Sarah and Leah served. Sarah served Antanas first. She came to very close to him. He could smell a delicate perfume.

'How exactly do you intend to learn the business, Pan Svirskевичius?' Sarah asked.

‘Can you please call me by my first name of Antanas?’ the young man responded. ‘I am not greater than you all. You see not a rich man. I have no great fortune. I am a man without parents and without a family. The Radziwills had rather never heard of me, even though they hired me. I feel little in comparison with you. I came here simply to ask Pan Asa to take me with him and show me a few of his taverns and distilleries. I don’t need to know, I assure you, the secrets of your accounting. I am no spy. I can be discreet. I am aware I am naïve. I merely hope to be a good companion on the roads. I shall be no large burden.’

‘Granted,’ Asa told. ‘We shall discuss tomorrow how we could do what you want. It may be a pleasure not to be on my own for a while. Travelling in the countryside is a lonely matter, Antanas. Please call me Asa. Now, please eat your cake, and let Sarah cut you a little of the pudding. At least, if you like our pudding!’

‘I am sure it is excellent,’ Antanas answered, reddening again.

Sarah placed another cake on his plate. She looked at him with interrogating eyes, pointing a knife and a spoon at the pudding. Antanas nodded eagerly. Sarah cut him a large piece. She placed it on his dish. Asa remarked the warm glow on her face. He looked at Leah. Leah drew her eyebrows higher, meaning between them something like ‘trouble ahead’. Asa nodded imperceptibly.

While they ate their cake, Asa probed further, ‘have you travelled around Vilna before, Antanas?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ Antanas replied rapidly. ‘I was born near Kaunas, Kevno if you prefer. I was born in a small castle, a very small castle, in a small domain. It was my home. I should live there more, but until now I stayed mostly at Königsberg, where I studied. My studies finished, then, yes, I travelled. I have visited Warsaw, Minsk and even Moscow. I didn’t remain there for longer periods than two, three months. I have journeyed for longer periods to Berlin and Paris. I only returned last year to Lithuania. I had another job at Königsberg. I was a clerk. My mother tongue is Lithuanian, the dialect of the Old Rus language. I feel more comfortable in German, the language of my studies. I know a little Latin and Greek, am more fluent in Polish and Russian. I’m afraid I don’t speak much Yiddish, but I am willing to learn. I know Yiddish is close to the German language, so I should catch on quickly. I don’t understand Hebrew and don’t speak it.’

Sarah answered in perfect Lithuanian, ‘I know those languages too, but no Latin or Greek.’ This made Antanas sit very straight again on his chair. Sarah said a few words more in Lithuanian. Asa had trouble following, for Sarah very rapidly rattled out her Lithuanian as if she were born with it. Antanas answered her as quickly. Up to that point, Antanas and Sarah and Asa had spoken Polish, almost without noticing in which language they conversed. The family had listened. Antanas became aware in this family everybody, even the children, understood what he was saying, and probably already knew several languages. This surprised him not a little. He kept silent for a few moments. He looked at the people at the table. He gave no comment. He felt chastised again. More than ever he realised his own insignificance in this Jewish family. He began to feel sad.

‘Who am I?’ Antanas asked of himself. ‘I am poor. This family is wealthy. I have studied but a little. I bet these people know more than I. The men may have studied for longer times than I. They must be very intelligent. The Jews are a very rational people. They know several

languages. Generations of them have studied. I am but a worm. I would not be a good party for a woman such as this Sarah. I am more of a great calamity for her.'

He sighed and thought on in the same line, 'these Jews have applied so much logic and consideration, so much rational thinking to their Torah and Talmud. Their minds are trained in the solving of intricate problems. They will regard any matter from all sides and in all aspects. They can think more profoundly than any other man or woman from Poland and Russia. No wonder the Polish nobility, the *szlachta*, employ them on their leases rather than Poles or Lithuanians. They are more reliable, more intelligent, probably more modest and honest. The Jews have learned to survive. The Jews have learned it is better to cooperate with the powerful of the moment than to resist them. They know many languages, a clear proof of how easily they adapt to their environs.'

A little later, he considered, 'most people, Prussians, Poles, Russians, Germans, Austrians despise the Jews. But is it not more their envy that shows thus? What should I tell the Vincevicius Family, here? The Radziwills didn't really send me here. They pay me to not show up anymore around their palaces. They pay me because they have a bad conscience about me. I am an embarrassment.

Nobody told me, but I must be a bastard son of some Svirski or Radziwill nobleman. I don't have to send back reports. They couldn't care less for what I do.

I cannot tell these Vincevicius men I am here practically on my own initiative. I could be of use to the Radziwills, but not this way! I am going to work for myself, here. Maybe I can indeed learn something in Vilna and in the rest of Lithuania. How do the Jews trade? In which products? Who are their contacts, in which cities, in which ports? To whom do they sell, how do they transport their goods, at what time of the year? I am but an intruder, here, and yet, these people have invited me into their midst, at their table. I am drinking their tea and their vodka. It may be a custom to have guests on Sabbath. They like a good story. Well, stories I have, and I can invent many more. How can I repay them? What influence do I still have on some of the men of the nobility of this land? This land is Russian, now, and it will stay this way a long time still, probably my lifetime. I do know a few men from Russia, traders at Königsberg, military officers of the Russian nobility I studied with. I have friends. I travelled to Berlin and to Paris with young men who can wield influence in Moscow and in Warsaw and in Königsberg. Their names may come in handy.

And then, there is this girl, beside me. She is Jewish. I never laid eyes on such a beauty. Her beauty is not just on the outside. Her mind and her character are beautiful. She looks so honest. She displays not the slightest grain of superficial coquetry. She likes jewels, but she speaks what is on her mind. She is earnest, open, outspoken. Am I exaggerating again, too enthusiastic about her to perceive the flaws, her shortages, her failings, her ugly sides? She must be stubborn, of course, and have a damn temper. I sense she is strong-headed. Love, warmth, joy, emanate from her like the rays of the sun! What would it be like, to be loved by such a formidable woman? Heaven on earth! You have been so lonely, Antanas, these last years. You have no family. The fanciest prostitutes of the best brothels of Königsberg and Berlin bore you! You are longing for a home with a wife and children. You want to sleep in soft arms. How would it be to have children by such a wonderful woman as is sitting next to you? You can almost touch her shoulder. Stop! You wouldn't do that, here, in this hall. She is Jewish! Jewish women are not allowed to marry gentile men. You have been invited in this

room, Antanas. These people have shown you a kindness. Don't destroy the harmony of this family. Stay away from the girl. Yes, but can I?'

'You seem sad, suddenly, Antanas,' Asa remarked.

Asa had been observing Antanas for quite a while.

'The Sabbath is a day of joy and rest for us. Tell us a story about Königsberg! What kind of a city is it?'

And so, Antanas Svirskevicus began to tell about the city founded by the Teutonic Order, now the capital of East-Prussia, the most important town and port of the Duchy of Prussia. It was an austere town of old Lutheran Protestantism. Religion was stern at Königsberg. It had an important place in the life of the inhabitants. Prussia was now part of Brandenburg-Prussia, since the Hohenzollern rulers of Brandenburg and Berlin had inherited Hohenzollern Prussia. The capital of Prussia was now splendid Berlin, exciting Berlin.

The Teutonic Order of knights and the kings of Poland and Lithuania had fought wars in medieval times over dominance of these lands. At the Second Peace of Thorn, in 1466, the defeated Teutonic Order formally relinquished claims on its western province. These lands remained as Royal Prussia, a crown region of the Kingdom of Poland until the first and second partitions of Poland, in 1772 and 1793. In the partitions, large parts of Poland-Lithuania went to the three great powers around the country: the Empire of Russia, the Empire of Austria-Hungary, and the Kingdom of Prussia-Brandenburg. Antanas told about the wonders of Königsberg, for that city was splendid, wealthy and agreeable to live in, indeed.

The afternoon of the Sabbath passed. Leah poured more brandy for the men. While Antanas recalled marvellous stories of the past, the children stayed. They smiled. The men smoked cigars. This was the Sabbath peace.

When Antanas had entered the hall, a few hours ago, Ezra and Abraham Vincevicus had drawn eyebrows up. The intimacy with everyone in the hall had returned since then. Sweet tea and more cakes were served, and then also more vodka. The voices sounded higher. Tale followed after tale. Ezra Vincevicus added stories of how Vilna was, long ago. He spoke of the old kings of Lithuania. The women shared the gossip of the week. Laughter filled the hall.

At one moment, Ezra asked, 'have you come all the way from Kaunas, then, Antanas? Did you come by horse or by ship? Is the Niemen open?'

'Indeed, I came by boat,' Antanas replied. 'The Niemen is open. I intend to stay for some time in Vilna.'

'Where in Vilna do you stay, if I may ask?'

'I found a room in a hostel near the river Vilya, and near the town centre,' Antanas continued, blushing with embarrassment. 'The room is small, but it suffices for me.'

Asa and Ezra knew the taverns and hostels near the river. The neighbourhood was unhealthy. Humidity hung constantly in the air. The hostels were not very clean. You could get your throat cut in the dark, near the river.

'Asa's house is full. He and Leah have the children. Abraham's house is noisy, too. I have a large house, a little farther in Gaono. Several of our rooms stand empty, as Asa and Abraham moved with their family to their own homes. I am sure Rebekah wouldn't mind to have a

young man who can tell such interesting stories in the house. We are Jewish. If that doesn't bother you, you can have a room that leads to our warehouse. You can come and go as you please. There is place for a horse in our stable. You can take your meals with us. The room will be quiet and clean. You are welcome to stay with us, Antanas!

Antanas Svirskevicus was surprised. The astonishment showed on his face. Live in a Jewish family? He understood instantly he might actually learn much from these remarkable people. He would enjoy the company of the marvellous woman who was sitting next to him. Yet, living with Jews was something for a Catholic like sleeping with the devil for a while. And then what? Weren't these people ordinary men and women, good, kind people, some of the nicest, hospitable, jovial men and women he had ever met? Why not? Where was the danger? He didn't like at all the hostel he had taken a room in. He had found nothing better for the money he could spend. His room was dirty. The meals in the tavern were bad. So many reasons to accept! Antanas didn't want to show his eagerness too blatantly. He looked at Asa. Asa nodded.

'I accept wholeheartedly and with gratitude, yes,' Antanas answered. 'If I don't intrude on you too much, I would like to stay with you. Yes, we can talk.'

'Fine,' Ezra concluded. 'That is decided, then. Well, we have to go back to the synagogue, now, if only for a short time. The service of afternoon prayers won't last long. Why don't you go to your hotel with Sarah, get your things, and return here? Sarah can show you your room. The room I meant, Sarah, is the one nearest the warehouse. Sarah can drive Asa's coach. She'll show you around our house, Antanas. After the synagogue ceremony, we all meet back here.'

Ezra laughed, 'Asa is feeding us today!'

Antanas noticed how, with natural ease, Ezra had taken the initiative. Nobody added anything or objected. Ezra's authority was final and came naturally.

The Vincevicus Family returned to the Great Synagogue. Antanas and Sarah rode to Antanas's hostel, to fetch his bags. Antanas refused to have Sarah accompany him inside the hostel. He told her to wait for him in the coach. He came back to her quite rapidly. Then, Sarah showed Ezra's house to Antanas. They went in. Sarah went upstairs. She opened the door to his room. Antanas placed his bags near the bed. Antanas noticed how the warehouse was filled with all sorts of merchandise. Many sacks of grain were stored high, in piles. Many crates of cigars stood arranged against the walls. He saw boxes of liquor, as well as bales of wool.

There came an awkward moment, when Sarah showed Antanas his room. She was alone with a man in the same bedroom, with a strange and gentile man! Antanas cracked a joke to break the tension. Sarah laughed. While they returned downstairs, Antanas could not hold back any longer. He simply had to know.

'Are you engaged to marry, Miss Sarah? Are you bespoken? Do you have a friend to whom you are committed?' he asked.

The question would have seemed very odd, obtrusive maybe, impudent certainly, impolite even, and embarrassing for both. The question sounded like, 'you are not a very young girl, beyond marrying age. Yet, you are not married. Why is that? Are you free to dally with?'

Sarah looked straight at Antanas. He was biting his tongue, Sarah noticed. He was looking sheepishly, and he felt very foolish. She laughed again, a high, pearling laughter. She answered, 'I have not yet met a man I could live with. I have been asked several times, you know. Twice, my father arranged for me to be wed to a wealthy Jewish young man. I'm afraid I have a strong character and a fiery temper, Antanas. I refused to marry the traditional way. I shouted, cajoled my father, and cried. In the end, my father let me have it my way. I don't know precisely what my way is, I grant you. I suppose my father and my brothers have abandoned imposing their choice on me. They think I shall finish as a spinster. I may well live to that. But I shall not marry without love and respect.'

Sarah said the last phrase slowly and with force.

When Antanas and Sarah came at the end of the stairs, beneath, they passed through the door to the warehouse, back to their small chariot. Their shoulders touched. They withdrew instantly, but they looked at each other. Sarah's eyes flashed anew. Antanas felt a surge of familiarity, and a hint of desire, as if the woman was already a part of himself. He resisted the impulse to take Sarah in his arms.

'Oh, oh,' he thought, 'what is happening to me?'

Sarah giggled, loudly, happily, the joy mounting in her voice. She jumped back in the carriage. Antanas opened the gate. He too, laughed. Both recognised what had happened. Beyond all doubt, Antanas had found the woman he wanted to marry, the woman he desired, and wanted to live with. He was sure Sarah felt the same. They belonged to each other, Antanas dared thinking. Sarah continued to smile at the wonder that had happened. Antanas opened the gate. Sarah drew on the reins. The horse surged forward, passed through the gate. Antanas closed the panels behind Sarah. She held the horse and waited for him. He jumped up to sit next to her. Their bodies touched this time, and neither moved away. Sarah laughed. Antanas could have embraced Sarah there and then. She would not have refused him!

When Sarah and Antanas arrived at Asa's home, the Vincevicius men had returned from the synagogue. A light supper would be served still in Asa's hall. Antanas told more stories of Prussia and Russia at the table. Evening fell. It was time to end the Sabbath with the *havdolah* prayer, the ritual of the separation from the Sabbath. White wine was poured in crystal glasses. Sarah received a silver box from Leah. The box was filled with aromatic spices. She lighted a special, finely decorated and twisted candle. She threw some of the spices in the small flame. The family drank the last wine. It was sweet and oily. Heavy, exotic aromas filled the air in the hall, the slightly blue fumes enchanting the senses.

Silence fell again in the hall. The sadness of one more fine, restive day finished, bore on the men and women. Sarah and Antanas sat next to each other, as before. Now, their bodies touched slightly.

'They seem to form a couple,' Leah Perlman remarked to herself and in her mind only.

Leah would have to discuss this matter with her husband, this evening late. She would have to talk very seriously with Asa, tonight, for what she perceived seemed very real and terrible to her. She sighed. Trouble ahead!

The sun was setting. The single candle of the end of Sabbath flickered weird shadows in the hall. The eastern wind still howled outside. It was the moment of the day between the last natural light and complete darkness, always a moment of sadness, because of the realisation of fleeing time. Soon, everybody would have to say goodbye and go home. It was a time of intense familiarity. Nobody spoke. Antanas cherished the last seconds of intimacy. God had given him no family. Was his own family sitting next to him? What illusions was he again forming in his mind?

Ezra broke the atmosphere. He was the only one allowed to do so.

Ezra asked, ‘Antanas, you, who have travelled so far and so often, tell us how the Jews in Prussia live. Do they enjoy a life as good as ours? Is their life better or worse than ours?’ Antanas reddened a little, for he had suddenly to emerge out of his haze, out of his private thoughts. He became the centre of all attention. What should he say? What could he say? What was this family interested in?

‘Oh, well,’ he started hesitatingly, ‘Prussia’s towns are truly not very different from Lithuanian towns such as Vilna. I found Vilna very pretty and lively. The streets of the inner city are crowded, as are the streets of Königsberg. The countryside in Prussia is very flat, probably even more open than here, and spread with more marshes and lakes. Prussia is a land of lakes! You asked me about the Jewish people? The Jews live the same way as here. The main difference might be, that most Jewish men and women are not considered to be foreigners in the land, with their own, separate communities, as still to some degree the Lithuanian Jewish communities seem to be.’

Ezra, Asa and Abraham had heard this being said before, not truly believing the stories. The women were astonished. Antanas was surprised by their reaction.

‘It all goes back to an emancipation edict issued on the 11<sup>th</sup> March of 1812,’ Antanas continued. ‘The then king of Prussia, Frederick William III, had an edict published, which stated the Jews of Prussia were henceforth to be considered fully citizens of Prussia. They were no foreigners anymore. Article 7 of the edict stated the Jews could enjoy the same civil rights and freedoms as the Christians! The Jews had to choose a fixed family name, and to use the German language in their official relations. All Jews received a certificate of citizenship of Prussia. The Jews had to live by the rulings and laws of Prussia or choose to leave the country. The ones who refused citizenship, would be considered as true foreigners. Very few Jewish people did so. The edict was taken on with great enthusiasm by the Prussian Jews. Is it not already an extraordinary matter to talk of Prussian Jews instead of simply “the Jews”? The Jews received equal rights, as any other citizen of Prussia, as the Christians in the land.’

The edict was the logical outcome of an evolution of ideas promoted by scholars called of the Enlightenment. I think you call the movement the *Haskalah*. The Jewish philosopher and author Moses Mendelssohn, who lived in Berlin, was one of the main scholars of this trend, of the Jewish *Haskalah*. He proposed the separation of state and religion. Everybody in the land was a citizen of the state. This was, of course, if he or she had been recognised so. His or her religion was a private matter. State and religion were two different matters, the first ruling the public domain, the other the private. In a modern state, all citizens should live together in

peace, and together serve the state, and work for the bettering of the community of all. Religion was relegated to the private sphere. Every citizen was a member of the state, had therefore equal rights and duties. Everybody had to defend the state. Everyone could act on one's religion and be respected equally.

The implication of this, is, that in Prussia, the Jews can entirely freely choose a school for their children. They can live wherever they want in Prussia. The Jews don't have to live in certain quarters in the cities. They can own a house in whatever street of the towns. Of course, usually, they still like to live together. The Jews can also live wherever they want in the countryside. They can trade freely, whether they live in a town, in a village or in the countryside. They have exactly the same duties as the Christians. They pay the same taxes. They have the same duties of military service by conscription.'

Antanas looked around, noticed everybody hung on his lips, and he continued, 'the Jews can travel freely. They can marry freely. Prussian Jews can marry also Jewish women from abroad. The wedding ceremonies in the synagogues are officially recognised as state marriages by the Prussian law. Foreign Jews must ask to become citizens of Prussia, but I heard the procedure is not too difficult, especially when one comes up with some money. Jewish foreign men can marry a Prussian Jewish woman. Any Jewish foreign man can do so, but he receives not automatically Prussian citizenship. He has to ask permission to become a Prussian citizen.

The Prussian Chancellor Karl August von Hardenberg came up with this law. He died last year.

There are quite a few exceptions on the law, as there always are. The Jews of Posen and of the Kulmerland in West-Prussia are not yet automatically included. That is rapidly changing, however. These lands had already integration laws, based on the French model. It is true, Jewish men are still not allowed to become officers in the army. They cannot aspire to civil functions. They cannot become representatives in government institutions such as the Prussian parliament and in the government of the communes. They cannot become members of the judicial courts. In my opinion, it will not last long, before such restrictions shall be faded out. I heard already, how some Jews have been admitted as officers in the army!

The emancipation edict did not eliminate all forms of discrimination of the Jews.

Nevertheless, the edict advanced a lot the Prussian society to promote and create in practice full equality for the Jews in Prussia. Jews who are citizens can move freely in the country! They can buy land without special control.

Of course, the authority of the Jewish organisations of the communities, the *Kahal*, the Jewish community system, was abolished by the edict. No more separate courts of justice for the Jews, no separate and sometimes exorbitant taxes on the Jews. No more protection letters have to be bought from the kings for large sums. In the schools, only teachers admitted by the state are allowed to teach. The language to be used in Jewish schools has to be German. This counts also for religious courses. Voluntary military service is allowed for the Jews and encouraged. The Jews participated in large numbers in the Napoleonic Freedom Wars, for Prussia and against the French armies.

Foreigners can ask permission to settle in Prussia. They can do so when they have a minimum fortune or practice a very interesting art or trade, and when they speak German. The law stipulates a few conditions: to have no criminal records, to have the money to live by, feel patriotic, take a fixed family name, and be able to tell where one would live in the

near future. Names can be chosen freely. Christian first names are seldom accepted, though. A Jew can marry a foreign Jewess, when she brings with her a fortune of at minimum five hundred talers.’

For a while still, the men, Ezra, Abraham and Asa remained silent. They stretched their limbs and sighed.

Abraham was the first to react, ‘why should we, Jews be citizens of a land? Are we not foreigners everywhere, with special habits and traditions? Why abandon our own courts, our own justice, our traditions, our own schools and teachers? We, Jews, are foreigners everywhere and citizens nowhere, citizens of no country. Would we want to suddenly become citizens of one particular country? Not I! In this country, why should we become Russian citizens? We are Lithuanians, and Polish first! We are no Russians. I feel Jewish, and then Lithuanian. Lithuania and Poland had a great history together. The Poles and the Lithuanians are no belligerent people. Neither are the Jews. We never resisted any army. I say such laws as promulgated in Prussia, I would not really welcome!’

Ezra didn’t protest. He bowed his head

Asa, though, had to agree with Antanas’s explanation of the Prussian emancipation edict. He addressed Abraham directly. ‘The Russians consider us foreigners. The Russian administration also largely considers foreigners the Poles and the Lithuanians. So, we have enjoyed some benign indifference in justice from the Russian judges when we faced other inhabitants of this country. We are on equal footing, now, in our conflicts with the Poles and the Lithuanians. The situation provides us with a simulacre of equality.

Yes, as you must know too well, we are not considered the equals of the Russians. Yet, we are considered equals to the Poles and Lithuanians. That for me, was already a progress! I say, that has been a positive evolution. Our religious books tell us to live by the law of the king of the land. For the Jews, that means by the law of the Russian tzar, not by any former Polish or Lithuanian law. I say we have been treated better by the Russians than by the Lithuanians or by the Poles. Now, how far can we put our fate in Poland, Lithuania or Russia? Foreigners we are, and foreigners we remain. I would like to be called a citizen of some country and claim the freedoms of all other citizens of that land. We would belong to somewhere. Our children could feel more secure. We would be protected by the law and the army of the land, for citizens of the state. I would gladly accept the same duties with the same freedoms.’

Abraham looked at Asa with angry eyes. Antanas feared a family dispute.

Ezra interrupted his sons.

‘Whatever, we are Jews and Jews we will always be. Well, everybody, we have to say goodbye to this fine day! The candle is finished.’

Ezra drank his glass of wine to the bottom. He used the last drops to quench the *havdolah* candle. Ezra then took the very last drops, touched his eyes and went with his wet fingers briefly behind his ears.

He said the final words, ‘a gute vokh’, for ‘a good week to you all’.

Thus, the Sabbath ended.

Ezra and Rebekah stood up from their chairs. Abraham and Abi too stood, Abi visibly relieved a dispute had been avoided. Antanas and Sarah stood. They wished everybody a good evening.

The house of Ezra and Rebekah and the house of Abraham and Abi, stood a little further in Gaono, towards the centre. They left Asa's house, followed by the children. Antanas would return to Asa's house tomorrow by noon. Antanas walked in the street, next to Sarah.

Asa noticed to Leah, 'they seem a couple already. What magic was at work? A gentile and a Jewish girl? In one day? In only a few hours?'

Leah hushed him, 'the same magic as between you and me. God beware! What are we going to do?'

Asa smiled.

## Leah Perlman and Abi Abramovski. 1814

Leah Perlman was the gracious white swan of the Vincevicius Family. Everybody in Vilna would agree with that assertion. Her father was established as a trader in amber of the respectable city of Kevno. Kevno gloried in her status of the original, renowned capital of Lithuania, called Kaunas in the old Rus Lithuanian language, Kowno in Polish. Kaunas lay on the Niemen or Nemunas River, not so far to the north west of Vilna. Leah's father also traded in other precious stones.

The centuries old resin-turned-to-stone called amber was the preferred gem of the Perlman Family. Amber glowed from dark brown to dark yellow, often almost transparent. It reflected candlelight radiance warmly. Amber was something of a mystery. Ages and life from so long ago had been trapped in the resin solidified to hard stone. It formed the basis of dream-jewels, much appreciated by the nobility and the wealthy all over the world. Around 1700, the Prussian king had even decorated an entire room in the Charlottenburg palace of Berlin with amber panels. The architects had needed seven years to have the finest amber craftsmen assemble the wall sections. Later, in 1716, the Prussian King Frederick William I had offered the panels to his then ally, Tzar Peter the Great of the Russian Empire. It consisted of no less than 13.000 pounds of the purest amber! Peter's daughter, Empress Elisabeth, moved the inestimable treasure to the Catherine Palace of Tsarskoye Selo near St Petersburg, where the Russian imperial family spent its summers. The room could be called one of the world's great wonders. Amber was the treasure of the Baltic!

Leah Perlman's father was a wealthy and respected trader. He traded not only in amber and other gems. He traded in grain, like almost all Jewish merchants, in furs and in wood. He spoke fluent German. He sent most of his goods to East-Prussia. He stayed for long weeks, months even, at Königsberg, the capital, but his preferred port was Memel. The port of Memel, called Klaipeda in Polish and Lithuanian, lay to the north of Königsberg. Perlman could transport his goods over the Niemen River from Kaunas to Klaipeda. The Niemen was the German name of the Memel, by the way. The German Teutonic Knights had thus called the port.

Most cities and rivers of Lithuania had four different names, in German, Polish, Lithuanian and in Russian! The Perlman family spoke Yiddish first, then mostly German. Leah had been educated in the Prussian Jewish traditions. Her mother was a daughter of an East-Prussian Jewish family. Leah's mother had brought Leah up in the strict ways of a wealthy Jewish burgher family. Leah's mother rather thought of the Polish and Lithuanian Jews as low-level rabble. It was a good thing so few Jews lived in Russia, for Leah's mother considered the Russian *muzhiks* as people lacking all culture. It was true the peasants of those lands were people of toil and grief, two reasons why they drank so much vodka. Leah's father had built up many contacts, however, in Poland, Lithuania and White Ruthenia, and even in more southern lands. One of his main contacts south of Kaunas had been Ezra Vincevicius. The two men had liked each other. They talked about their children, and from one and one came two.

Ben Perlman and Ezra Vincevicius had become friends and trusted partners. Both instinctively avoided to bring their wives together. Ezra understood his friend preferred talking to him alone. Nevertheless, when Leah had reached the marrying age of fifteen, she being a very lively girl, Leah's father had started thinking about marrying her to a son of Ezra Vincevicius. Leah's father wanted a young man more solid and dependable than the Jewish boys of East-Prussia. He found these too soft, too weak, too shallow, too sophisticated in stature. He wanted no son-in-law who would look down upon him and his wife and daughter. He was thinking of a son-in-law with bright eyes glistening with cunning and greed for business ventures, a young man with big shoulders, strong arms, a decent dose of initiative and a clear mind for business opportunities. He had confidence in Ezra, so to Ezra he turned. Ezra had two fine sons. He described his sons' characters to Ben. Quite rapidly, Ezra and Ben shook hands, both equally satisfied. Over a little wine, Ezra and Leah's father concluded to have Leah, then sixteen, be wedded to Ezra's younger son Abraham.

Ben Perlman had already met Abraham. Abraham's charisma had impressed him. He liked the youth's force and daring in business, his mind that calculated all angles of profit, and his determination. Abraham was a young man with ambitions! Ben sighed, then. How much had he and his wife wanted to have a son, a male child with the mind and liveliness of Leah! It could not be. God had granted to the Perlmans only this one daughter, their beloved Leah.

Leah Perlman heard with some anxiety from her father she was to be engaged to marriage. The lucky husband would be Abraham Vincevicius of Vilna. Ben Perlman and his wife took Leah on a visit to Vilna. Her father would introduce her to Abraham, to Abraham's father Ezra and to his mother Rebekah Munkacs.

One evening in summer, Ezra Vincevicius had broken the subject also with much caution to his wife Rebekah. Rebekah felt sceptic. But then, Rebekah was sceptic about everything Ezra came up with, and about everything Ezra organised without her. She fired off a hundred questions, making Ezra almost regret having closed a deal with Ben Perlman.

Rebekah asked who Leah was, how the girl looked like, about what kind of family the Perlmans were, whether these Perlmans were truly as wealthy as Ezra confirmed. She liked what she heard, in the end, though she understood the Perlmans were even less observant Jews than the Vincevicius.

Ezra described the delicate beauty of the girl Leah, the way she held her head and respected her parents. Rebekah concluded Ezra had chosen well, this time. She mellowed to the girl. Abraham had given signs the last years of risking to become a pretty wild young man. He liked gambling, wine and women, weaknesses which could mean disaster if further developed. Rebekah ascribed this to the unfulfilled passions of her son. She feared Abraham might bring in one of these days a lusty girl endowed with a heavy belly of a new Vincevicius child, a challenging, wild-eyed filly out for Vincevicius money. Such a thing had not yet happened, though.

Rebekah hoped Abraham was clever enough to avoid such pitfalls, but she had not felt too reassured. She had therefore agreed with Ezra it was time Abraham got settled and married to a well-bred girl, who would satisfy his desires and keep her son inside his house with a few kids of his own.

Ezra told Rebekah he had bought a large house deeper in Gaono for the new couple. There was much work to do in the house to renovate it. That too, would keep Abraham busy. He proposed to have the newly wed decorate the house as Leah liked. Ezra could pay, but he preferred Abraham to work harder still and pay for what his wife might like.

‘Good,’ Rebekah exclaimed. ‘Don’t give him too much money at once and too soon. Let them fight for their own coins and for their house. That should draw them together. Don’t make matters too easy for them!’

‘I’ll tell the same to Pan Ben,’ Ezra concluded, and nodded.

Ezra was glad Rebekah had accepted his initiative so rapidly. He had pushed one more worry to the side.

Leah and her parents travelled together to Vilna. Ben Perlman was on a business strip to Minsk, passing by Vilna with his family to visit the Great Synagogue of Vilna, the shining temple of the Jerusalem of the North. That was also the official explanation given by Ezra and Rebekah to Abraham. They told the true reason only a little later.

Leah was to be presented to the Vincevicius, and Abraham to the Perlman, with the aim of engaging Leah to Abraham. Abraham drew a sceptic face when his father and mother sat before him with very strict and stern faces. He mellowed only when Ezra explained to him how wealthy the Perlman actually were, Leah their only daughter and heir.

The Perlman family would call upon the Vincevicius Family. Rebekah, helped by two Jewish girl servants, scrubbed the floors sharper as she had ever done, three days in advance. She polished the silver, dusted the walls and ceilings, displayed her finest porcelain, her whitest lace table cloths, and had Ezra repair the furniture where bits and pieces had been chipped off by too rough passing. She bee-waxed the grandest cupboards, coffers, chairs and sofas and made the wood shine. She dug up her finest porcelain figures and vases and placed them at strategic places, to be admired. Ezra cleaned his warehouse, brought order in his bales and boxes to a regular, logical piling. He cleaned his two carriages, and the horses in the stables. He whitewashed the old walls to perfect cleanliness. Ezra rearranged the courtyard and garden with the aid of a professional gardener. Rebekah very carefully chose the clothes for her family to wear, two days before the expected visit.

Her sons, Abraham and Asa, saw the rigmarole with growing apprehension and astonishment. Would the czar of Russia in person come to visit?

Ezra had invited the Perlman Family to an evening dinner at candlelight, so Rebekah had thought over and over which dishes she would serve. She asked the expert advice of Hannah Landau and of her mother, Beila Tugendhold. The older women were also invited to supper, with the express mission to observe and to counsel Rebekah afterwards.

In the afternoon of the day the Perlman would knock on the Gaono door, Rebekah forced her sons to put on their best holiday clothes. She straightened their white shirts, dark grey vests and trousers. Abraham displayed a rare talent for immediately making a mess of the clothes he wore.

Asa’s new clothes fitted as if they had been glued to his body. He looked at the entire dressing up with a sarcastic smile, which infuriated his brother, but he did as his mother told him to. Asa was the son who always looked neat and clean. Nevertheless, he didn’t want to

wait, doing nothing for an entire afternoon, waiting for the parents of Abraham's future bride to inspect her prospective husband.

Asa was thinking about how the bride his parents would eventually choose for him would show up. He didn't mind. He had thought little of girls lately. He had too much on his mind already with his taverns. Thinking about so many things together at that moment was too much for him. He had more serious matters on his mind! He declared he had an appointment with a rebbe in the synagogue and with another merchant thereafter. He flung on his heaviest fur coat and escaped in a hurry. Asa surprised Ezra, but Asa was out of the door, literally running, before Ezra could protest and call his son back. Rebekah didn't see the scene. She was doing her last cooking in the kitchen. She merely heard the front door slam behind her oldest son.

The Perlmans arrived late. Ezra had been standing at the window, looking into the street all the time. He felt nervous. He saw the carriage of the Perlmans arrive. He ran to open the gate of his warehouse for them, beckoning Ben inside. The Perlmans rode in a one-horse light carriage. Ben Perlman had already jumped into the street in front of the Vincevicius house. Ezra showed up quite quickly, calling out to Ben to drive inside. Ben was a fine driver. He brought the horse and cart to stop neatly in the warehouse. A servant of Ezra's would take care of the horse and bring it to the stables to feed on rich hay.

It was slightly raining and snowing outside. Ezra wouldn't want the ladies having to step into that kind of cold, humid weather to enter his house. Ezra signalled to Ben to leave the carriage in front of the door to his inner corridor. Myriam Perlman, Leah's mother stepped out first, followed by her daughter. Myriam was a stately matron. She showed she was not ready to immediately give in to the wedding of her daughter with what might be a lowly Lithuanian peasant boy. They went through the corridor into Ezra's hall, welcomed there by Rebekah. Rebekah had thrown her apron aside in the kitchen, her hands still warm and rosy, for she had been working with hot water.

Abraham stretched his neck from behind his parents. The presentations were made in the great hall, directly behind the door to the hall. This proved a little awkward, for the corridor was a sombre, long and narrow place. Abraham and Ezra helped to relieve the Perlman women of their coats. Rebekah led them further, inside, to her pride, the Vincevicius great hall or living-room. Myriam Perlman appreciated the long oak table, the glimmering silver and porcelain, the lace on the table. Great this room was indeed, broad and very long too, the length of the warehouse and the corridor next to it. She looked at the dignity of the hall with surprise and satisfaction. Rebekah bade the ladies to take place first on the sofas.

When everybody was seated, Ezra started a conversation with Ben Perlman, asking how their journey had been. He welcomed the family with nice words. Rebekah served a little brandy. Words came easily. There were many subjects to talk about, as well of Vilna as of Kaunas: the weather, the business in Lithuania, the trade with Polish cities, with Prussia and Russia. How was the health of the young people, of the elders? How well had the young studied, what did they like in life?

Abraham embarked on a long discussion with Ben Perlman on how he had bettered the quality of cigar-making in his small factories. Perlman enlightened him on the trade of tobacco with Prussia. Perlman exported his cigars as far as Berlin! The two got involved in long, interesting considerations, which Ezra and Rebekah did not interrupt. Both men seemed obviously interested in the subjects, which pleased Ben Perlman inordinately. He got quite exited in the discussion, and at the end patted Abraham's shoulder affectionately. The women were shy to feel comfortable at once. They only exchanged a phrase once every while, until Hannah Landau warmed the atmosphere by telling about her late husband's occupation.

While Abraham talked and talked, he watched Leah sideways. Leah felt the dark eyes of Abraham on her. She understood he was trying to impress her indirectly. Abraham liked very much what he saw. This Leah girl was taller than he had expected, thinner of waist and yet full-buxomed. He expected her legs to be fine, lean and long. She showed a nice, gentle face. Abraham didn't think she was afflicted with a sharp mind or a strong will. In the superficial conversation he was having with her parents, in which she barely participated except for answering to a question, Abraham could not fathom her character. He had to judge on exterior features. Intelligence, Abraham thought, was not really needed in a woman. Leah had all the right, stunning looks, the elegance and familiar grace the burgher wife and hostess of his own dwelling would need. She would be a fine mistress of the house, docile and beautiful. Abraham did notice the fineness of her face, the regularity of her features, the whiteness of her unblemished skin, how she held her head high. He thought she would become an astonishing hostess to receive and entertain his business partners. Abraham warmed up. He became gradually more expansive, drawing Ben Perlman into the same atmosphere, in which soon Ezra was drawn in too. The bright charisma and flatters of Abraham conquered his future parents-in-law by storm. Even Leah's mother giggled a little at some point, at a fine allusion to her dignity and beauty by Abraham. She smiled encouragingly at him and sipped at her brandy.

Only the girl Leah remained seated so stiffly in between her parents! Leah kept her lips against her teeth most of the time. She seemed to bite on her lower lip. She did not laugh or smile and did not open herself so easily to the Vincevicius. Neither did she really encourage Abraham to talk to her.

Rebekah wanted to begin serving supper. She waited some more for her other son, Asa, to arrive. She lingered, pushing the moment of announcing supper further back. Asa chose this moment of his mother's expectation to throw open the front door. He had shaken off most of the rain and snow outside. He pushed open the door of the hall rather brusquely, still fully clothed in his furs. The winter thus interrupted the conversations. Asa noticed the glasses of brandy in everybody's hands, except for in the girl's. Leah looked at him with wide eyes, for it was as if a bear had erupted in the hall. Asa strode in, bulky and heavy, brown and huge in his fur coat. He did not hesitate. He first shook hands with the mother and father Perlman and then introduced himself in a low yet clear voice. Leah touched his hand only with the tops of her fingers. Asa apologised, and then he left the room again to get rid of his coat and boots. He should have done just that in the first place, his mother's angry eyes told him. He returned a few moments later, while the guests moved to the table. Asa's father pushed his son down to a seat in front of Leah Perlman.

Abraham sat next to the girl. She had been sold already, Asa thought. Abraham was talking to her, explaining his own trade with Prussia. Unlike his father-in-law-to-be, he transported his goods to Königsberg, and mostly by train.

‘Trains are far more regular and dependable,’ Abraham told Leah. ‘The trains run with about the same speed in winter as in summer. I do not have to organise different schedules in winter, when boats cannot advance on the Niemen because the water is frozen tight.’

Leah nodded, but she was looking with her large eyes at Asa. Asa too had eyes only for Leah since he had entered the room. He found her the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen. She didn’t talk much, hardly joined in at the lively conversation that had developed at the table. He kept looking at her, studying her eyes, nose, lips, ears, the colour of her hair. Leah saw a serious young man in front of her. She noticed Asa was handsome, in an agreeable way, innocent and honest, warm, some sadness darkening his otherwise light eyes. She liked the way he drew his fingers over his smooth, even, luxurious black hair, pushed the last drops of water out of his very short shaved beard.

Asa became aware of the girl’s staring. He quickly averted his eyes, but brought them back to the young woman soon.

‘She is too young to be married so young to my brother,’ Asa was thinking. ‘My brother will crush her, destroy her character, curb her will, subdue her. He will use her. This is a rare crystal figure, not a jewel to crush, but to cherish as a precious stone. She outshines the stones I know.’

He noticed how probingly the girl also looked at him, far more than she watched her parents or the other guests. She hardly ever turned her head to Abraham. She did not answer most of Abraham’s insistent questions. She didn’t seem in the least interested in Abraham. She sat, stiff and beautiful, an alabaster figure at the table, an amber statue glowing in the candlelight.

Rebekah and a Jewish maid served supper. As was traditional in the Vincevicius household, Rebekah brought in a light soup first, then her splendid *gefillte* fish. Ezra served white wines from Samogitia. Afterwards, Rebekah brought a series of various plates of meat, of veal and lamb and bits of chicken and duck. The silver plates were placed on the table together, so that the supper shone even wealthier than before. Rebekah was showing off!

The maid brought bowls of boiled potatoes to the table, chicken peas, red and yellow carrots, beans, and an early kind of spinach. The bowls were of white, sunny porcelain, decorated with flowers of various colours. Also slices of Rebekah’s renowned, own-baked bread stood near the saucers with gravy. Rebekah was obviously very pleased and proud with what she could serve still at this end of winter.

Ezra poured white and red wine. The candles in the silver candelabras shimmered in the crystal glasses. It became gradually darker. Evening covered Vilna with its veil.

At the end of supper, Asa retreated to a sofa in a far corner of the hall. Many of the others continued talking at the table. He was thirsty. He poured himself a large glass of water. He was astonished to see Leah Perlman getting up from her chair and coming up to him. She took a place on the same sofa. She began to talk to Asa, and he answered in short words, but very politely. The conversation between them lasted. It started a little joltingly, but soon rolled on warmly and fluently.

‘Are the winters in Kaunas as long and harsh as the ones of Vilna?’ Asa wondered.

‘They are probably colder. And more humid. Our home stands near the river. The eastern wind comes from over the river and bites through the house. Still, the view on and over the river is magnificent. You should see the colours of winter, so delicate. The environs of Kaunas are just wonderful in autumn, with all the various trees glittering in the last, warm sun with so many different colours. We have a very fine view on the water. I like it particularly when the sun draws lines in the water, silvery lines in winter, red in summer. These are the crests of the waves moving to the sea, northwards.’

‘Yes,’ Asa agreed. ‘Have you ever been on the sea?’

‘I went to Klaipeda once, with my father. Once only. I visited Königsberg and navigated on a boat in the lagoon. We were not in the open sea. I also travelled to Polangen with my father. We spent our summers there, sometimes. There too, a large lagoon closes the bay in front of the port. The sandy beach is wide and nice, there.’

‘So I heard,’ Asa nodded. ‘Well, you know more of the world than I. I hardly ever left Vilna, though I journey a lot around the city, southwards, towards Minsk, too.’

‘Vilna is a nice city,’ Leah acknowledged. ‘Kaunas is older, but is a fine city too.’

‘I am sure it is,’ Asa agreed. ‘You have been a quite lucky woman to live in Kaunas. Lithuania’s glory has been determined at Kaunas.’

They spoke openly, warmly, of matters they were both interested in.

Abraham approached them, a large wooden box in his hands. The box was enveloped in yellow satin cloth. The girl reddened. She looked sideways at her parents, who nodded for yes, she could accept the present.

Abraham had bought her expensive laces and ribbons. In the box also lay a heavy golden chain. The present meant Abraham would accept Leah as his bride. Abraham looked at her, hoping for a grateful look. Leah held the box in her lap, open, the satin, ribbons and laces next to it, between her and Asa. She didn’t know what to do with the box and the presents. She didn’t look up at Abraham. She looked to Asa.

Leah was saved by the Perlmans and the other Vinceviciuses, who came to sit in the sofas, then. Leah’s eyes were drawn away from Asa. She talked with Abraham and with Ezra and Rebekah.

‘Our girl is shy,’ Leah’s mother excused her, breaking the silence that had suddenly fallen near her.

‘She is young,’ Rebekah accepted the excuse.

Leah thanked Abraham.

‘Thank you for the presents,’ Leah whispered. ‘They are nice and so beautiful.’

‘Leah has been surprised,’ Myriam Perlman added, ‘she is not used to receive presents from young men.’

Imperceptibly, Leah had moved to Asa. Asa had eased on the sofa and moved out of his corner of cushions pushed aside. Their bodies almost touched. There was no place for Abraham. Neither Asa nor Leah opened space between them. Asa looked at Leah. She seemed so young and vulnerable. Would she be ready for marriage to someone so passionate as his brother? Asa thought not. Leah was still a child.

Asa had once been invited to a meeting with a very wealthy Christian merchant of Vilna. A maid had asked him to wait in a small room. On the table in front of him lay a book of pictures of the ancient city of Rome. One of the black-and-white pictures was an engraving of a painting, a ceiling fresco in the Sistine chapel of the Vatican. It showed man and God floating in the heavens, almost but not just yet touching each other's fingers. Asa had understood the fresco in different ways. It showed him the idea of how love could happen between man and God. One did not have to touch someone else for love to exist. The intimacy of being near sufficed to form love. In another explanation, God could thus have brought the soul in man.

Sitting so close to the girl Leah, feeling comfortable with each other, had created a sense of belonging, of being at ease and well together, that could not be forgotten or denied by both of them. This touching of the souls without the touching of the bodies forged a stronger bond than any other between two people, and certainly between a man and a woman. This was the truest form of love, Asa supposed.

Asa felt the need to protect this child. He did not show much charisma with other people. He was a rather effaced man and a man of no natural authority. But when he entered one of his taverns, a hard and sometimes even violent environment, he had noticed that the children came to him. When a three-year old boy or girl in a tavern comes to sit near you, talks to you, gets on your lap and feels fine, and remains sitting with you, no tough tavern-holder could remain angry with you and stay antagonistic. You suddenly belonged to whoever was in the tavern. The tavern-holder's woman would come to sit with you.

Asa had the same feeling with and for Leah. Yes, he attracted people thus, by being innocent, harmless and naïve. These elements of his character disarmed the roughest men. Moreover, it was a quality he was not really aware of. Was it not thus with all men?

Leah looked at Asa, and her eyes begged. She held her head a little to the left.

Her eyes lured, 'do you want me? I feel safe with you.'

Asa noticed the stab of pain in the eyes. He would have liked to grab Leah's hand, but such a gesture would not have looked seemingly at that moment. He could not touch his brother's fiancée.

Asa looked back at Leah. Only for an instant their eyes crossed.

His soft mood flared up. His eyes responded with hurt, 'yes, I want you. I will protect you. I like you to be with me. This is so sad!'

Leah looked back to her hands. Asa feared she would throw the box into the room. Leah shoved the box between her and Abraham. She moved a little closer to Asa. Now, their bodies touched lightly.

There was also a lull in the conversation between the older people.

'We should go,' Myriam Perlman whispered to her husband. 'It is getting very late. I hope you can find back our rooms.'

Perlman had a little abused of Ezra's fine brandy. He stood, steadied himself on his chair.

'I know the way quite well,' Ben Perlman hastened to return.

The Perlman Family assembled, also Leah. She went to her father. It was time to say goodbye, which they did in a hurry.

Abraham led the family to the warehouse, to the carriage. He fetched the horse from the stables. Asa had disappeared. He came back, running to the carriage, where the ladies already sat. He carried a small box in his hands. He thrust the box through the window onto Leah, 'this is my present to you, Leah,' he called out.

Before somebody could say anything, he stepped through the door of the corridor, into the hall.

Abraham brought the horse in, put it in front of the carriage. Ben Perlman put the straps on the animal. With a formal movement of his arm and hand to Ezra, he called a last goodbye. He climbed on the front bench and took the reins. He would drive carriage and horse himself. Ezra opened the gate. Gusts of very cold wind and white speckles of snow flew inside. Ben Perlman clicked his tongue. The horse moved backward. Then, Ben forced it on. The carriage entered Gaono.

Nothing special happened for a week after the Perlman visit. Nothing additionally had been agreed between Ben Perlman and Ezra Vincevicius about the next steps for the marriage arrangement.

Ezra was wondering on the Sabbath after the visit whether he should take the initiative and ask for a new meeting of the families. Then, two days after Sabbath, Ben Perlman unexpectedly showed up at the Vincevicius home. Ben didn't smile. He and Ezra conferred for a long time. They spoke, only the two of them, at the table in Ezra's hall. Perlman didn't want to stay for supper. He left late in the afternoon.

Rebekah feared for a catastrophe. Ezra closed the door after Ben. He walked back to the hall, lost in thoughts. Rebekah waited for him, fists on her hips. She had the apron still on her black dress. She brought one hand to her heart

'What is happening?' she asked immediately.

Ezra didn't answer at first. He only drew a pensive face and sat. Yes, trouble was around.

'The girl doesn't want to marry Abraham,' Rebekah guessed, tears welling up in her eyes.

'True. The girl doesn't want Abraham,' Ezra continued. 'She wants Asa!'

'What?' Rebekah exclaimed. 'I thought everything had been arranged.'

'I thought so, too. The Perlmans thought so, too. Nobody has thought of involving the girl in the decision, but it seems she has a strong will of her own. And she doesn't want Abraham. She wants to marry Asa.'

Ezra explained to his wife what Ben Perlman had told him.

The girl had locked herself up in her room in the hostel for three full days. Nobody and nothing could tempt her out of her seclusion. Ben Perlman had threatened to break open the door. Then, the girl had turned the key. She had allowed only her father in, not even her mother. She had stood before her father, small, so young, but resolutely. A delicate, wonderfully crafted golden chain hung around her neck with at the end, on her breast, a large piece of amber set in gold. In the almost translucent amber, an ancient yellow flower had been caught.

'I am the flower, father,' the girl had exclaimed. 'This is Asa's present. I am going to marry Asa, nobody else. Please arrange the matter. I am Asa's flower. We belong to each other. I can be happy only with him.'

Perlman was sure his daughter had not exchanged more than a few words, short phrases of no importance, with Asa Vincevicius. How would she know Asa Vincevicius would want her, after she had refused the brother?

‘Just ask him, father. I know he’ll have me. Just go and ask him. All your agreements with the Vincevicius Family can stand. Only, I will marry the other brother.’

‘Darling, it is not to me to ask a man for my daughter! The men come, or their fathers. Ezra Vincevicius asked you for his son Abraham.’

‘An insignificant detail, father. I will gladly marry a Vincevicius, but not Abraham. I want the other one, the older one. If you don’t go to speak to Asa’s father, I will have to go. Asa belongs to me and I belong to Asa. Look at the present he offered me. It says all there is to say. He asked me. Do you think a man like Asa would give such a present to a woman he didn’t want? You know jewels. This has cost him a fortune. He’ll want me, all right! I want no other!’

The conversation lasted, but it remained one-sidedly. Ben Perlman spoke and pleaded. His daughter Leah stubbornly said only, ‘go ask him!’

Leah’s mother was called in. Father and mother worked for several hours on Leah’s mind. Her determination didn’t waver. Tears fell on the wooden floor. The Perlmans cajoled, begged and threatened, but Leah only repeated her decision. She stood like a rock.

Ben Perlman had explained all this to Ezra and how, in the end, he had given in to his daughter’s wish.

Rebekah reached with her arms to the sky, ‘I saw the girl was spoilt to the bone! What has Asa done to call damnation and conflict on our house?’ she cried.

‘I didn’t think Asa might have done anything special whatsoever,’ Ezra replied. ‘Ben Perlman told me he has asked exactly the same question to his daughter. Had Asa spoken words of love? Had he asked for her? Had Asa seduced his daughter? Leah has only shaken her head. She replied there was no question of love or of any other such frivolous feeling between her and Asa. We just belong to one another, Leah had repeated.’

‘Not Asa,’ Rebekah told. ‘Asa would do no such thing as steal his brother’s promised one. The children had not exchanged more than five words to each other!’

‘What shall we do, then?’ Rebekah cried, tearing at her hair. ‘This is pitting brother against brother!’

‘Yes. It is,’ Ezra replied. ‘We shall have to talk to Abraham. There are other, even wealthier daughters around. Other fathers will be proud to have a Vincevicius young man for son-in-law. We’ll have to make Abraham somehow to understand he cannot have this girl Leah Perlman.’

‘We had better look for a substitute quickly,’ Rebekah answered, ‘preferably for one with more money and better connections and prospects still than the Perlmans. I know my son. He can only be consoled with more money or more power. If we do not succeed, Abraham will start hating his brother. That may well be the end of the Vincevicius Family!’

‘I know,’ nodded Ezra. He added, ‘fate is at work with this marriage. What have we run into?’

The matter was settled in the Vincevicius house the same day. When Asa entered in the evening for supper, Ezra asked him whether he agreed to marry Leah Perlman. Asa was

surprised. He made his father repeat. Then, a wide grin instantly transformed his face. He had been rather desperate the previous days. He understood he could be happy nevertheless.

Asa said, 'of course, father. Leah and I, we love each other.'

'How do you know that?' Asa's father spat. 'You have only seen Leah once, a week ago. You have not spoken more than five times to her that evening. Have you been seeing the girl, unknown to us, long before?'

'No, no, father. I have only spoken to her when she came here that evening, to have supper. I hadn't met her before. Yet, I know we belong together. She is not a person different from me, you see. Leah and I, well, Leah is me!'

Nothing further had to be said. Ezra told Asa much about nonsense decisions, about feelings plucked from a tree, about certainties suddenly created in loose minds. Asa never answered.

Ezra let Asa go. He went back to Rebekah.

A little later, Abraham entered. Ezra explained the situation to Abraham. Abraham raged and cursed and shouted loudly. He ran several times through the hall, vociferating against Asa. Asa had stolen his betrothed.

'I too, I want Leah Perlman,' Abraham shouted. 'A contract is a contract, and you have a written contract, father! You have concluded an agreement with Ben Perlman and with his wife. My name is stated in that contract! My name! I am engaged to Leah, I, Abraham Vincevicius! I want this woman. A wedding is not a matter of money alone. The girl is distinguished and beautiful. She has fallen into my eye. I fell in love with her, as soon as I saw her. I want her. I should have her. I shall have her. Let the contract be applied. Force the Perlmans to the contract, or there will be no wedding.'

'Son, I can't,' Ezra replied. 'Not when the girl refuses you. Be reasonable! A wedding is no business contract. Forcing the girl would not be a good start for a marriage. You taking her would then be the equivalent of rape. Use reason, my son. I promise you I will make this up to you. I will find you another wealthy, lusty Jewish girl, one who will come with greater riches even than Leah Perlman. Leave this Leah to her choice, to your brother Asa.'

'Where is Asa?' Abraham barked, 'I'm going to kill him!'

At the shouts, Rebekah ran into the hall. She flung herself at Abraham in tears. She explained in other words what Ezra had already said. It took Ezra and Rebekah the entire evening to calm down Abraham. Abraham spoke several times of sending his brother to the other world, as Cain had killed Abel. He yelled away all the arguments of his parents.

Asa, meanwhile, had heard from the kitchen the ranting and raging of his brother. He didn't dare to enter the hall and confront the wrath of his brother. He took some bread and went to his bedroom. He stayed there. He drew a cushion over his head and slept. He did not hear how slowly, very slowly, Ezra and Rebekah turned Abraham's mind.

The next morning, Ezra woke early. He sped to the hostel of the Perlmans with good news. He felt confident his son Abraham would eventually console himself over the loss of Leah Perlman and over the humiliation afflicted upon him by his brother. Ezra announced his son Asa would gladly marry Leah Perlman.

Leah was called in. Her father announced her the news Ezra had brought. Yes, she could be wedded to Asa Vincevicius.

Leah wept for joy. She embraced her father and mother and Ezra. She laughed and shed tears at the same time. She shook Ezra's hands as if he were her saviour. Ezra then noticed the golden neckless and the piece of amber. Asa had shown the jewel to his father, several years ago. Asa had said he reserved the jewel for his betrothed. Ezra stood aghast. He knew Asa's mind, his determination. Ezra too, then, let the joy overwhelm him. He drew Leah to his breast. He called her, 'my daughter'.

Yes, Ezra thought, fate was at work with his son Asa and Leah Perlman. A marriage forged by God himself would not be broken, never!

'When can we be married?' Leah wondered suddenly. 'We shouldn't linger, now. How soon can we be wedded? I don't want to wait any longer.'

Her joy and what she said made Ezra, Ben and Leah's mother laugh and shed a few tears too. 'We'll arrange for the wedding as soon as possible,' Ben Perlman laughed.

Ezra nodded.

The two fathers knew that with a rare love and determination like shown by the two young people, they had better act rapidly. They certainly didn't want to marry Leah and Asa with the bride heavy-bellied. A matchmaker had not been necessary. The marriage contract could be copied as such, the name of Asa Vincevicius substituted for Abraham's and then the old contract torn up.

To console Abraham, who still felt cheated, Ezra called in the help of the best Jewish matchmaker of Vilna for his second son's marriage. This man soon presented three young women, among whom Ezra and Rebekah chose Abi Abramovski. The Abramovskis also were Jews of Kaunas, of Kevno, and possibly even wealthier Jews than the Perlman. Abi was a lively girl, the only daughter of the Abramovskis. The family counted no sons. Abi was nice and plump, as Jewish girls ought to be, the matchmaker assured. Abraham could immediately help his father-in-law in the trade business.

Abraham agreed to marry the girl even before meeting her. As compared to Leah Perlman, he would have accepted anybody. He consoled himself with silly actresses of the Vilna theatre. He flaunted his mistresses to the Jewish community. Ezra had to rein him in, tell him his behaviour was becoming an open scandal that could be publicly rebuked by the rabbis.

A last matter to resolve was where Asa and Leah would live. Asa refused to live with his bride in his father's house. He considered Leah deserved a house of her own. Leah refused to live with the Perlman in Kaunas.

Ezra and Ben together therefore bought two houses in Gaono of Vilna, nearer to the Great Synagogue than Ezra's house. The houses had to be renovated and to be joined into one comfortable dwelling. The work was begun instantly. One large house would be composed of the two smaller ones. The couple would possess a stately home with a large warehouse attached and much terrain behind. The three Vincevicius Families would thus live in Gaono: the families of Ezra, of Abraham and of Asa.

Ezra's house would be too big for two older people.

'This is not an issue,' affirmed Ezra. 'The Perlman will stay with us often. They will have rooms with us.'

Ezra had come to appreciate Ben Perlman as a good friend. Asa and also Abraham promised to send their children often over to their grandparents.

The betrothal of Asa Vincevicius and Leah Perlman took place in the Perlman residence of Kaunas. The Perlmans served a generous feast for family and friends. It was the first time Asa and Leah met again after the presentation of Leah to the Vincevicius Family. The two were not shy to each other. They hardly separated during the feast, holding hands all the time. They always sat together. They didn't need words to be happy in each other's company. Everybody could see how glad Asa and Leah were sitting together. Their faces glowed. 'How many years do these two know each other?' a friend of Ezra wondered. 'Two days,' a grinning Ezra retorted to the baffled man.

The betrothal ceremony started in the morning. The parents of the future bride and groom filled in the last conditions for the wedding's financial arrangement in the Hebrew marriage document. These conditions were the *tnoyim*. They had been written down and exactly formulated by the *shames*, the sexton of the Great Synagogue of Kaunas. The names of the couple were specified in the document, the dowry and the date of marriage. Asa and Leah had to sign the parchment. At the feast of the betrothed, one of the invitees read the *tnoyim* out loud for everyone to witness. When the official reading was finished, Ezra Vincevicius and Ben Perlman broke several fine porcelain plates as signs of luck. The audience in the Perlman hall shouted '*Mazel tov! Mazel Tov!*'.

The feast started. Musicians flowed into the hall, stood around the couple and they sang songs. The diddles shrieked ever more frantically. In the meantime, the invitees brought in wedding presents. Asa and Leah were buried under valuable gifts for their household.

The wedding of Asa and Leah took place shortly after their betrothal. The date had been fixed on a Friday, as was appropriate for Jewish maidens. The wedding was to take place in the Great Synagogue of Vilna. The Perlmans paid for the bride's magnificent white dress. Asa insisted to pay for Leah's *Shterntikh* himself. He spent a small fortune on it to please and honour Leah and her parents. He would not have it otherwise, though the Perlmans protested. Leah's *Shterntikh* was composed of two bands of the whitest lace, into which were sown white pearls and gleaming precious stones. The bands encircled the bride's head, fixed above the forehead. The upper part looked like a diadem on her. The lower part encircled Leah's face and reached to behind her ears. This part had an undulating edge, from which hung smaller, precious pearls. The stars shone on Leah's fine face, making her look like a shining princess sent from heaven. Ezra Vincevicius bought Leah a silver watch to match the white dress and the glorious *binda*, as the *Shterntikh* was called in Vilna.

On the Sabbath before the wedding, the Sabbath in the silver week, the *oyfruf*, Asa had to purify himself in the Vilna Great Synagogue. He was called to the *bimah* as the last reader. The '*oyfruf*' word thus came from being 'called up' to cite from the *Haftarah*, the teachings of the Prophets. While he did this without failing, the women who had accompanied his mother threw sweets and nuts onto him. This brought the entire congregation to laugh. The throwing down of candy was followed by the *Kiddush*, the sanctification of Asa over the wine after the prayers. Tradition was thus honoured for the groom.

Afterwards, the poorer children from Gaono were allowed in the hall of the synagogue to grab what they could of the sweets.

When everybody went to Asa's house after the ceremony, the feast started. Asa's friends gathered before the *minkah*, the afternoon prayers, to celebrate. They drank wine and ate fruit. The feast turned soon into a rambunctious, noisy celebration. Ezra had to intervene to call Asa's friends to some order.

In the golden week, the week of the wedding, after the *oyfruf* to the Torah, Ezra Vincevicius and Rebekah Munkacs organised a great meal for the couple. The golden week was so called, because the fasting couple received only a broth in which rich gobs of chicken fat floated. Asa and Leah sat at the head of the table. Their parents served a copious meal in various stages. Ezra and Ben shared half of the costs. After the feast of the couple, they pressed money in the hands of their guests.

On the wedding day, Asa and Leah fasted. In the morning, several girls, the bridesmaids, accompanied Leah to the bathhouse for a ritual purification *mikveh*. The girls formed a procession that ran, dancing merrily about in Gaono.

The wedding ceremony as such actually began when Asa was taken to his parents' house. Ben Perlman, who was already staying at Ezra's, took him by the hand, leading him to the bride. At the entrance of the house, Asa went up to Leah, who had been waiting in the corridor. Her head was covered with a white, silk shawl. Asa was allowed to peek at her face. He alone could lift the veil a little at this time and see the glowing, smiling Leah. Then, Asa and Leah were separated again. Asa had to wait some more in his own house.

At this moment, a *klezmer* band, a group of a dozen Jewish musicians, entered, and they began playing soft, light and languorous music. Ezra and Ben had hired these fiddlers to accompany the feasting.

An hour before midnight, Ben Perlman once more took his future son-in-law by the hand. He brought him to the synagogue. Asa wore a white *kittel*, a white overgarment, over his other clothes. In commemoration of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, a little ash was placed on Asa's head.

Asa could then proceed, accompanied by his friends and family to the *khupa*, to the canopy, in the synagogue's courtyard. The *khupa* was a large, elaborately embroidered cloth held up by four poles. The guests lighted candles. Musicians preceded Asa. They played joyful tunes now, while more guests arrived carrying all sorts of candles. Some even wore the *Havdalah* candles, the thick, braided candles that were also used to mark the end of the Sabbath.

A little later, the Perlmans led the bride to the *khupa*, to the marriage canopy. The *khupa* stood under the open sky in the courtyard. It did not rain. The rabbi began to read the betrothal benedictions. He did this over a goblet of wine. The witnesses of Leah and Asa drank. The rabbi threw the goblet on the floor and broke it for good luck. The bride and the bridesmaids circled seven times around the groom, reciting prayers. There was much giggling while the maidens and the bride walked, danced and finally ran. This period symbolised the waiting time between betrothal and marriage.

Later, Asa and Leah stood once more next to each other under the *khupa*. The sky was clear. Stars glimmered over the *khupa*. Leah stood to the left of Asa. The rabbi invited Asa to lift Leah's veil. From now on, the veil remained high.

The rabbi had to remain solemn, but he had rarely seen a more beautiful little bride.

He murmured to Asa, 'stars are above and a star stands under the *khupa*, Asa. Keep good care of this one.'

Asa, surprised, nodded.

The rabbi rattled off the usual wedding prayers. He didn't want to keep the couple waiting for too long.

Asa turned to Leah. He whispered she was very beautiful in her white dress. The rabbi hushed them. He made scolding eyes, but inside he smiled. He continued his series of millennia-old wise prayers.

The rabbi brought a wreath of white flowers over the heads of Asa and Leah. He then summoned a friend of Asa's to come forward with the rings. Asa placed one ring on Leah's finger.

Asa said, 'you are consecrated unto me, according to the Law of Moses and Israel.'

Leah did the same with the second ring and said the same phrase to Asa.

The rabbi blessed the rings and the couple.

Another rabbi brought two crystal glasses provided by Ezra. He poured a little white wine in the cups and invited Asa and Leah to drink. Then he enveloped the glasses in a white linen cloth. He placed the linen at the feet of bride and groom. Asa and Leah stepped on the glasses and broke them. This was one more commemoration of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.

The final breaking of the glasses signalled the end of the ceremony. Asa and Leah were married. They were wife and husband. They could return home. A loud cheering broke out among the guests. Leah laughed.

Asa and Leah walked arm in arm to Asa's home first, accompanied by all the men and women who had witnessed the wedding ceremony, half of Gaono.

The bridesmaids tried to get into Asa's house. They began to tug at Leah's dress, to undo the buttons. Leah slapped at the indiscrete hands. She ran upstairs. Asa held back the girls who tried to follow him and Leah. While laughing wholeheartedly, he pushed the ladies gently back. The young women protested, tried to get past Asa, and pushed their breasts against Asa, hoping to embarrass him. All this was done, accompanied by much giggling and laughter. Asa opened his arms, welcomed the girls, but let no one past. He succeeded in closing the door in front of them, all the women outside. Then, he ran upstairs, to where Leah was waiting for him.

The band of musicians played louder and louder music outside, in Gaono. Songs began to be sung in the street. The people joined in. Leah lighted candles in the bedroom, which was received with shouts and ribald remarks down beneath. The music lasted a long while still, then all became quiet in Gaono.

In the morning, a group of young women arrived early at Asa's house. They knocked on the door, crying they had come to cut off Leah's hair. Asa didn't open his door to them. He

opened a window upstairs amidst much laughter from below, and more shouts of ‘give us the bride!’

Asa cried, ‘I don’t want my wife’s hair to be touched!’

His words were accepted with more shouts. What, would Asa deny this fine Jewish tradition? The women were disappointed. They held high the black silk shawl that would have covered Leah’s shaven head. Leah showed also up at the window, holding a nightgown to hide her nudity. She tore at her satin, black dress also, to hold it in front of her. This led to more bawdy shouts from the crowd.

Leah shouted, ‘no wig for me, sisters! My hair is for my husband alone and every day to enjoy! No *galleibe* for me! No woman shall touch my hair!’

Leah threw the wig her mother and mother-in-law had prepared for her out of the window. Asa drew her back into the room. He closed the window. The band of musicians arrived in the street. The band began to play. The women gathered outside to sing old Jewish songs. A few girls danced in the street.

The parents of the bride and groom had prepared a feast of seven days in honour of the newly-wed couple. The feast after the wedding, the *rumpel*, was to last so long. In fact, only the dinner right after the wedding would be attended by all the invitees.

At this wedding supper, once more the soup served was the golden chicken soup. In the early afternoon, after the first lunch and after stout drinking by the men, Asa had to deliver a funny commentary on the past. This was the *droshe*, a Talmudic oration. Asa had prepared his *droshe* speech with great care. He had appealed to his friends and to the rabbi of the synagogue. The rabbi was a very good-humoured man, to whom nice Jewish jokes of yore came naturally. Since a truly great drinking bout had already preceded Asa’s words, the house shook with laughter. A fiddler accompanied him to punctuate the paragraphs, and the jokes.

After Asa’s *droshe*, the invited men and women came forward to offer the *droshegeshanken*, more wedding presents. Cash money too was offered to Asa and Leah. Asa gathered the presents in a side-room, for all to appreciate.

The afternoon finished with much dancing. Leah danced during the *kosher* dance with her father, her father-in-law, friends, holding the length of a handkerchief between them and her. Only Asa could hold her closer for a Cossack dance. Leah whirled and whirled, her long hair flowing around her head.

A similar dance between mother and mother-in-law drew much laughter. In this dance also, the seemingly bickering mothers held a handkerchief between them while they swirled and turned.

The next days, the dinners, suppers and lunches, would be served less and less lavishly. Still, Leah’s parents stayed in Vilna to the end, in Ezra’s house. They revelled in their children’s happiness.

Abraham Vincevicius did not show up at Asa’s marriage. He also took no part in the seven-day feasting. Everybody thought he had left Vilna on business. This was partly true. He travelled to Kaunas, to meet his own future father-in-law and his future bride. Afterwards, he toured in Prussia for over a month, first at and around Klaipeda, then to Königsberg. He had

wanted to push on to Berlin and return much later by Warsaw, but a bout of despair drove him back to Lithuania earlier than he expected, after his trip to Königsberg.

It was not entirely true Abraham had left Vilna for a journey before Asa's wedding. When Asa had led his bride to his house after the wedding ceremony, Abraham stood, hidden in a dark porch of one of the houses opposite Asa's house. He was clad in a dark cloak. He had drawn up the collar of his cloak to hide his face and his hat fell deep over his forehead. Asa and Leah went inside, followed by the giggling bridesmaids. Abraham saw the bridesmaids coming out again. Then, he walked to the town centre, where one of his servants guarded his carriage and horse. He left in the night for Kaunas, in the light only of a half moon.

Two months later, the wedding of Abraham Vincevicius and Abi Abramovski took place in Kaunas, in the house of the Abramovski Family. The wedding resembled in every aspect Asa's marriage. It was as grandiose and as well organised as Asa's and Leah's marriage. Abraham had been nice in this period to Abi, though he found her insignificant compared to Leah and to some of the other women he had encountered.

Abi was not ugly, but rather plain. Abraham considered her common, not only in looks, but also in mind and in liveliness. Abi would never be up to Abraham's temperament. Yet, Jewish law expected him to protect and love his wife. Abraham pledged to himself and to his father Ezra to respect Abi, and so he did.

Abi Abramovski perceived the tension in Abraham. She didn't know what had happened between Abraham and his brother. She had heard he had not been at his brother's wedding. She didn't dare ask what the origin of the tension was. Abi was a good soul, a truly nice woman. She asked nothing more from life than to be a good housewife to Abraham, and a loving mother to her children. Abraham asked much, much more from a wife. Abi admired Abraham. She noticed quite well how all Kaunas and all Vilna admired him. Abraham loaded on Abi more jewels and presents than Leah would ever receive. That gave him some satisfaction.

Abi then glorified in her happiness with such a man. She did all Abraham asked and she rarely objected. Abi drew Abraham to her bed before the wedding. Who would notice? The first act of coupling resembled a rape, but Abi was fulfilled. Abraham would be a passionate husband, she learned. She revelled in that too. Abi would give Abraham what he wanted, how he wanted.

She began in a very energetic way to redecorate her and Abraham's house of Vilna. Abraham sometimes complained about her exaggeration in her devotion to cleanliness, but with time, he had to admit he too was proud and glad with the way Abi kept the house. Agreeing with Abi on matters of household came easily to Abraham. Abi received Abraham's guests with dignity and style.

In her first years of marriage, Abi didn't know Abraham also lived together with a Vilna actress near the theatre. She was content. She gave all and expected little. Her two sons came quickly. The boys filled her life more than Abraham could. Abraham provided her with everything she needed for her house.

When Abraham and Abi formed the procession to walk to the synagogue of Kaunas, Asa and Leah discreetly joined the group of the groom. Asa had not really wanted to come to the

wedding. His mother, Rebekah, had begged him to reconsider. Leah supported her mother-in-law. For their sake, Asa accompanied his parents to Kaunas. He and Leah assisted at the wedding ceremony in the synagogue's courtyard. Asa and Leah did not stand in the first rows behind the couple. Abraham and Abi did not notice them.

The Abramovskis had also invited Asa and Leah to the wedding feast. Before the first dinner started, in the early afternoon after the wedding, Asa and Leah entered the fine Abramovski house. They brought the *droshegeshanken* in their arms. Asa and Leah had chosen some of the finest silver presents the couple would receive. How would they be welcomed by Abraham? Would Abraham accept them or send them away in shame? Asa speculated Abraham would not make a scene in front of his new father-in-law.

When Asa and Leah entered, Abraham had first turned his face away and cursed. Then, he sighed, and reluctantly, he stood from his chair. He went up to Asa. Asa saw his brother coming to him with some awe.

Asa was lucky, as he most always was in life. The day before his wedding, Lew Abramovski had told him in a long and serious conversation, in which also Ezra participated, he would make over the management of almost his entire business to his son-in-law. Moreover, Lew Abramovski would teach Abraham how to trade on the international scale the Abramovskis did their business. The main secret, Lew Abramovski told, was having reliable partners with whom to conclude temporary associations, form lasting connections, and how to create the confidence partners needed. One had to ensure good confidence in such endeavours. Without confidence in the honesty of one's associate, no commerce was possible. Confidence had to be built up over the years! A newcomer could not succeed unless accompanied by a trustworthy person, well known in the business. A newcomer needed friends who vowed for him and that exactly was what Lew proposed to do for Abraham under Abramovski guidance.

Abraham was greatly relieved with Lew's proposal. He had money. He had received a large house in Gaono of Vilna. Renovating and decorating the house to make it worthy of Abi Abramovski costed dearly. Moreover, Abraham had an expensive mistress to entertain. He had started trading the same way as his father did, expecting great returns on investment. These enterprises brought him much profit, but in the beginning, the investments had eaten up the money he had received from his father. Lew Abramovski offered him now a splendid way out of his financial worries, and a confident to whom he could turn. Lew, of course, traded on another scale altogether than Ezra Vincevicius. This was the grand life and game!

Abraham was thus very good-humoured at his wedding feast. The more so, because his father-in-law had also told him straight in the eye he knew all about Abraham having a mistress in Vilna. That should not be an issue between us, Lew Abramovski had whispered to Abraham, as long as Abraham kept the affair private, out of the public eye and ear, and as long as Abraham kept control of the affair. Abraham should not let the actress control him. It should be the other way around. That is how I proceed with my mistress, Lew Abramovski confided in his son-in-law. Both men had laughed conspiringly then, and Lew had stretched out his hand to Abraham, which Abraham shook. The pact was sealed between him and his father-in-law. Lew and Abraham had knowingly laughed between them. Lew and Abraham understood each other, as businessmen should. They would get around. Lew Abramovski didn't want his daughter to suffer. Abraham promised him so much and made then and there

a resolution to himself to keep his promise. He realised how dangerous it could be to have somebody as Lew Ezekiel Abramovski as his enemy.

Thus, Abraham's mood was wonderfully uplifted during his wedding ceremony. The wine and brandy helped. When Abraham saw Asa, after slight hesitation, he went to his brother, shook Asa's hand, embraced him, and wished him welcome. Asa took the hand and was genuinely relieved.

Abi Abramovski smiled when she saw her husband and his brother smile at each other. She thought nothing remained in the way of her happiness. Abi went in her turn to Leah Perlman. She embraced her. A fine friendship ensued between the two sisters-in-law. Abi was a simple woman, but she was not stupid. She had studied in the *heder* of Kaunas. She had read books. She spoke several languages, taught by private teachers. She now also wanted Leah to teach her a few things, such as how to truly behave in high society gatherings and dinners. She was also in need of a true confidant, which, she felt instinctively, her husband would not be. Leah and Abi became good friends and their friendship lasted.

## Abraham and Asa Vincevicius, God and the Jews. 1825

Abraham Vincevicius thought of himself as of a grand force of nature. He was indestructible. Everything he did was successful, nothing could stop him except the normal limit of the resources at his disposal, and then, resources one could multiply. He could do wonders with money. He needed large funds for his many projects, but money lay plentiful around him. He turned into profit anything he touched. No man or woman could resist his natural charm. Well, except one. He was a leader of opinions in the community, a man of authority, a force to be reckoned with, a man who pushed anything and anyone out of his way when resisted. Abraham was the power to whom all gathered, the king of the pack. Everybody followed him. Everybody listened to him when he spoke. Compared to Abraham, Asa Vincevicius disappeared into nothingness. Asa was a minus, a mouse, a non-entity. He kept his silence and remained discreet when Abraham boasted freely. Asa was demure when Abraham burst through, boasting and laughing. When Leah Perlman chose for Asa instead of him, therefore, Abraham experienced the trauma of his life.

The rabbis of Vilna saluted Abraham from far. When Asa touched his hat and bowed and wished a good day to a rabbi he had encountered numerous times already, the rabbi would nod to him absent-mindedly. The rabbi would merely groan, ‘good morning, good day, eh, eh, eh ...’ and flee on.

Nobody seemed to remember Asa’s name.

The ladies of Vilna in particular cherished Abraham and flocked to him. They didn’t notice Asa. Abraham indulged in the best food, the best wine, the best vodka. He came to grow bulky. He showed a powerful chest from birth, though, and while growing up, he expanded in importance, in muscle power, in flesh and in quickness of mind. Asa on the contrary, was born thin. He remained lean and quick and slithered through crowds. For Abraham, everybody made place. Nobody would bump into Abraham at a reception! Asa had to jump out of the way for people.

Asa had begun to walk stooped. Lately, he had straightened a bit, but he remained the weasel who jumped out of your way. Abraham bore on like a steam locomotive. Everybody in Vilna thought Abraham’s sexual appetites could not be satiated. This might well have been the ordinary truth. Wild stories of orgies and of fallen women circulated on him. These were grossly exaggerated.

The theatre dancers and actresses knew Abraham Vincevicius well. He knew them all. Among these, one leading actress had once caught his eye more than others. She had been extraordinarily beautiful, and successful with the theatre managers. Her circle of admirers had been large and prestigious. She was a tall woman with a large bosom, thin waist and saucy bottom. She moved with unusual grace. She had been for several years the star actress of the Vilna theatre. A Polish woman, her successes at Breslau and Warsaw had waned. She was lucky to have received new contracts at Vilna. She had actually aimed for Minsk, Königsberg and Saint Petersburg, but she never got further than Vilna. Königsberg did not tremble for her considerable charms.

When Abraham Vincevicius met her, she had accepted with some poignancy her days of glory were probably over. She surmised she would now fall deeper and deeper. She had

noticed this fact so often in the aging actresses. She dreaded the prospect. So, she associated with Abraham Vincevicius, sensing the Jew in him might remain faithful to her even in her later years. In that, she was right. He was a decent man.

Her weapons to keep Abraham linked to her were her body, her good looks, her skills in female seduction, her wits and her Polish charm. She was not a bad woman. She took good care of herself and of her assets. So far, Abraham had not disappointed her. She had passed a difficult time when Abraham announced her he was engaged to marry a Jewish woman. She might gladly have caught her lover in her own legal nets. She understood the challenges. A Jew marrying a gentile woman was an insurmountable issue. Abraham needed the money of a very wealthy patron, of a father-in-law whose means were immense. Abraham could then propel himself forward, deeper and higher in the society of wealthy traders of Vilna and of entire Lithuania. At first, she felt abandoned, and in panic. Abraham continued seeing her, however, living with her for entire days, and assuring her a wife was only for having a continuance of his line. She did not well understand the attraction that bound Abraham to her. Yet, the bond remained strong, and she exploited the link thoroughly. Abraham was married. He did not leave her.

Abraham's income originated in his cigar factories. He exported cigars to western Europe and to Saint Petersburg. The factories he had received from his father guaranteed him a steady profit. Abraham was far more ambitious than this income allowed. His father had taught him the basics of trading. Abraham now too traded in about everything he could buy somewhere low and sell elsewhere at much higher prices. He remained limited in his trade only because of lack of funds. Abraham wanted to grow his fortune fast. He raged at the slowness of getting truly rich, as rich as the wealthiest man of Vilna. Nevertheless, he was on his way to securing a place among these men. He aimed at becoming so wealthy money and funds could be forgotten as economic limits. He had not yet reached that point, but he was on his way! The provisions now made by his father-in-law projected him squarely on the right path. He was grateful for that. He thanked God for the opportunity, for his cunning and intelligence, for the good luck that propelled him from success to success. For his partners, the main incentive to enter an enterprise with Abraham Vincevicius was this good luck. Abraham never lost in anything he undertook. Except for Leah Perlman.

Abraham's mistress was called Elzbieta Dobrovolski. Elzbieta had not been without means when Abraham met her. She had been married before to a considerably much older man. She was divorced and had extorted quite some money from her former husband. Moreover, he had deceased a few years later from an illness, not before she had forced him to not forget her in his last will. Elzbieta owned her apartment in the centre of Vilna. Abraham had merely bought the apartment next doors, so that she owned an entire floor all to herself. Abraham had spent quite a nice sum to the renovation of her rooms, too. Her suite was splendid. She lived like a princess, like the wife of a very well-to-do burgher of the town, without most of the tenuous duties. A young girl of Vilna served her as maid. The girl occupied two small rooms in the same building, in the attic. Several other wealthy, mostly elderly people lived in the same building and had their maids live in the attic rooms. Abraham Vincevicius knew that attic well. When he quarrelled with the passionate Elzbieta, he had only to go up a few stairs to find comforting solace in other soft arms.

Elzbieta Dobrovolski was useful to Abraham in other aspects than love. As a Polish woman, she had secured a few connections with the smaller Polish gentry, former lovers and benefactors. Abraham was not her sole asset. This fact she reminded Abraham often of. Elzbieta remained Polish through and through. She thought of herself as of a Polish patriot. She loathed the Russians for having first subdued and then annexed and exploited the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. What was Lithuania more than an extension of Poland? What right had Russia to rule over Poland and Lithuania other than the right of the strongest? Was the law of the wild forests then to be applied to sophisticated nations such as Poland? What about the strong will of an ethnical coherent people to want to determine its own fate? What did Poles and Lithuanians have in common with the autocrats of Saint Petersburg and Moscow? Elzbieta proffered the opinion Lithuania and Poland formed an open country of the same ideas. One country had been the wish of the Lithuanian king Jagiello, when he had married the heiress and queen of Poland! Elzbieta thought the same of all the lands once called Lithuania, for the old Lithuanian-conquered territories of Ruthenia, Volhynia, Podolia, Kiev and the Crimea. All this was Poland-Lithuania!

Nevertheless, several higher-placed Russian administrators of the *Gubernia*, the Province of Vilna admired her too, made their attendance on her, and she had access to them. The Russians admired her for simple reasons, of course. Elzbieta had not been merely the mistress of her one lover Abraham Vincevicius! The Russian administrators thought her ideas foolish, the harmless ranting of a fickle woman. They did not even answer her with decent arguments. They cheered to her with their wine glasses, and would have replied with yes to anything, just to get in bed with her.

Abraham knew very well Elzbieta's former lovers had distanced themselves from her with time. Abraham was her only lover, now. Elzbieta had grown older. She had lost the fresh charm of youth.

For Abraham Vincevicius, his relation with Elzbieta was one of convenience. He liked her body. She never failed to arouse his desires and to appease them. Elzbieta was willing to satisfy his sexual appetites. He supposed too she felt a genuine affection for him. He was also convenient for her. He offered her the comfort of a presence at her side, and the comfort of his fortune. He was a lover, protector, a source of financial security, and a presence.

Now, Abraham had a wife, Abi Abramovski. Abraham was sufficiently Jewish to desire a steady, married life. His sons by Abi had ensured him of heirs and of the continuance of his name, of his blood and being. His religious community demanded of him to be married. The Jews appreciated a steady life with a family in a house. It was only by being married Abraham could become a respected member of the associations of charity of the *Kahal*, of the Jewish community.

The fact he also had a mistress offered him increased status, prestige and even distinction, for only the very rich men could afford a mistress such as Elzbieta. The wealthiest traders of Vilna entertained mistresses, so they could feel comfortable in Abraham's presence. He would not be the moralising hypocrite with them.

The rabbis were willing to close an eye, as long as he bestowed generous funds on the synagogue. The rabbis and scholars would sometimes make covert remarks on the way he lived. They never directly confronted him, scorning him for having a mistress. Some form of toleration had set in with time. Abraham was a good house-father. He did not beat his wife, honoured her, respected her, was not violent with her, and ostentatiously loved his children.

Abraham found himself at peace with the congregation. He was not a man without some degree of virtue.

Abraham liked being considered a good Jew. In a strange way, he also came to like Abi. He often approached her with a bunch of flowers, with a nice jewel, tokens of respect and appreciation. Abi accepted these signs as marks of love. Abi was satisfied and quite happy in her house of Gaono. Abraham displayed all the signs of a happy Jewish husband. For this, others respected him. How could one not respect a man so astute in trade and in business? Abraham was a man of substance! He was a giant of respectability in the *Kahal*, the community of the Jews of Vilna. He felt satisfied by what he had accomplished and aimed for more. He came very well along with his father-in-law. One could see the two men discuss business in one of the finest hotel lounges of Vilna, sipping brandy, and quite satisfied with each other.

Asa Vincevicius, Abraham's brother, was altogether a very different man! Ezra, Asa's father, speculated his son Abraham had inherited his character traits from his grandmothers, from Hannah Landau and from Beila Tugendhold, and especially from his maternal grandfather of Hungarian origins, Andras Munkacs. The Munkacs had been passionate, vivid persons of great stature, sometimes given to bouts of frivolity, though excellent businessmen. They possessed the daring to seek the great risks that brought extraordinary profits. Ezra thought them reckless. Asa, on the contrary, took after him, after the Vincevicius, after him and after his paternal grandfather Samuel. In other words, Abraham was a Munkacs and a Landau. Asa was the true Vincevicius.

A Vincevicius was through-and-through honest, loyal and righteous. He was a man of high morals, respected in the community for his piety and knowledge of the Talmud. He abided by the laws of the Torah, the laws of Moses. He was a serious man, admired for the evenness of his character, for the sobriety of the way he lived and for the way he cared for his family and his community. He was a thoughtful man, who never acted rashly. In his business ventures, the Vincevicius was known to decide rationally. Asa always knew exactly, quite definitely, why he was acting this or that way. He could explain the decisions or the reasons for his endeavours.

Asa had received the management of the land leases of the Vincevicius Family. He regarded himself the steward of his father's possessions. The Vincevicius Family had bought leases on land from the main Lithuanian and Polish landlords. Their lords were the Radziwills in the first place, also the Sanguszko, Chodkiewicz and even the Ostrogski, to the Gaztold and Vriski. Other Polish nobles held land and villages in Lithuania. Asa didn't really care from whom he leased land. The nobles of Poland-Lithuania quite willingly leased out parts of their domains to Jews. Jews were dependable, generally honest, true to their word, and intelligent. They would better any land they set their eyes on. Jews used Christian Orthodox peasants to grow grain on the lords' lands. Jews paid the peasants, then sold the grain to other Jewish merchants. They handed over part of the revenue to the lords. It was a scheme by which the higher nobility and the Jews profited both and most.

Times turned sometimes hard. Harvests failed. Pests proliferated and killed the grain stalks. Grain prices could plunge when western nations threw more grain on the market. Generally, the scheme of leasing worked well. The Jews took the losses and made up for them in next

years. The nobility profited constantly. The leases guaranteed steady profits without much effort. The nobles also proposed tavern leases on their lands and in their villages. Hundreds of smaller towns and villages of Lithuania and Ruthenia down to Kiev, were the property of the noble families. These were of the Catholic or of the Calvinist and Lutheran faiths. The Jews cared little for the religion of the people they worked with.

Asa Vincevicius managed especially the tavern leases of his father. From his parts of the profits, he had taken and developed leases in his own name. He too was making money besides receiving a part of the proceedings in the business of his father Ezra. He was careful. He took far less risks in business than his brother Abraham. He made money much more slowly than Abraham, but seldom lost large sums. As he increased the tavern leases significantly, he brought in money from many sources. He had also begun to trade on his own, sending his goods to the port town of Memel in Prussia, named Klaipeda by the Polish. Memel lay in the north. Asa limited his trade to late spring, summer and autumn. He used ships almost exclusively on the Niemen River to transport his goods.

Asa's enterprises in trade were not nearly so important as those of his brother Abraham. His risks were lower, his profits more modest. He did not complain, though. He could sleep easily at night, Leah in his arms. He did not have to worry about risks. He only bought when he was sure he could sell at higher prices. He did not and could not manipulate prices. He did not cheat. His trade had developed into a routine, his partners men of confidence to be relied upon, his benefits assured. Many smaller Jewish traders followed his example. More than any merchant Asa knew, he prepared for the worse. He traded cautiously. He always thought of what might happen by means of catastrophes or setbacks to what he did. He reflected for long times on what he could and should do in such cases.

Asa was not very popular in his conversations and meetings with non-Jewish merchants. He showed a propensity for contradiction, for viewing initiatives from unexpected angles. He seemed to like long discussions. He questioned everything, seeking answers to the possible but improbable unexpected. This could irritate other traders, who showed more daring and dash.

Asa sometimes even enervated rabbis when he demonstrated that seeking understanding and clarity in ideas and phrases was not straightforward. He declared thinking out matters was a necessary condition of Jewishness. A few rabbis called him mockingly their Socrates.

Most people represented God as a man. That was certainly the case for the Christians. The God of the Christians was called 'the Father', but he was mostly Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ, having also been a man, had a face. Painters represented him. Asa could not imagine how his God looked like. His God had no face and scarcely a name. The Creator, the being he called God, 'Bog' in Russian, did not even truly have a name for the Jews! The letters YHWH only, the holy Tetragrammaton, had been subscribed to the Creator. The Creator's nature must be so alien in its enormous power! Asa could not assign a likeness to the Creator of the universe. He accepted the essence of God would forever be unknowledgeable. YHWH, Yahweh, or rather Yehovah, had not even shown his nature to Moses. He had merely turned his back to the leader of the Jews. No, the Creator had no face. He was called Gott in German, Bog in Polish and Russian, Dieu in French, which was a Latin name, and

Allah by the Muslims. He was Jupiter by the Romans, Zeus by the Greek, and Baal by the Phoenicians. The Creator was called by a thousand names.

The Jews did not pronounce the name of God. The rabbis called him Adonai, which was not the true divine name, merely a word the rabbis used to indicate the Creator and not utter the forbidden name of the Tetragrammaton.

Therefore, Asa reflected, however much the scholars tried, it had no sense for the Jews to speculate on the nature and appearance of God. Was that the reason why for the Jews, the word, God's law given to Moses, the Torah, had so much more importance than trying to know what God was like? The word was the only tangible thing the Jews had of their God. Trying to understand what God was like, was very typically a Christian thing, not in the Jewish tradition.

The Torah was vast enough. Did not the Torah contain as many laws and regulations as the 613 seeds of a pomegranate? Asa could think rationally about his God. He had to stop conjecturing, however, when his rational thinking had arrived at its logical end. Reason could then not probe on into the complete unknown. Here, the wise man had to declare himself defeated. No Christian could accept being defeated by the limits of reasoning. Asa smiled. So much arrogance! An Oriental could accept this, and a Jew too. Only the mystics tried to probe further, but with their heart, shutting out their mind and letting God take possession of them. Asa did not believe in such trying.

If the Jews avowed defeated early on in their understanding of God and merely adored without understanding, the Christians and other religions remained very frustrated. Was that one of the reasons why the Jews were so hated by so many people? The Jews adored without knowing and yet lived content and happy. No Christian could get so happy.

Jews were truly different, Asa mused. Jews were circumcised in the sign of their covenant with God. The Jews kept faithfully to their very old traditions. They washed regularly in purification. They kept to their own. They worshipped God as everybody else, but even more their books, the scrolls of the Torah.

We Jews, Asa reflected, are a people that cannot wield power. It is good that way. It holds us back from killing and from doing injustice. There is much virtue in being powerless. Our virtue resides in being able to achieve! We are traders and entrepreneurs, even though we are so weak. Despite the fact we know these to be our virtues, we, like all other men, aspire to power and to well-being without achievement. The rabbis tell us that whenever our people, originally Israelites, achieved prosperity and power, we found ourselves impossible to keep our religion pure and without corruption of the mind. We, Jews, seem to have to suffer to remain pure at heart.

The Jews were more intelligent. More than other people, they were tolerant of other religions. They did not proselytise, whereas the Christians proselytised all the time. The Jews were not a violent people. They never took up the sword. Were these not very desirable qualities for humans, which no other religious community but the Jews could claim? Were not all persecutions of the Jews then stupid? Peace was a Jewish invention for Asa! Why persecute a people everybody knew from history would do no harm to other nations?

Were the Jews so disliked because they lent money at interest? Probably yes, Asa surmised. A Jew was forbidden by law to lend at interest to another Jew. You could give money to another Jew and this for a participation in the profits, but not lend money to another Jew at an interest. Lending money to strangers was permitted, however. The Christian laws forbade the lending of money at usury interests. A Christian could always lend money from a Jew, at high interest, for at high risk. This possibility had made many Jews very rich men. Was it then envy that drove other men to hate Jews? Probably! That, and the differences in religious traditions, in ways of living and in the unbeatable intelligence of the Jews. Jews were so intelligent, so adept at rational thinking, Asa was certain, because since very many generations Jews had been going to schools. The schools sharpened their power of reasoning.

A Jewish boy at three entered the *heder*, the school for the little ones. At twelve, after his *Bar Mitzvah*, a Jewish boy continued reading and studying the Talmud. The Talmud was a series of books, which formed the interpretation and rational commentary on the Torah laws. Thus, exercised in rationality and logic, a truly gifted boy could continue his studies until far in adulthood in a *yeshivah*, in what amounted to a Jewish religious university. The so-learned means of rational thinking could be applied to any undertaking of mankind. The Jews simply were better exercised in considering the pitfalls of enterprises than any other human. Judaism was all about the law, about observing the law, discovering new views in the laws given to Moses. The law therefore was fixed, defined, but also relative. Since one could reflect about the law, practices of the law could move, be changed, be reviewed and be replaced by new views. In this aspect too, Jews were very different from the Christians. The Christian Pope published the canons, which became instantly as many dogmas. There existed no dogmas in Judaism. Everything was open to discussion, to rational considerations and to discussion. That was the essence of the Talmud as commentary on the laws of Israel, as given by God. Westerners and Christians could not live by such uncertainty, as little as they could, live for a God without a face, Asa mused. This was the fundamental weakness of the Christians.

The Christian clergy rejected the Jews, of course. Being a Jew was the work of the devil. Jesus Christ had been crucified by his people, by the Jews. Smart as they were, the Jews must have known very well the truth of Christ's message, but they rejected it continually. Such was the opinion of the Christians, and such could not be forgiven! Nevertheless, Asa worked in collaboration with Christian Lithuanians and Poles. He usually dressed like them, except on Sabbath Days. A few of the Christian Catholic and Christian Orthodox traders called him a friend. Others remained respectful.

What troubled Asa most, was that he always had to remain alert, on his guard, in the country he lived in. The rabbis told this was the price to pay to keep the Jewishness in him. Asa considered it an unnecessary nuisance. He was a foreigner in this land. The law considered him as such. The Jews formed a group of foreigners, allowed to live in the country, under the special statute of the *Kahal* community system. Asa could not but feel a foreigner in the land he was born in. The Russians had since all times rejected the Jews from their lands and closed their borders to the families of the Jewish faith. Certain cities of Poland had done the same. Asa appreciated at least the honesty of the measures closing Russia from the Jews. Better to be clear than to be hypocritical about the matter! Many Poles didn't like the Jews either, and

showed it in judicial courts. At least, the Russians treated Poles and Jews alike, with the same condescendence.

When the Russians had occupied Poland-Lithuania, as of from 1772 on, they had gained the largest population of Jews of Europe. Indeed, Lithuania, especially with the lands of Belarus and Ukraine, old Lithuanian territories, had treated the Jews decently, so that three fourths of Europe's Jews had taken roots here. In 1772, quite suddenly, the Russians had incorporated a vast land in which millions of Jews lived, they who had always rejected Jews from their empire. The Russians could but accept the Jews with the lands of larger Lithuania and in their newly conquered territories. The Jews were too many to be expelled, too many to be exterminated by simple means. The Empress Catherine had accepted the Jews in her empire, but then confined to the settlement areas of what was grossly former, glorious Lithuania, the lands from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The Jewish Settlement Areas were defined as including Lithuania proper, Ruthenia or Belarus and the lands that could be called Ukraine, Volhynia, Podolia, Kiev.

Asa's and Abraham's mother tongue was Yiddish. Naturally, they felt attracted to the German speaking people. Yiddish was a German dialect mixed with Hebrew words. The Jews were serious men and women. They were generally honest and sincere, creative in business, excellent problem-solvers. Asa and Abraham found the German-speaking merchants intelligent, direct, energetic and all but negligent, not unlike their own people. These were qualities Asa in particular, appreciated in business. Maybe, he guessed, that was also why he had liked Leah Perlman and her family so much. The Perlmans definitely were Ashkenazi Jews. They must have taken on the name of Perlman not so long ago in history and have settled originally in the German-speaking lands before advancing east to Lithuania. He, Asa Vincevicius, had a fully Lithuanian name. His family could have lived in Lithuania since much earlier than the Perlmans, the Landaus and the Munkacses. Asa felt proud of the ancient Lithuanian kings, of Mindaugas, Gediminas, Vytautis, Agecirdas, Kaustatis, Jagiello, and so many more. He had studied the history of Lithuania. Nevertheless, he remained a foreigner in these lands. Nothing could alleviate this fact. Asa always felt a little shy and unsure of himself when he left the Jewish quarter of Gaono of Vilna. Only within the walls of his house did he really feel at home and as anybody else in the world. Asa often cursed his pessimistic thoughts.

Abraham didn't care much about such thoughts. He lived like a fish in the water within any community, despite the difficulties. Abraham had the rare gift to blend in any community and make people forget he actually was a Jew.

The words of Antanas Svirskевичius had touched Asa. The ideas now regularly came to his mind. How appeasing would it not be to be called a true citizen of a country! Any Jew had then the same rights as any other citizen. Asa would be able to call such a country truly his own. He could feel at home wherever he travelled in that land, feel he belonged to somewhere. His religion would probably always remain exotic, but he would feel much more at ease and better protected by the law.

Asa had fallen in love with Leah Perlman from the first moment he had laid eyes upon her. How could it have been otherwise? Leah was a pearl of beauty! By what divine inspiration or

by what inherent, built-in feature of his mind had he felt immediately so at ease with her? The feeling had been extremely real, not imaginative at all. Leah had felt the attraction too, maybe even stronger than he. A true miracle had happened. As Leah had been engaged to his brother, Asa had not been able to speak of how he felt to Leah. Ultimately, that had also not been necessary, for Leah had taken the initiative and done what was needed to set right a momentous error. She could not have married Abraham!

Asa smiled. All he had done for what was needed to bring Leah and him together, had been slight indeed! For all the great moments in his life, he had had to do so little! His father had decided on the ways he, Asa, lived. His father had given him money and leases. His father had taught him all. He, Asa, did not have to fight for his good fortune. Leah, in her own way, had done the same. Was he then a weakling, who let others decide for him? Maybe yes! When he longed to be a true citizen in a country, was it then not because he, like his brother but in other ways, sought power and renown, esteem and prestige, qualities which the rabbis might all call sins and vanities, the beginning of ruin? Asa chased such thoughts out of his mind.

Asa Vincevicius might indeed have thought of himself as of a weak man. His partners in business would have been surprised at such low self-esteem. They rather thought of him as a ruthless merchant, honest and sincere yes, as a tough lease-holder, as of a man who did not tolerate dishonesty in others. Asa abhorred theft, treachery, debauchery, cowardice and deceit. He seemed a dull pillar of righteousness to his partners. They often disputed matters with him. It was difficult to agree with a saint, one of his partners had once cried out. For Asa, grey did not exist. Merely black or white, nothing in between. And, of course, Asa told straight in your face that what you had done was black or white.

Such men as Asa, growing tall and straight as trees, did also not bow in heavy wind. They broke, but did not yield. So far, however, Asa had not broken. The winds only whirled around him and failed to hurt him fundamentally. His cunning was so great, his mind so all-encompassing, his vision of what could go wrong so sharp before any project! He always had the means to confront dangers, pitfalls, or bad surprises. He did not have to think long on how to react. He knew from beforehand what to do, the thoughts rolling out of his sleeves with ease. Since nobody would have believed Asa had foreseen all issues long before, people remained in awe at his quick intellect.

Asa and Abraham had never felt really close. They lived in the same house but remained too many miles apart in character and too different in age to have enjoyed the same exaltations or confronted the same dangers. They had different friends when young boys, and rarely if ever been involved in the same games and the same boys' adventures. Their experiences had differed. Asa and Abraham often disputed business ventures. They contradicted one another passionately, with arguments and opinions. They perceived this as quite normal. After all, they also dared to contradict their father. From the contradictions arose better understanding, other viewpoints. No offence was meant or taken.

Asa thanked God for his unique love, for Leah. She filled his heart with tender happiness. He felt no need for other friends. He had not given much thought about whether Abraham might miss someone like Leah. Had not Abraham now his own wife Abi, and his mistress Elzbieta?

The Christians, and even more so the Christians of the western countries, of the Germans, considered love the greatest gift of God to mankind. For a man, a life with a woman who loved him was the greatest joy on earth. A life without true love was not worth living. Such loveless life amounted to nothing more than a life spent uselessly, to a tragedy. Did Abraham really love Elzbieta and she him? Asa suddenly doubted this. He realised his brother might feel empty in his mind. Did Abi love Abraham? If Abraham was not loved by a woman, and not in love, his life was but misery, an empty shell despite the children born of him and of Abi. Asa thanked God for having brought Leah to him, like Esther to Boaz. Asa had been and still was fulfilled, whereas Abraham remained incomplete. Asa pitied his brother then, despite all his brother's wealth, dash and success.

## In the Jewish Taverns. 1825

It was autumn, but still warm. The woods of the country displayed splendid tints of green, brown and red, the most magnificent multitude of colours. Asa Vincevicius loved this time of the year, before the excessive rain showers and then the snow would begin to fall. When the sun shone, as now, the air was pure, warm but not hot, and agreeable. The landscapes looked wonderful!

The nights seemed chillier than in the previous weeks. Asa Vincevicius and Antanas Svirskevicius rode on one of their inspection tours in the countryside around Vilnius. Antanas did what his masters expected of him. He was actually happy and relaxed, satisfied in these days. The period resembled a long vacation, and one for which he was paid, too. The tours took them far from the city at times, and in all weather. Asa drove a light carriage. There was scarcely place for two men, for Asa used this carriage also when he rode alone. It could carry no loads of any importance. The carriage had a high hood, but which was short, so that the men were exposed to the wind, rain and snow, entering from the front. The carriage could be drawn by one horse, however. It was light enough to use but one horse for the journeys, which made the issue of finding good fodder all the easier. When stuck in mud or early snow, Asa could more easily draw or push the carriage out of its dire situation.

Asa had thought Antanas would join him on merely a couple of such travels. But Antanas stayed on for weeks, and then for months, obviously enjoying himself and learning all the way. Asa didn't mind. Antanas was a happy fellow. Asa and Antanas got to know each other better. Asa trusted his companion, now. He was happy not to remain all by himself on the tours. The two men talked on the way. They never fell out of subjects to discuss.

Asa showed Antanas the Vincevicius distilleries. Some of these produced brandy on a grand scale. Ezra and Asa preferred several smaller factories rather than one large one, so the distilleries lay dispersed. Various Polish and Russian laws forbade the Jews to distil liquor. Those laws were not enforced, however. Smaller distilleries attracted less attention by the authorities. The members of the highest, mainly Polish, nobility defended the Jews who got caught by police guards. This happened only on denunciation by competitors or by jealous peasants and priests. Luckily, the people who worked around and advised the courts of the governors of the provinces, also leased distilleries. When the Polish or Russian noblemen appealed to these men or to the heads of the police, the cases got dropped silently. Asa knew well the constant tension of such issues, the worries and concerns, the sleepless nights waiting for such possible trials. He had learned to live with the stress, confident he could plead and pay his way out of such quagmires.

Antanas had looked with surprise at Asa when he heard about this.

'How often does this happen,' he asked, 'these denunciations? Paying bribes must diminish your profits considerably!'

'They do,' Asa answered unperturbably. 'The cases remain rare, however. I lose from ten to fifteen percent of my profits to bribes. Sometimes I lose a tavern lease, sometimes the right to distil at a particular place. We, Jews, cannot own land. We cannot build taverns without leases. We are not allowed to exploit taverns. Yet we do. Usually, everybody closes eyes to what we do. Everybody gains from our work. We still cannot own land ourselves. Most of the

land belongs to members of the nobility, here. The nobility owns entire villages. We do build taverns. We can lease the management of existing taverns from the high nobility. We repaired most of the taverns to end up with entirely new ones. I have signed contracts on leases with the same men who may have voted for the restrictive laws in Parliament! The laws are rarely totally enforced. Too many powerful men would lose too much money if the Jews would not manage the taverns in the countryside. The Polish nobility, the members of the *szlachta*, live in luxury in their palaces and in Warsaw or Saint Petersburg. They are quite happy to lease the management of their Lithuanian estates to the Jews, to their *arendars*. *Arendar* has even in some regions come to be the very name of the Jews! In these lands, in the Jewish Settlement Areas of Russia, we live primarily from the sale of spirituous liquors. We produce and sell vodka. We need the taverns in the villages and smaller towns to boost our sales of alcohol. We do not invite to debauchery and to drunkenness. The *muzhiks*, the Russian peasants, and the peasants of Greater Lithuanian, would drink without us. That is proved by fact. Overall, we own more than half of all the taverns, but many other taverns are leased by Christians. The Christians mostly open the taverns in the larger towns.'

Asa paused, then he continued, 'occasionally, I do lose a tavern. That happens when a Russian or some Polish official nurtures a grudge against me. I don't protest. When the noble's steward or the nobleman himself cannot come up with a suitable solution, such as sending the official thousands of miles to the East, I lose a tavern. I absorb the loss. I close the inn. Who loses most? In the first place the village and the official! I move on. I open a new tavern somewhere else. The noblemen even gladly lend me the money for the leases. Besides, of course, I don't really own the tavern myself. I just lease it, and often the contracts with the tavern-keepers are not even drawn up in my name. I make sure the contract with the nobility states I can stop paying the lease in such cases.'

'What do you mean?' Antanas exclaimed. 'I have seen a few ledgers of my masters, who lease you most of the taverns. Your name is on the contracts in clear!'

'You have seen but one layer of the overall scheme,' Asa smiled. 'I might as well tell you. Sonner or later, you would have found out by yourself. I have triple contracts! The nobility leases to me. One contract. I sign a second, dummy contract with a Christian. The Christian signs yet another contract with a Jew he employs. Two more contracts! The Jews who work in the taverns, the tavern-keepers, the so-called 'owners' of the inns, get paid by me and I choose them. They receive a fine percentage of the profits, of course. I have to pay the Christian who acts as the middleman.

When a policeman makes havoc in a tavern and demands for the owner, the Jew who serves the drinks merely tells he is employed by a Christian man, whose name he grants gladly. The Christian will acknowledge he is the legal owner. Usually, the investigation stops there. Case closed. His money comes from me.'

Antanas turned to Asa, 'what if the case doesn't stop there, or if the Christian double-crosses you? Since he is the alleged owner of the tavern, he can keep the inn.'

'He merely has a copy of a lease contract that is fake, I remind you. He is not the owner. The nobleman would never recognise the contract. More usually, the name on the contract with the Christians is a fake. Noblemen know too well the Christian man would not be able to manage the tavern well. In case of issues, the nobleman's steward closes the tavern and the

contracts, and we start anew, with another Christian middleman. I recuperated some taverns after a couple of months of closure. Not much harm done!’

Antanas looked baffled. ‘I understand why my master sent me to you. I had to learn of such schemes, but not by him. Once in a while, Asa, your schemes must fail. Some Christians must be smart enough to dig themselves out of the scheme and keep on to the taverns.’

‘They do. It happens. Once every two or three years. Such a man gets grilled, of course. He got one contract, though only that one. Never another one. I warn the noblemen. As to me, I take the loss. The loss is included in the ten to fifteen percent profit loss I absorb each year. I don’t make a fuss over such cases. The police don’t get involved. I explain matters to the Christian. Often, he abandons his scheme. Moreover, I am generous, though I state so myself. I pay the Christian middleman and the Jewish tavern-keeper better than most of my competitors. I pay them better than my father did. I pay them better than my brother would have done. My profits are lower than some of my competitors, but I lose less taverns. I don’t rage and shout when I suffer a loss. I accept the loss and walk on. I try to remain discreet. That, and the generosity, limits the cases in which I truly lose a tavern lease. I take the losses for granted. I have them calculated in my overall profits of the year. Of course, it hurts. Well, it hurt in the beginning. Now, I laugh at such a loss. My detachment unsettles the Christian dishonest middlemen, as well as the occasional dishonest Jew. It unsettles the Jews that hold the inns open for me. They have learned the hard way I act ruthlessly afterwards. Such men are grilled, like I said. They get no new contract elsewhere. They made a very bad choice. Ultimately, they lose much more than I. I lose once; they have lost forever. Everybody stops doing business with them, for unreliable. I make sure of that, of course, too! Words have spread. Everybody currently knows what to expect from me. Dishonest men make some money once. They never get a second chance.’

Antanas laughed. ‘What if I denounced you?’

Asa looked at him. Was he wrong in his estimation of Antanas’s character? A threat showed on his face.

He said, ‘you wouldn’t remain to be a steward with any nobleman of the *szlachta* again. It would upset the entire scheme. No chance that ever happens! Besides, I think I know you, Antanas. You are a decent man at heart. You wouldn’t do something like that.’

Antanas noticed the immanent threat. He got very serious, regretting the phrase.

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ Antanas admitted. ‘I see no point for negative actions in commerce. You are the first man I met, Asa, who suffers losses without true regrets. You accept it as a way of living. That is a new angle of viewing matters for me.’

‘It is but a simple, rational calculation,’ Asa continued. ‘One could get old and sick worrying about one’s risks all the time. I say: take the risks into account from the beginning, see to it the risks always remain limited. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket, as my grandmother said, and worry less. Worries and fear can kill a man as easily as a gun.’

Asa changed subjects rapidly.

‘Does the Jewish faith allows drinking alcohol, distilling and distributing alcohol? Alcohol can lead to drunkenness and worse!’ Antanas wondered after a pause of silence.

‘The Islam forbids drinking alcohol. The Catholics and Lutheran and Calvinist Churches are not keen on it. We, Jews, are allowed wine and brandy. Our religion is much older than Islam

and Christianity. Abstaining from wine, our rabbis tell, would mean rejecting one of God's finest gifts. How right they are! I have yet to meet the rabbi who doesn't like his occasional glass of wine or vodka. Our religion does not encourage abstinence from wine. Nor does it encourage vegetarianism and celibacy. We have no orders of monks, no military orders of monks, no abbeys and convents. Suicide is a sacrilege in the same sense. We are not anymore allowed slavery. We feel wise men and wise women should not withhold their opinions from the community. Therefore, Jews talk much. I digress now, but I continue. We are trained to discuss rationally, to negotiate, to plead, to beg even, maybe also to protest till the end, never to fight. Often, I agree, we talk and discuss too much. We consider matters from every corner. That gift is the basis of our contradictions in speech, of our critical mindset, and of our rationality. It is one of our better qualities, I would say. The non-Jews envy us our rational thinking. It is in adversity, however, that the Jews thrive, and find or win their greatest glory.'

Asa drove his horse on, for evening was falling. Antanas saw no houses as far as he could see. Antanas wondered where Asa was heading to. During the hours they had advanced that afternoon, he had only seen the same monotonous kind of landscape. This was flat land of sandy soil, on which grew low trees and bushes, and grasses, as far as the eye could see. Here and there, vast cultivated fields of wheat, barley and rye opened in the woods. The fields lay of vast measures, signs people lived not far from where Asa and Antanas rode in the dried paths. The narrow road winded lower than the fields. Antanas reflected these paths would surely be impassable in winter, when they got filled with one or two man-heights of snow. Surely, Asa must use a sleigh to come to here in winter. Sleighs would have to be used, or the peasants would have to hibernate like bears. Was this bear-country? Antanas looked anxiously sideways and behind.

Antanas should have looked forwards. Four men on foot emerged in front of Asa's and Antanas's carriage. They walked as a tight group, but then they split, two men walking on each side of the road, as if to avoid the carriage. Their eyes seemed void of expression, yet they watched eagerly every movement of the men sitting on the bench of the carriage. 'Bandits,' Asa grumbled between his teeth. 'We may be attacked. Grab your revolver and cock it. Hold your sword close.'

Asa held the reins in one hand. He too, Antanas saw, grabbed for his revolver from under his seat and cocked it out of sight of the walking men. These were dressed like ordinary Ruthenian *muzhiks*, peasants. They wore large hats drawn over their foreheads and long, simple overcoats of brown, oiled linen. Why overcoats on this warm day? They might have hidden any weapon under their wide, sleeveless coats, Antanas thought. The advancing men could not have expected travellers on this path.

One look at the first man walking on the left had been enough to notice they went in a to them familiar mode of ambush. Antanas kept his silence. His heart beat louder and louder. One hand lay on his revolver, hidden under his right leg. His left hand drew his military sword closer. The heft lay nearer to his right hand. Antanas could shoot, unsheathe his sword and slash out in an instant. If necessary, he could hit with the silver scabbard to the other side. His military training tensed his muscles.

Asa clicked his horse on with a sharp sound of his tongue and mouth. The animal was nervous, too. It continued to draw the cart on with the same, dull movement, at ease, and head down of the fatigue of the end of the day. The horse longed for a stable and food.

Asa sat left on the bench, Antanas on the right. When the first man on the left passed Asa, the man touched his hat with a finger and looked at Asa, holding his face somewhat higher than before. Asa saw a black-bearded face in which shone fiery, dark eyes. Asa nodded back. The man walked on.

Asa thought nothing might happen after all. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes on the approaching men. When the man walked at one step behind Asa, he suddenly turned very fast and grabbed the board of the carriage, putting one foot on the wood that permitted the driver of the carriage to get in the cart. Asa had expected something like that. He had not stopped watching the men on his left. He placed his handgun to between the hoodlum's eyes. 'One gesture further and you're dead,' he shouted.

The second man on Asa's side had taken hold of the reins. He heard what Asa said. In the meantime, Antanas also had his revolver pointed at the first man on the right. The second man on the left froze for an instant.

'You can try and be dead, or run,' Asa continued coolly to the man he held under shot. 'Just give me an occasion to shoot. I would like that!'

The man cursed and hesitated. Asa brought down his whip on the second man's face. He did not have to look for that. He kept his eyes on the first man. The second bandit cried out in pain.

A shot sounded. Antanas had had less patience. On Antanas's side, the front bandit slumped down. A hole in his shoulder turned red. The second man there leapt. Antanas had already dropped his revolver. He hit the man fiercely in the face with the heft of his unsheathed sword. The man cried out. His face exploded in blood. Antanas pushed his sword completely out of the carriage. He pushed it to the second man's throat.

Asa repeated on his side, 'run! Run! Otherwise, I'll shoot and kill. I have no pity for you scum!'

The men lost their nerves and their energy. Their trick had not worked, this time. The second man on the left still had the reins of the horse in his hands.

'Let go of the reins,' Asa commanded loudly.

He had thrown down the whip into the carriage. He held a second revolver, a large, old, ugly weapon, directed at the man.

Asa held the revolver crosswise from under his right arm. He aimed the revolver at the second man on his side. Under threat from the ugly weapon, the man dropped the reins. Still, he leapt and charged at Asa, despite the heavy revolver pointing at him.

Asa pulled the trigger. A bullet hit the man in the chest. He fell. The first man used Asa's movement as a temporary inattention to grab at the carriage and at the revolver still pointed at him. He diverted the handgun with a strong sweep of his arm and hand. Asa let the revolver go down, brought it lower, and then again close to the man's side. He pulled the trigger of the gun. The blast threw the man from the carriage, to the ground. Asa had shot him in the side. Blood erupted.

Asa took his whip. He drew on the reins. The whip came down on the back of the horse. The carriage jumped forward. The horse began to run fast by a tuck on the reins. The animal was as if suddenly torn out of its stupor. It ran on a galop. In but a few seconds, the carriage drew several steps on, and away from the bandits. Asa brought his whip down once more. The horse ran faster. The carriage turned around the bend in the road. It fled.

The path ran straight after the bend. Asa looked around. The four bandits were nowhere to be seen. Asa guessed the men were licking their wounds. They must now have lain in the dust of the deep road and be cursing for the lost occasion to rob the unknown travellers. Asa looked forward again. He slightly urged the horse on at the same speed. A little farther, he eased the horse. He let the animal galop and draw the carriage on at a slower pace. He slowed further. The horse could not run on this way for long, and Asa didn't risk stopping. He let the horse simply step. Only then he turned and looked at Antanas.

Antanas had been thrown backwards during the sudden leap of the horse and carriage. He was holding on to the bench, now, to the side planks. He had dropped his sword and held again on to his revolver.

Antanas grinned, 'I think we shall not see those men again soon. I shot one in the shoulder. That will lame him for a few days. The other lost a few teeth. It will not make him more handsome.'

Asa smiled and nodded. He hoped the man he had shot would merely be wounded. A dead man could mean complications, an investigation by the local police, questions, and tough answers to be provided. Asa and Antanas would have to confront a package of nasty lies. They had wounded men. The bandits might die of the wounds, though not so soon. They would have to lie in bed for days, develop gangrene or not. The rot might ultimately kill them, slowly but surely.

Asa stopped the carriage.

'We clean our guns and reload,' Asa said to Antanas. 'better not to remain unprepared!' His hands trembled.

Antanas nodded to Asa. He began to blow the burnt powder out of his revolver. Asa saw it was a fine, elegant piece. Antanas placed another bullet in the chamber.

'That will do,' Antanas affirmed. 'I'll clean it better later on. Let's get out of here!'

Asa had been doing much the same with his handguns. He pulled the reins and gave a slight touch of the whip on the horse. They rode on. The bandits never caught up with them, if they had been capable of doing so.

Asa smiled, 'good riddance!'

Asa and Antanas felt out of reach. They rode on at a slow pace for about one hour. The road turned several times. Asa knew this road and land.

The sun had disappeared behind them. Then, suddenly, Antanas saw the first houses of a village or of a small town Asa had been heading to. They had reached safety.

Asa pointed to the far, relieved, indicating, 'Kozinovo!'

They had reached their destination of the day. Antanas didn't know whether he was still in the governorate of Vilnius, in the governate of Grodno, or in that of Minsk. He didn't really

care. A sudden elation made him cry out a shout of victory. He smiled with a sigh of relief. He shifted on the bench, pushed his sword back in the scabbard, the revolver again under his seat.

‘Blessed be God,’ Antanas sighed once more.

Asa smiled. He too felt the joy of release of tension in the expectance of shelter, the joy of safety, food and a drink. His throat felt completely dry.

Antanas had no idea where Kozinovo, actually Old Kozinovo, was situated. He guessed he was somewhere between Vilnius and Minsk, rather more to the south.

They did not drive directly into the village. The path broadened to a road, though still merely an earthen way between the fields and meadows. The forest opened wider. Asa directed the carriage to a large building that stood isolated at a little distance from the gathering of houses. Antanas recognised the building as a complex forming a tavern. It stood at a crossroads leading to Kozinovo. Asa brought the carriage to under an open, huge, wooden barn. The structure looked imposing. It could shelter several large carriages. The barn had no façade on one side, so one rode directly into the barn from the road.

Immediately, a young man appeared from nowhere. He greeted Asa respectfully, grabbed the horse reins and led the animal to a little farther inside. The youth began to disentangle the leather straps that held the horse. He liberated the animal from the carriage and led it to a place on the other side of the stable. He threw quite a lot of hay to the horse and brought a pail of water. The horse seemed happy to be thus tended to. It started to snivel and then eat from the hay. Several more horses stood there, in a space separated from the rest of the stable. The young man came back to Asa and Antanas. Asa gave him a few coins, for which he thanked profusely. He seemed to know Asa.

The youth grinned.

He said, ‘my father is in the hall. We expect many guests this evening! We still have rooms available, though.’

Asa smiled and nodded. The tavern was his. He leased the place, but had restored and built much to it. He leased the rights to hold a distillery and a tavern here from the Podolski noblemen. The tavern-keeper was a Jew, a very pious and therefore reliable Jew.

Asa and Antanas stepped down from the carriage, assembling their travel bags. The entry to the tavern lay on the other side of a courtyard, around which Antanas now noticed several more buildings. The walls of the tavern were whitewashed and clean. Two Greek columns on each side of the entrance gate supported a large, covered porch. Antanas had seen nothing but low hovels on the way, covered with thatched roofs. The columns formed an odd example of sophistication in the countryside. On the other side of the building ran a high, long balcony. This, no doubt, was the side where the bedrooms waited for customers. A staircase ran down the wall on the far edge. A ladder was placed against the balcony. Two men were placing new bushels of reed on the roof. Asa pushed Antanas through the door. Antanas stepped inside and halted for a moment.

Antanas was amazed. He stood in a far greater hall than he would have imagined for a common tavern in a small village. The hall looked huge to him, wide and long, larger than any tavern hall he had been in so far. The ceiling rose also higher than he would have

believed. Heavy wooden beams supported the roof in a beautiful structure. Antanas counted more than a dozen round and rectangular tables, nearer to the door than to the other side. Chairs and benches stood around the tables. At the far end of the hall ran a counter, almost from one end of the shorter wall to the other. Behind the counter, arms wide open and hands palms down resting on the surface, stood a Jewish man.

The tavern-keeper wore a large *yarmulke*, the Jewish cap, on black, straggly hair. His beard was full, and dark. He wore long earlocks. He was dressed in the long, traditional black caftan coat. The coat lay open on his belly, so that a long white prayer shawl, his *tallis*, showed. He shouted a welcome to Asa from the other end. His voice reverberated well through the large room.

The man laughed, ‘Asa Vincevicius! What fine wind blew you to us, my friend? You are our first guests of the evening!’

Asa shouted back, advancing to him, ‘serve us a cool beer first, Moshka. Then vodka. Our throats are dry as pepper. Please have two rooms readied for me and my friend, Antanas.’ Moshka grinned, took three large glasses from under the counter and poured beer from out of a huge vase.

Asa and Antanas walked slowly to the counter. Antanas kept looking around, at the windows, and at the intricate structure of beams. Moshka filled the glasses until they were topped with a thin layer of white foam. The three of them cheered and drank. They shared no further niceties. They drank, no words exchanged at first. Moshka noticed how eagerly the men on the other side of the counter swallowed the beer.

Moshka smiled, saying, ‘I suppose you shall want two of our finest rooms?’

‘Yes, please, Moshka,’ Asa continued. ‘You don’t know yet Antanas Svirskevicius. He is a steward for the Vriskis. He accompanies me. Yes, give us your cleanest rooms.’

Moshka turned to a maid who had pushed her head to peek from behind another door leading to a room or rooms behind the counter. He shouted to her to prepare the rooms of which he gave her the numbers. He handed the keys to her. Antanas was a little surprised the rooms in this tavern had actually real locks. He drank on, letting his eyes dwell on Moshka.

‘What is the news of the world of Vilnius?’ the Jewish tavern-keeper asked.

Asa began a lengthy conversation about the situation of Poland, Lithuania and Russia.

Moshka listened.

After a while, Asa started to tell about their attack by road bandits. Moshka remarked he thought he knew the men. The same group had wreaked some havoc among his guests two evenings ago. With the help of the village dwellers, he had worked the men out. They had shouted threats to him and to the village, but they had disappeared on the road to Minsk. They must have turned back. Moshka told they had shown an old handgun. This had resulted in the man leaving in a hurry with a broken wrist!

Asa indeed had seen the last man wore a dirty bandage around his right hand. That man had not much engaged in the fight.

‘Same gang,’ Asa added to Moshka’s tale. ‘We sent them off with holes in their bodies. They lived when we left them, but one or two may die of gangrene.’

Moshka merely nodded. He didn’t mention the police, and neither did Asa. Conflicts were handled without the involvement of the police in these parts of Ruthenia!

Asa asked for something to eat. Moshka pointed to one of the smaller, round tables closer to the counter. They sat.

Asa and Antanas hadn't asked for what Moshka might offer them. Another maid brought them plates, cutlery, and two more beers. Moshka pointed to his heart. The beers were on him.

The hall darkened. The sun set. Moshka lighted the candles in two huge seven-branched candelabras that hung on the ceiling. He lowered the candelabras with a thick rope. He also lighted single-branched chandeliers on the walls. Other guests pushed open the door. Vodka was poured.

A servant girl brought them to eat. They got stewed veal, cooked and re-cooked for several days, with a pottage of barley, rice and millet. The veal floated in a sour paste, the *borsht*. They got thick slices of black bread, tasting as sour as the *borsht*. With the bread, the maid brought them pickled cucumbers, fermented with salt and heightened in taste by fennel. A bottle of vodka was placed without much further ado next to two small glasses.

Antanas ate little. He could not really get accustomed to the heavy food of the countryside. He nevertheless devoured the bread and some of the pickles, dipped a little meat out of the stew, but refused to touch the *borsht*. He had received too much of that horrible soup the previous days, with or without the stewed cabbages. He did try a few spoons from the legume stew of chickpeas and carrots in animal fat that was brought in sometime later.

Asa had been watching Antanas amusedly.

He smiled, 'you can't get used to the stews of our Ruthenian villages, don't you, Antanas? Rough stuff for you?'

Asa noticed Antanas drawing a nasty face at the stews. Antanas dodged the question.

'I have seen more and more Jews dressed like the bartender lately,' Antanas told Asa, keeping his eyes on the man. 'Why are there so many more pious Jews in the countryside than in Vilnius? He looks an entirely different kind of Jew to me! Some of the families coming into this tavern are similarly dressed, very austere, very Jewish. Are they Jews of another kind than you, or just Jews of the older generation?'

'They are different,' Asa answered. 'This is deep Hasidim country. Hasidim are very observant Jews, strictly religious. The Hasidim are a Jewish sect, men from a spiritual revival movement founded in these parts of the land, though the movement is more dominant a little further south. They keep to their own. They are very reliable men, though a little strange. The Hasidism movement was founded by Israel ben Eliezer in the early 1700's. Hasidism means piety. We, traditional rabbinic Jews, do not think much about the true nature of God, of Adonai, as the essence of God cannot be apprehended.

The Hasidic Jews, on the contrary, have given much thought to the nature of God. They believe in reaching God by mysticism and they believe in the immanence of God in the universe. They observe Jewish law to the letter. They apply an ascetic Judaism, and they reject the teachings of the rabbinic scholars who study the Talmud and discover ever new views in the laws. I think their belief in the immanence of God was derived from Jewish mysticism and from the Kabbalah writings of Luria. Maybe, unknowingly perhaps, they may

have been influenced by the writings of Baruch de Spinoza, though that reference is far-fetched.

Now, since God is immanent in the Creation, the Hasidim search for contact or communion with God! One can reach this state, they claim, by negating all worldly concerns, which is difficult to accomplish. The state of communion with the Creator is so difficult to obtain that the Hasidim believe only very saintly men can get to that point. Only the men called the *Tzaddiks*, the ‘Righteous Ones’, can reach this state.

The Hasidic Jews therefore organise themselves around such *Tzaddiks*, and they form his court. The *Tzaddiks*, the leaders of Hasidism, reach ecstasy and spiritual communion with God. Or so the Hasidim believe! The *Tzaddik* can intervene with God for the common Hasidim.

With time, only a *Tzaddik*’s son could become another *Tzaddik*. The inherited courts developed. The *Tzaddik* families grew very rich from the donations given to them by the people who came to consult them on all sorts of matters, from love affairs to business endeavours. Their courts developed into grand affairs! Adherents of Hasidism hand over a small piece of paper, a note, to the *Tzaddik*. On the notes, they write their petition. The note is called a *kvitel* in Yiddish. They add a small sum of money for the *Tzaddik* to provide an answer. These gifts are the basis of the wealth of the *Tzaddik* courts.

There are indeed some differences in dress for the Hasidic Jews as compared to us, rabbinic Jews. Outside, they usually wear the *shtrimmel*, the flat, black, fur-trimmed hat that is characteristic of the Hasidic Jews. The Hasidim button their clothes right over left. They wear especially long sidelocks called *peyes*, and long beards. At some point, they decided to wear exclusively the garb of the Ruthenian peasants of old, especially the long, black coats. Of course, most Jews will wear those coats now. Most of the Hasidic groups discourage shaving off beards. Married women wear wigs or scarfs to hide their hair. In fact, each Hasidic court has its unique customs, style of prayers and also of clothing.’

Asa paused, drank, and continued.

‘One of the older Hasidic sects is the group of Chabad-Lubavitch. The bartender and manager of his tavern is a Lubavitcher Hasidic Jew. He is a nice man, strict, peaceful, but with its inherent mysticism and strange ideas about the nature of God, struck against traditional rabbinism.

The founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer was called the ‘Baal Shem tov’, the ‘Master of the Good Name’. Abbreviated, that gives the Besht. He was born in Moldavia. In his later years, he moved to Podolia, to Medzhybrizh. The Besht had also been a tavern-keeper at one time. Some claimed him to have been a miracle-worker, so his reputation soared. Many believed what he proposed for the nature of God. His most prominent follower was the rabbi Dov Ber the Maggid, or the preacher. More than the Besht, Dov Ber elaborated on the Besht’s rather vague ideas. He formed the actual movement. The belief moved north to Lithuania, mostly by the work of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, not far from here.

The Hasidic movement, with its inherent mysticism and strange ideas about the nature of God, hit against traditional, rational Rabbinism. The opponents to Hasidism came to be called the *Misnagdim*.

In my opinion, Hasidism pushes the Jews back in time, into blind faith, into mystical contemplation, into the irrational thinking of the Kabbalah, into the adoration of the holy men

called the *Tzaddiks*, whereas adoration should be limited to God. Hasidism also stopped social reform.

The rabbis of Lithuania gathered at a fair. They demanded penalties against the Hasidim. Especially Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman of Vilnius objected to the mysticism as opposed to rational study of the Talmud, the oral law of Judaism. In 1772, he and the community of Vilnius launched a campaign directed against the sect. In 1777, an anathema was placed on the Hasidim of Vilna, a *herem*. Rabbi Elijah excommunicated the Hasidim again in 1781. In 1796, he declared Hasidic Jews were heretics from Judaism, and he denounced the complex constructions of faith of the Hasidim. In the meantime, Rabbi Elijah had been called the *Gaon* or Holy Rabbi of Vilnius, in Hebrew the '*ha-gaon he chasid mi-Vilna*', the pious genius of Vilna. Vilnius became the centre of traditional Rabbinism. It was called the 'Jerusalem of the North'. The street our family lives in is called 'Gaono' in his name.

You will find few Hasidic Jews in Vilna, as the Hasidic dynasties or courts are banned from our community. In September of 1796, Rabbi Elijah, the *Gaon*, told the Hasidim violated Jewish Law and had broken with the teachings of true Judaism. He called the Jews to react against Hasidism. The *Gaon* directed his anger against Schneur Zalman.

The *Gaon* of Vilna died in 1797. The Hasidim community organised a drinking bout during the funeral! The Rabbinic community, the Vilna *Kahal*, therefore protested against Hasidism at the Prosecutor-General of St Petersburg. Zalman, the then general head of the sect, was imprisoned in Vilna with 22 of his accomplices. At the end of 1798 though, the Russians sent Zalman home and they set all other prisoners free. The *Kahal* elders then of course came under attack by the Hasidim. Denunciations resulted on both sides. When Emperor Alexander I came to the throne, the trials ended and an uneasy peace set in between the Hasidim and the Rabbinist Jews.

Something very good too came out of the strife. The *Gaon*'s student Rabbi Chaim Volozhin founded the first true *yeshivah* in his home town, Volozhin in White Russia. This *yeshivah* revolutionised the Torah study.

Nevertheless, the Hasidic sects or courts grew and developed. Courts are becoming more and more hereditary now, forming real dynasties.

The Jewish Enlightenment, with as exponent the writings and sayings of Moses Mendelssohn, disliked Hasidism as a mystical, anti-rational phenomenon. Nevertheless, some Hasidic courts encourage the study of the Torah and the Talmud. If you would place a name on the kind of Jews I and my family are, you might call us *Maskilim*, or enlightened Jews, and definitely *Misnagdim*, though I don't despise true Hasidim. I just don't believe in their ideas on God. I get on well enough with Moshka, and he with me.'

'Does the sect still thrive?' Antanas wanted to know.

'Oh, they do well enough', Asa replied. 'There must be over a hundred courts in Poland and Lithuania and Ruthenia by now. The *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, appeals much more to me and to the Vincevicius.'

'I read texts of Moses Mendelssohn,' Antanas commented. 'I liked what he wrote. His German feeling of Judaism is very different from the eastern way of thinking.'

‘True,’ Asa commented, ‘though not so far from the way of thinking of most Ashkenazy Jews.’

Asa ended, ‘the Hasidic Jews are very observant Jews. They remain Jews. Just like the Protestants, the Lutherans and Calvinists are Christians. There are great differences, of course. Cannot also a mystic strike be discerned in some of the Catholic monk orders?’ Antanas didn’t answer. He did not feel at ease discussing religious matters. His own feelings and convictions were too far from any formal religion. He rather agreed with Asa. He recalled from experience talking about religion – or about politics – quickly led to heated discussions, to hatred and to enmity. He desired no controversy with his friend Asa Vincevicius, whom he respected and liked.

‘This bread tastes good,’ Antanas remarked, bringing Asa’s attention to another subject.

‘What is it baked off?’

‘Who knows?’ chuckled Asa. ‘Rye most probably, potatoes maybe. I am not sure Moshka serves my vodka all day round. We’ll visit the distillery tomorrow. It is a large one. I send vodka from here to the north and to the south. The tavern-keeper, Moshka, helps me in that.’ ‘He is as well tavern-keeper as trader,’ Antanas smiled. ‘What Jew does not have more than one occupation?’

‘Not only that,’ Asa replied rather coolly. ‘This tavern is also the local post-office. It rents out rooms. It has a shop. Travellers can buy anything they forgot for the journey here. The tavern has stables. For the villagers, Moshka sells cheese, beans and peas and carrots and cabbages. We installed a smithy close by, so Moshka can provide for the repair of broken wheels. He sells salt, tobacco, matches, needles and thread, ribbons and female clothing items. I suspect he also provides for the occasional lusty girl or woman to unfulfilled men. Moshka lends out money, though in small quantities. He demands a very high interest. A tavern like is a gold mine in more than a few respects.’

Antanas had suspected as much. So far, he had accompanied Asa to learn how matters stood with the Jews. Asa had told him but little about the full trade of the taverns. He appreciated the confidence. Maybe the fight on the road had diminished Asa’s reserve, maybe the fatigue of the long day. Nothing could replace the intimacy of comrades-in-arms!

‘One of my largest distilleries is housed in a building behind the tavern,’ Asa continued explaining. ‘I brew vodka from rye, and also much from potatoes. I brought modern equipment to this place. I have Pistorius stills here, invented in Germany merely ten years or so ago, by Johann Pistorius, a merchant and inventor who studied in Berlin. A Pistorius consists of two connected pot stills and a rectifier. It distils up to 60% and even 80% of alcohol in one movement. The Pistorius distils 80% alcohol in just one distillation!

I like pot stills a lot more than column stills. The vodka is more flavourful. We distil vodkas more and more from potatoes with the Pistorius stills. We flavour our vodkas with herbs, with fruit, and so on. We also put honey and peppers in our vodka. We produce the Polish honey vodka! And we even distil the famous *slivovitz*, a plum brandy, which is very much appraised in Poland, too. I sell my vodka in Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia. The potato vodkas go primarily to Russia and the Ukraine. We transform large quantities of rye and of potatoes.

Nobody suspects an important distillery in such a quiet small village as this. I pay taxes and bribes for everybody, Poles and Russian officials, to close eyes. Profits remain modest on the

tavern, high on the distillery, very high on the selling of the various specialty brandy, high on the food, low on the other products of the tavern.’

Asa would have liked to tell some more about his trade. The drinks helping, he felt in a generous, open mood tonight. Never in his life had he felt the ease to tell about what he did. He did wonder whether he could have confidence in Antanas. He decided he could, but bit on his tongue and thought it better not to tell all his secrets to anybody, even not to Antanas.

Then, brusquely, the large doors of the tavern were pushed wide open. A large crowd entered the hall. The people, Jews as well as Christians, were led by a group of three musicians. A girl followed, dressed in white shirts with broad sleeves and a white skirt, wearing a cloud of very many coloured ribbons, high boots and an elaborate hairdress. She danced about in the Russian way, sometimes in front, sometimes around the men and women of the group. The men and women were mostly dressed in black coats like the musicians, but many joyous colours showed on the women behind their large coats.

Moshka had sent his musicians to gather the people in the village, to call them to the tavern. The *muzhiks*, the peasants of Ruthenia, poured in.

The group of musicians consisted merely of three men, among whom three fiddlers and a man who played a very old, small harmonica. They played loudly and merrily as they entered the hall, drawing smiles on all faces of the men and women who were already sitting in the tavern. The girl danced, showed her tambourine above her head, and sang with a pleasant voice.

Asa and Antanas smiled at each other. They beat the rhythm with their feet and stayed. They did not yet feel like going to sleep. The nights were long in Ruthenia! The bedbugs did not attract them either.

When Asa returned home from his travels, he was generally full of bugs in his clothes and on his body. Leah never allowed him immediately inside! He had to stay in the stables first, in quarantine. He had to strip naked and had to wash, first in cold water, then in very hot, soapy water. When he protested, Leah showed him in the dirty water the layer of insects that had come off him. Asa had to wash his hair three times, too. Leah would inspect his body afterwards, to sometimes only declare herself satisfied after a third bath. She gave him new clothes to put on before letting him go inside to say hello to the children and to lie down in her bed. The clothes he had worn on his journey, in the taverns, she washed several times in hot water, and ironed them. The heat from the iron killed the very last tiny insects and their eggs.

The small orchestra played happy tunes. The dancing girl fluttered around in the hall. She sang old songs of yearning love and bad deceit. She drew tears. She caressed old men under the chin and came to sit on the laps of younger, red-cheeked lads. These young men looked strong, healthy, well-fed and greedy lads. They drank vodka by the bottles. Their eyes grew unfocused and weary.

Moshka and a maid served and counted glasses. When they returned to the counter, they noted who had consumed how many drinks. More peasants entered, all boisterous men. Occasionally better-dressed families also came in and found a seat at the tables. Women accompanied the men. The noise of voices and songs sounded very loudly in the hall. The

fiddlers drew their bows ever more frantically. Evening and night fell. Asa noticed how several young *muzhiks* launched eyes flickering with lust to the girls. They also seemed to stagger from drunkenness. Antanas was amazed at the quantities of vodka that vanished on such an evening. He said so to Asa.

The fiddlers followed the dancing girl with their music. She, rather than they, determined the rhythm and chose the songs. One of the fiddlers didn't seem to appreciate the girl wandering from knee to knee among the young peasants. When one young, quite handsome lad, to whom the girl had flocked more than once, grabbed the girl for the fifth time or so, placed one hand affectionally on her bottom and his other hand sliding upwards to her bosom, the fiddler jumped up. He slapped the youth on the head with his violin bow. He ordered the girl nearer to him, on the space of the hall where she could dance freely. The dancing girl whirled around a few times, dropped her tambourine, and equally flushed with alcohol, moved slowly back to where the young peasant sat. She seemed to like the handsome lad quite well. The fiddler drew the girl away for the second time. He began to scorn her, making angry eyes, wide gestures and a threatening finger at her. Everybody grasped the meaning of, 'stay away from that young man!'

The girl pouted. The young peasant looked surprised. The girl moved to him again.

'Oh, oh, oh,' Antanas whispered to Asa.

He was right. The fiddler leapt at the young man and thumped from sideways with an enormous fist in the face of the youth. The blow was powerful. Yet, the lad didn't move a bit at first. Antanas wasn't sure he had felt anything. The boy shook his square head as if a fly had bitten him. He felt at his mouth, to where the fiddler had reached him, and he grinned. He too stood up. He stepped closer to the fiddler and boxed the man with a mighty blow right on the nose. Blood erupted. Asa heard bone crack. The fiddler was thrown backwards to the floor, and he stayed there, stunned. Asa could predict what followed.

In an instant, the fiddler sank to the ground, numbed by the youth's heavy blow. Then, the two other musicians were on the youth and started beating at him with their closed fists. That made the young peasant's friends jump to his assistance.

Chairs fell. Benches overturned. Women shrieked. Fists flew, heads knocked, feet stamped, foreheads thrust. Tables toppled. Glasses and bottles fell to the floor and broke, spilling alcohol around. The musicians too had friends in the hall. These sprang into the *mêlée*. The hall ended in a chaos of fighting men. The women ran to the walls for some protection. An enterprising woman swung an empty bottle around until it cracked at the head of a man. No daggers were drawn, no pistols fired.

A dogged fight ensued. In no time, everybody in the hall fought everybody. Who was friend or enemy? A sturdy man tried to hit Asa. Asa had never seen this man, and he had no intention to let himself be hit by a dirty, mighty fist. He noticed the man was drunk and probably didn't see too clearly anymore. Asa kicked out with a foot and he chopped with his boots the man's legs from under him. The man doubled. He fell down head first on the earthen floor. He wouldn't bother with Asa for some time.

Asa still stood firmly on his legs. That sight didn't please a couple of the man's companions. They moved in on Asa, fists first. Antanas intervened in true boxing style English way. He

downed one man with a couple of straight blows and got engaged in a fight with a third man. Another man hit Asa in the side. Asa slashed out with his fist.

The tavern turned into a battling pandemonium of fighting men and shrieking women. The children fled into corners to seek asylum. The fight lasted and became general. Hardly one man was not fighting another. Fists hacked around.

Asa felt a woman on his back, grabbing his arms. A man, maybe her husband, sprang on him. Asa kicked with his right leg a bench into the man's legs. The man toppled. He got faster to his feet than Asa could react. The *muzhik* punched his raw, calloused fists in Asa's face. Asa staggered backwards. He bumped into Antanas, who was holding off another peasant. Asa could liberate his right arm and his fist flung his assailant a decent uppercut under his chin. Another man punched Asa in the face.

Asa saw not anymore all the men in front of him quite clearly. The peasant husband honed on to him once more. The shrieking woman still hung on his back. Asa appreciated so much love of a woman for her man, but the fact didn't make his bill. He tried to flung her off him.

'The woman scratches my back open,' Asa managed to tell Antanas. 'I shall have to give accounts to Leah about what happened.'

'And I to Sarah,' Antanas cried out next to Asa.

They stood back to back, the woman between them. Asa was so surprised at what he thought he had heard, he held in for a second. He turned in amazement to Antanas, flinging the woman onto a bench.

That instant lasted long enough for a man in front of him to deliver him a killing blow. The arm came from far with amazing speed and power. The world went black to Asa's eyes, and he fell down, onto a bench and from there, to the ground.

A few moments later, though Asa never knew for how long he had lost conscience, he opened one eye and then a second. Antanas stood over him, grinning, and slapping him gently around the ears.

'Ah, there you are,' Antanas smiled. 'I thought you were gone. Can you see my finger?'

Antanas waved a dirty finger before Asa's eyes.

'Of course, I can see your damned finger,' Asa shouted. 'What happened?'

'You went out for a while,' Antanas replied. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm fine,' Asa grumbled.

He had been feeling at his chin and cheeks and nose. His hand came off with no blood.

Everything was still in place.

'What is going on?'

'The fight is over,' Antanas smiled. 'Your Moshka has a good voice and good ideas. He began to shout drinks were on the house at the counter. There followed a general howling, and the fight just stopped. A fiddler was thrown out, the dancing girl vanished. Have a drink!'

Antanas held a glass of vodka to Asa. Asa gulped the burning liquid down. His teeth ached. His chin hurt. His chin was still in the right place, though, and in one piece.

Antanas helped Asa on his feet. He drew the round table and two toppled chairs to them. He got hold of two glasses at the counter and returned to sit next to Asa. The small orchestra assembled back in its corner. It brought now some melancholic, smooth songs. The dancing

girl too returned, as if nothing had ever happened. One of her cheeks was coloured bright red. She sipped from a flavoured vodka and sang in a lower voice. Everywhere in the hall, people drew tables right and chairs and benches. No great harm had been done. They arrived with new glasses in their hands.

Asa and Antanas remained for another hour after the brawl. The room stayed quieter than before.

‘Sometimes, I see no fight at all on my tours,’ Asa reflected. ‘Sometimes I am witness to two brawls. I never was in two fights in one day, before! This is a special day. We have to stay here for some time. Luckily, Leah will not see me in this state.’

Antanas nodded. He knew the feeling. Asa didn’t ask about Sarah.

When people began to leave the tavern, Asa went up to Moshka and asked what damage had been done.

‘Nothing of substance,’ Moshka shook his head. ‘I know of a drunken brawl every few weeks. I know how to end them.’

Asa grinned.

Asa and Antanas went out of the tavern, walking arm in arm to the other end on the side. They tried to climb the stairs, which took them some time, before they opened the doors to their rooms. They flung themselves all clothed on the bed and snored almost immediately. They slept to a good many hours in the morning.

It was close to noon when Asa and Antanas got together and ventured back into the tavern hall. The space had been cleaned. Nobody could have guessed an enactment of a great, epic battle had been performed the night before. The floor had been scrubbed. New and bristling straw had been thinly thrown on the ground, debris of glass had been swept away. Moshka already throned, fresh as an eel, behind his counter.

Asa and Antanas strumped to a table. Moshka asked what the gentlemen would have, breakfast or lunch. He grinned. Asa looked at him from out of one eye, the other one refusing to open that day. Asa and Antanas nodded to a very light breakfast of bread, cheese, boiled eggs and tea. No early vodka! There was nothing better to end a late drunkenness than an early vodka, protested Moshka, but neither Asa nor Antanas could stand hearing of liquor this day. Asa was to inspect his distillery. Antanas groaned at the mere thought of having to sniff the odours of vodka being distilled.

It was way past noon, when they stood at the entry gate of the factory. Antanas had seen distilleries before. He expected not much new. The distillery in front of him consisted of three one-floored halls, two small ones and a middle, long one.

In the building on their right, the one they entered first, the rye and potatoes were being prepared for fermentation. Part of the hall served as a warehouse for the basic ingredients. Asa and Antanas met the master distiller here and the general manager, both very much Hasidic Jews. The distiller explained mainly to Antanas how his vodka still used quite large quantities of grain, of rye, in the process even of distilling from potatoes. The starch in the potatoes had to be transformed to sugar, which could be accomplished by the grain. The grain had to be milled. Then, the potatoes and grain were boiled together in water. When the result

cooled, fermentation, after adding yeasts, could start. The final broth was sent to the second building.

The master distiller brought them to the distillery proper, the second hall. Here, Antanas had a surprise. This higher and larger hall, was kept particularly clean, on explicit orders of Asa. This hall too had two distinctly separate parts, arranged along the length of the space. Against the leftmost long wall stood the pot stills.

‘I don’t like too much column stills,’ Asa declared, the master distiller nodding. ‘Column stills destroy much of the flavour in the liquor. All the water in the vapours is stopped by the column before they reach the condenser. I surmise this water contains some of the oils that bring flavour to the alcohol. The column produces a purer, but less flavourful liquor. The Pistorius stills are two interconnected pot stills. They deliver a beverage with high alcohol content too, but they retain a fine taste. With pots, you have to distil several times. The Pistorius does this in one pass.’

Asa told with pride very few distillers in these regions used Pistorius stills. Along the wall stood one such still next to the other. People were working at them, Jews and Christians together.

The other, long half of the hall was used to bring in the stuff that was the basis for the distillation processes. Wooden barrels with the finished vodka were being brought to the third building. Essentially, this part of the hall was dedicated to movement of men, tools, and barrels. At least twenty men were working in this part of the distillery. The process ended by the flavouring phase of the vodka. This was done on larger quantities of the liquor than Antanas had seen in other distilleries.

‘Particularly the women like the flavoured vodka,’ Asa explained. ‘It would be stupid not to address properly half of the potential consumers. We add peppers, cinnamon, fruit and herb extracts, even Saint John’s wort, bison grass extracts, and other.’

Barrels of vodka were then brought in carts to the third building, which turned out to be a warehouse, essentially. The barrels of liquor, small and large ones, were stored here. Antanas noticed how the distillers neatly stored the vodka according to age and flavours. In the last section of this space, the men poured the vodka into bottles, and they stored the bottles in the warehouse proper. Antanas understood now why the tavern had held such a large, open barn. The distillery also distributed the vodka. Transport was arranged by it. For that, it needed tens of horse-drawn carts and sleighs. Another large cart-barn stood behind the distillery. Antanas had not seen this building at first. This was the domain of the bookkeeper, who was also the warehouse manager! Asa spoke at length to the man, who had a rather large office near the gate.

‘There are three major functions of the greatest importance in a distillery,’ Asa claimed. ‘You need an excellent general manager, a bully actually, a man with a whip, to see to it nobody lingers aimlessly at work, steals or remains negligent at work. The manager must insist on cleanliness and order. I don’t like seeing dirty and chaotic workplaces.

Secondly, you need half a genius at least for the actual production of the vodka. The half genius must be the master distiller. Both of these men are Hasidic Jews, here, but I would as easily have hired Christians had I found such able men among them. I pay my men better

than my competitors, because the men I hire are the best and the most honest men in the environs.

My bookkeeper, the third man, is a Christian. I wanted my bookkeeper to be able to tell me by heart how much vodka we produced in a particular month, and whether we distil more liquor or not than the previous months. Truly, I don't care what faith my first men believe in. I just want them to like what they do, to do it well, with passion and honesty. Then, I pay them generously. They get devoted to me and I can trust them. Mutual trust is necessary, always appreciated, from both sides.'

Antanas could not but agree. He liked the positive attitude of Asa. Was it not like this that life should be? Why all the suspicious atmosphere he had seen in other enterprises? To what did it serve? It led to bad work, to grudges and to unhappy people. Unhappy people didn't work well. Errors or wrong results were not mentioned, deliveries got bungled, and the reputation of the factory suffered.

Asa continued, 'you may think me naïve to have faith in the good qualities and attitudes of people. By experience, I found out my particular way of regarding people, my emphasis on decency and respect, work more wonders than the whip and suspicious behaviour. I lose here and there, of course, but I win much more.'

Antanas nodded.

Both men left the factory at the end of the afternoon. They felt a little inebriated again from the alcohol fumes in the distillery. Asa had a headache and Antanas was not much better off. They needed rest.

They stayed two more days in the tavern. Antanas could talk to anybody and study the distillery, the tavern, the shops, and the other activities of the complex.

When it was time to return to Vilna, Antanas had formed himself a good idea of the factory. With the help of the bookkeeper, he had calculated on a piece of paper how much profit the Vincevicius Family could make from Asa's factory. He knew what percentage went to the noblemen with whom Asa worked. Even he was amazed at the figures.

Afterwards, Antanas insisted on leaving. He would have to go on a long journey of several weeks if not months to the Vriski noblemen in Poland and Prussia. His report was expected. He had to propose changes and advances in how the noblemen proceeded with their Jewish leaseholders. He told Asa he admired his friend's way of managing his leases. On his journey, Antanas had seen several less well managed taverns. Antanas thought himself very lucky to have met Asa. Had his flair or a protective angel brought him to this man, Asa?

What or who had driven him into the heart of the wonderful woman called Sarah Vincevicius? He had to think hard! He had several issues to solve with that woman, his love. On the travels, talking to Asa, his confidence in his own abilities had grown. He had seen how trade worked. He smiled. Had he grown up in the effort, in the end? His crucial question was who really to serve: the noblemen who treated him so distantly and with disdain, or himself and the Family Vincevicius, the family of his love and of his friend Asa?

## The Future of the Vincevicius Family. 1826

Asa Vincevicius and Antanas Svirskevicius journeyed together on yet more inspection tours in the lands of Vilna and northern Ruthenia, in White Russia. They visited the taverns, the distilleries and the lands leased by the Vincevicius Family. Gradually, Antanas also came to propose new ways of trading for Asa. His mind burgeoned with ideas. He never stopped devising new trade schemes. Antanas did more than think and dream. He succeeded in gaining for Asa opportunities of business with other members of the Polish szlachta than the Radziwills and the Vriskis. Asa, who might have thought in the first months of their travels that Antanas would prove nothing more but a dead weight on his leg, yet happy to have a companion on the long trip, become more surprised by the day of journeying with an interesting, resourceful partner after all. Antanas grew into being a useful friend to Asa. He made Asa think even more than in the past on his business ventures.

Asa grew suspicious of this. Why went Antanas so far out of his way to pleasing him? Asa could think of only one reason. The strange relationship that was developing between Antanas and Asa's sister Sarah seemed far more serious than Asa might have feared!

Asa and Antanas travelled at the beginning of the winter, of the harsh cold season in the plains. When the first snow began to fall and blizzards howled, Asa felt less keen on continuing his inspections. He longed for his warm house and the warmer arms of Leah. Antanas noticed Asa's reticence for driving deeper into Ruthenia. He tactfully declared he too needed to return a while to Warsaw and to Prussia, to confer with his employers. He told Asa he wanted to investigate further on certain matters, but he remained very vague on the nature of those, and Asa didn't probe deeper. Antanas departed at the end of November of 1825. The winter passed agreeably at Vilna. Asa began thinking of hitting the road once more, in early spring, to look after his taverns and distilleries.

Antanas returned to Vilna only at the end of the winter, in the first months of 1826. He seemed tired. He waited a few days in his rooms at Ezra's before seeking up Asa. The first time Asa saw Antanas again was at an evening in Ezra's hall. The men drank wine and vodka, smoked cigars Antanas had brought from Königsberg, and talked. Ezra Vincevicius was eager to know what Antanas had heard about the evolution of politics in the Kingdom of Poland. Poland had been Russian territory for a few decades now. The czar of Russia was also king of Poland. Russia dominated Poland, almost the same way it had annexed greater Lithuania. Ezra wondered what had happened lately, in the larger world, and how the nobility of Poland and Lithuania acted in the current situation.

Antanas talked about much more than merely of what the patriarch of the Vincevicius Family seemed interested in at the start. Asa had to notice Antanas had investigated a lot on the status of the Jewish people, about the structure of the *Kahals*, about the legal statute of the Jewish people of Russia, and of the way the Jews lived in Poland and in greater Lithuania. He smiled internally about the reasons that might have led Antanas to give the subject so much attention. Antanas still had Sarah on his mind! It was true, Sarah bloomed each day more to a splendid woman of great beauty.

‘What has actually remained of the *Kahals*, of the Jewish communities, after the Russian laws of 1786 and 1795?’ Antanas started wondering rhetorically. ‘By the Constitution of 1804, only very limited functions remained allowed to the *Kahals*!

The rabbinate and the *Kahals* have been separated into two separate functions, whereas previously they formed one whole. The ancient autonomy of the Jewish communities in Poland-Lithuania, with its various official institutions and assemblies, the *waads*, do not exist anymore. Of course, the rabbis are still in charge of the religious ceremonies and religious life. It would have been very strange indeed, had it been otherwise. The rabbis decide on disputes of religious matters. The *Kahals* continue to exist, only to organise the payment of the state’s taxes on the Jews. These are still worldly matters. That is all!

There exists and lasts some toleration by the Russian authorities for more extensive functions of the *Kahals*. I grant you so much. But those exceptions have been merely minor concessions wrung from the state in difficult times. The Christians have managed quite successfully to keep the Jews out of the municipal administrations and out of the magistracies of the *guberniates*, of the provinces of the empire. On Christian protest, the governments of the provinces have limited the participation of the Jews in the magistracies to one-third, and that even for places with predominantly Jewish population.

The Christians of Vilna and Kovno wanted to know of no participation at all for the Jews in the magistracies! An imperial law of 1805, an *ukase*, therefore forbade participation of the Jews in all Lithuanian imperial magistracies. That is how matters stand.’

‘We know of the situation,’ Ezra intervened, smiling wryly.

He felt a little irritated. There was no need to push his and his son’s nose deeper in the fundamental awareness of the situation. What did they care, as long as they were well-nourished, could trade and make a living from the taverns and distilleries and cigar manufactories in Vilna territory? A Jew was happy when he could live and survive.

‘We supported the Russian armies in 1812,’ Ezra reminded Antanas. ‘Without the Jews, Tzar Alexander could not have defeated Napoleon. We live in Russia. We did well.’

‘True,’ Antanas nodded. ‘I heard Tzar Alexander I has been deeply impressed by such signs of Jewish loyalty. That is why he hasn’t legislated harshly against the Jewish people so far. The emperor and his court still feel inclined to their benevolent attitude concerning the Jews. Tzar Alexander seems to me to have been a truly paternalistic person. Asa, you must know, the tzar died on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November of 1825, at the end of last year.

Alexander’s brother Constantine Pavlovich was to succeed on him, but he had already abdicated before taking on the crown. Constantine resigned from the task and the honour. He had actually been forced to do so, to be able to marry the beautiful Polish Countess Joanna Grudzinska, the later Princess of Lovich. Tzar Alexander I required Constantine to forfeit his rights on the throne in favour of his younger brother. The decision had remained secret for a long time. His younger brother, Nicholas, has been sworn in as the new tzar of Russia.

Nicholas I is quite another personality than Alexander was. Nicholas will reign with a more military character and with the mindset of a military used to being obeyed on whatever he comes up with. He seems not really to care much for the Jews. He is not really aware of what the Jews have done for Russia during the Napoleonic wars. He is a man who will shake matters up and place his personal stamp on affairs. Like the previous tzar, Nicholas wants to

improve his people to western examples. That is what my contacts among the Polish *szlachta* told me. Nicholas is out to stir matters up. Moreover, it seems he can be fickle in his opinions. He thinks and acts like a military man. He is out to autocratically impose new rules on everybody, also on the Jews.

Let me give you a short overview on how matters stand, and what has happened in the last ten years or so.'

Antanas paused. The men drank. Ezra filled the glasses himself. No woman entered the hall. Asa and Ezra listened with full attention.

'In January of 1817, Tzar Alexander I ordered the Russian Senate to henceforth take all Jewish matters to the General Manager of the "Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Denominations". A man called Pavel Golytzin held that function. He was a confidant of Tzar Alexander, and like him a very devout Christian. Later, the tzar installed the "Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs and Public Instruction", equally put in place under the guidance of this Golytzin. Notice how religious matters and public education were gathered in one and the same ministry!

Then, in this ministry, a permanent council, a Jewish Council, was established composed of Jewish representatives of the communities. The committee was to improve the condition of the Jews and to explain to the *Kahals* the purposes of the imperial government concerning Jewish affairs. It was a notable initiative. Golytzin and the late tzar were both fervent Christians. Their secret aim was to convert the Jews to Christianity. The *Kahals* could elect their representatives. In the autumn of 1818, twenty-two electors were chosen from eleven *Kahals*. They gathered at Vilna. They talk, hear reports, and debate. As long as they do only so much, nothing is amiss!'

Ezra and Asa looked at each other. They heard an altogether quite different man talking than the youth they had been used to. That youth of the last years wouldn't have shown sarcasm in his words.

'Later still, a "College of the Deputation of the Jewish People" was organised and set up in the ministry. The college worked in an advisory function until last year, until 1825. Scarcely anything concrete was decided in those meetings. The Jewish deputies of the college, three men, merely acted as go-betweens in Jewish matters for Minister Golytzin. Since these committees and councils led to not much in terms of results, and the Russians being no bigger fools than other people, the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs fell flat, and Golytzin had to resign from his ministry. What remained was a "Ministry of Public Instruction", held by Golytzin's successor Shishkov.

Shishkov proposed to abolish the former 'Deputation of the Jewish people'. The tzar accepted. So far so good. As far as all these initiatives brought nothing tangible to hurt the Jews, no damage was done! Not much good either!'

'Let's go back in time. In 1817, a tzarist law introduced the foundation of a "Society of Israelite Christians". It had to assist the Jews who wanted to convert to Christianity, or to help the Jews who were already converted to Christianity to be faster and better integrated in the Christian Orthodox, Russian community. Nothing came out of this initiative either, for there simply were no – or but very few- such Jewish converts! Still, a large area of land had been reserved in the *guberniates* of Yekaterinoslav to settle the Israelite Christians. Count Golytzin

proposed in 1824 to the tzar to finally dissolve also this “Society of Israelite Christians”. Alexander I decided to let it live. It was difficult for him to admit failure. The whole matter had been an error, an illusion. I believe it will disappear entirely with Alexander’s death at the end of last year.’

‘Do all these initiatives not prove the Russian tzar thought about his Jewish people?’ Ezra asked. ‘No compulsive conversions have happened!’

‘Right,’ Antanas noted. ‘In the meantime, however, the tzarist government worked against some Judaizing sects appearing among the Greek Orthodox communities.

Now, these sects had nothing to do with authentic Judaism. They were called the Sabbatarians, because they feasted the Sabbath, used more or less Jewish ceremonies as performed in the synagogues, and other Jewish customs. The Sabbatarians were not a Jewish sect. They were a Christian sect, a heresy within the Greek Orthodox Church, and therefore doubly dangerous for the Russian Church and the Russian tzarist court. The sect spread in Voronyesh, in Saratov and Tula in particular. The sect was the exact opposite of what the tzar and Golytzin secretly would have wanted: Jews converting to Christianity! Here, Christians were converting to a pseudo-Judaic faith. In 1817 already, Golytzin wanted to eradicate the sect. In truth, the Russian autocratic court was not ready for accepting any freedom of religion.

Two years ago, in 1823, the Russian Committee of Ministers supported a radical project. All outward display of the Sabbatarian sect was forbidden. The leaders and the teachers of the sect were forcibly sent into the military service. All Jews were to be expelled from the districts in which the Sabbatarians had appeared in force. Intercourse between the Christian inhabitants and the members of the sect became forbidden. Further police regulations were issued. These measures and the awe inspired by the sect, enhanced anti-Jewish sentiments in government circles of St Petersburg. Whole populations of Russian, mainly Jewish villages, were deported to Siberia! The events showed to me the ruthlessness with which the Russian government can treat hundreds if not thousands of people, quite rapidly. No, the Russian government is not tolerant towards other faiths but the traditional Christian, Greek Orthodox one.’

Antanas let his words sink in.

‘In April of 1820, the Russian tzar issued a prohibition for Jews to employ Christian domestics. This too was part of the anti-conversion laws. In 1819, other imperial decrees forced the local administrations to prosecute on all contracts whereby a member of the nobility leased the harvest of a given year to a Jew. The same decree prohibited the Jews from employing Russian peasants for gathering the grain and hay and for all other agricultural work. If these were not discriminatory laws, I don’t know what we are talking about.’

Antanas looked at Ezra and Asa, but they merely listened to what Antanas had to say. They did not comment for the moment. They avoided all these laws here, by distributing bribes.

Antanas continued, ‘as you know, a few years ago, White Russia, Belarus, Ruthenia, was stricken by a famine. You remember those years, which were also hard times for Lithuania. The nobility blamed the famine on the Jews and on the Jewish tavern-keepers. Therefore, in April of 1823, a new Russian law issued by the tzar forbade the Jews of the Settlement Areas

of the *guberniates* of Moghilev and Vitebsk, territories in which very many Jews lived, to hold land leases and to lease taverns. The Jews were not even allowed anymore to live in the countryside. All farming contracts were declared null and non-existent by January of 1824. All the Jews of the *guberniates* were to move into the cities and towns by January 1 of 1825. The rulings affected thousands of Jewish families. Most of these Jews were reduced to beggary from one day to the other.

The spectacle of the poor people huddling in the streets of the towns and seeking refuge in synagogues was sickening. The Jewish charity organisations were overwhelmed with so much misery their funds and work broke down. The Russian administrations did not seem to care. Some did what they could to alleviate the pain and poverty of the Jews, few acted at all. You must have heard of this tragedy.'

'Yet another tzarist *ukase* issued in May of 1823 established a new "Committee for the Amelioration of the Jews,"' Antanas said after a while. 'I found out its aim was to examine how the Jews might be rendered more useful to the empire. The committee had to determine how the Jews could be made to contribute more to the amelioration of their civil status. Its secret, inavowed function, however, was to seek ways of reducing the numbers of Jews in the Russian empire. The committee forms a real threat to the Jewish communities in the Settlement Areas. Its recommendations may affect gravely the Jewish people in all parts of Russia! Who knows what drastic measures may be proposed?'

'In this same year of 1825,' Antanas implacably resumed, 'additional tzarist laws, *ukazes*, have been ordained to guard the western borders of the empire, the frontiers of the kingdom of Poland. The new rules have been published by the military administrator of the kingdom of Poland, Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich.

The Jews are to be expelled from the border zone! Since the Jews are foreigners in Russia, they are considered potential enemies by the Russian state. The law ordered all the Jews living roughly within 50 miles from the frontiers to be expelled from where they lived, with the exception of those Jews owning immovable property in the zone. Jewish emigrants from neighbouring countries, in particular from Austria, were forbidden to settle in Russia. The law was executed strictly.

I should like to add the Jews and the Russians look completely estranged from each other. In my opinion, the estrangement can only breed suspicions, hatred, mutual blaming, and hostility. The class of intellectuals of Russia consider the Jews merely as temporary residents in Russia, in greater Russia, including the lands of Poland and greater Lithuania.

I heard strange complaints in Russia. The Jews have a passion for trade, the complaints claim. They neglect agriculture and handicrafts. The Russians easily forget so many laws chased the Jews from the countryside! The Russian court banned them from the artisan guilds for fear of land occupation and competition inside the empire. As the Jews mostly live from trade nowadays, the Jews are all considered liars and cheaters!'

Antanas paused again. He looked at Ezra and Asa, expecting angry faces, for he had been bitter and blunt in his words. They sat in front of him with bowed head. They did not stare at him. They avoided his eyes. They knew too well all he had said was the truth. They had been

avoiding thinking of such truths, since they lived not too badly and particularly in the safety of Vilna.

‘The general idea among the Russian intellectuals and the Russian court is,’ Antanas continued, ‘that the Jews should be Russified, adopt the Christian faith, or be expelled entirely from the country.’

Antanas once more let his words sink in. He repeated them.

Antanas said, ‘after the death of Tzar Alexander I, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November of 1825, the Russian crown went to his eldest brother Constantine, the military commander of Poland. Constantine had already abdicated, as I told, before the death of his brother. His other, younger brother became Tzar Nicholas I. Nicholas is a no-nonsense military man. He considers the Jews to be a people who drain the strength of the White Russians. He called the Jews leeches! He seems to think the Jews have no place in a Greek-Orthodox, Christian empire. He nourishes the idea of converting the Jews forcefully by pressing onto them a military service of exceptional character. The Russians eradicated the Sabbatarian sect in the same way. You might think laws and rulings against the Jews have rarely been enforced in Poland and Russia. Let me remind you then, of the Decembrists. Let me remind you of what shocked Nicholas I from his first day on the throne!’

‘On the day Nicholas I was sworn in as tzar of Russia, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December of last year 1825, a revolt broke out against him. The Imperial Russian Guard had founded a secret society known as the “Union of Salvation”. The society was started in 1816. A first meeting happened in 1820, but the society stopped its activities in 1821. Two groups nevertheless continued to function in secret, one in the Ukraine and one in St Petersburg. The society wanted the introduction of a constitutional monarchy for Russia, the abolition of serfdom, and equality for all citizens living in Russia. The southern society nurtured more drastic aspirations yet, such as to abolish the monarchy and establish a republic.’

‘Tzar Alexander I died on 19 November 1825. The Imperial Guard swore allegiance to Alexander’s brother Constantine. Constantine renounced to the throne for Nicholas. The St Petersburg group of the former Salvation Union acted.

They revolted, and elected Prince Sergei Trubetskoi as ruler. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of December, the officers of the Union and about 3000 men gathered in the Senate Square of St Petersburg. They swore loyalty to Constantine, not to Nicholas, and to their Decembrist Constitution. Prince Trubetskoi rapidly vanished, so that the Decembrists had to call in Prince Eugene Obolenski as their leader. Fights developed in the streets of St Petersburg between the troops of Obolenski and of Nicholas.

At the end of the day, Nicholas ordered three artillery cannons to fire. The rebels’ ranks broke. More cannon fire made many casualties on the River Neva, the ice of which broke under the rebel troops. The rebelling officers, among which some of Russia’s finest aristocratic sons, were arrested. The officers of the southern group in the Ukraine were likewise arrested. Five Decembrist leaders, among whom the most influential one, Pavel Pestel, were executed. The rest was exiled to Siberia. Among these last were the Princes Trubetskoi, Obolenski and Volkonski. The defeat of the ill-fated Decembrists sounded the end of the reformist nobility of Russia.

I heard the uprising left a deep impression on Nicholas I. He became suspicious of all classes in his empire. He has appointed a man called Speranski as head of the second department of his chancellery, of a committee formed to compose a new Russian law. Let's hope Speranski will come up with a law, valid for the entire Russian Empire. I have no idea what the law can hold for the Jews, but I think it will not bring you much good. Nicholas I showed how ruthless he can be, how he does not shy away from drastic solutions on very many people, whatever their quality.'

'We, Jews, have never stayed for long in one place,' Ezra replied on Antanas's story. 'Our forefathers arrived from Palestine, from the lands of Jerusalem, to flee persecutions. We know a lot about persecutions. Our forefathers arrived in France, Portugal, Spain and Germany. Many centuries ago, they fled also those lands to settle in Poland and Lithuania, where they could live in relative peace and fortitude.

The situation has not much changed since the Russians conquered and subdued the Polish and the Lithuanian rulers.

Our law tells us to accommodate with whoever rules the land we live in. Since we have no state, nation or land that can be called truly ours, such is our fate everywhere we might go. It has been thus for many centuries. We have endured much, everywhere.

I hear you tell the Russians don't like us. Nobody likes us! We are too different and too stubborn to change our ways. I am very much aware the Russians have expelled the Jews from their lands.

With the partitioning of Poland and Lithuania, in which the tzars received the largest part of Poland and Lithuania, they received a few million Jews suddenly in their country. They limited the territories we could live in to the current Jewish Settlement Areas, grossly corresponding to the lands of Poland and of the former greater Lithuania, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. If not here, where could we go to without abandoning everything we have?'

Antanas replied, 'there are countries where the Jews are equal to all other people living in them.

On the other side of the oceans, there are the United States of America. Ships leave at Antwerp for that country.

Another land you might take into account is Prussia. Prussia has adopted many principles and ideas from the Enlightenment philosophers, including your own Moses Mendelssohn. The Prussian king has adopted the ideas of the Enlightenment, the ideas you call of the *Haskalah*. He proclaimed an "Edict of Emancipation" of the Jews in March of 1812. I have to remind you what exactly that edict of Frederick Wilhelm III says.

The edict begins with a statement declaring all Jews living in Prussia having all sorts of privileges given to them by the government, are henceforth to be considered as citizens of the Prussian State. This means the Jews are no more foreigners in the lands of Prussia! They are Prussians!

The edict stated no further conditions to the quality of citizenship for the Jews, than that they should choose a family name and use the German language in their bookkeeping for their trade or handicraft, in their contracts and other documents of justice. The law even stated the Jews were allowed to use another living language, meaning not Hebrew, which is a dead language, but maybe allowing for Yiddish. When the Jews sign papers, they should use the German or Latin letters.

Within six months of the publication of the edict, each Jew had to declare at the administration of where he lived, which name he or she would henceforth use. Each Jew had received a paper, declaring him or her to be a citizen of the Prussian State.

What a wonderful paper is this?

It declares a Prussian Jew is not a foreigner anymore! The citizenship is valid for him or her, and their offspring. The chosen name would be preserved and the Jews would be known under that name in the archives of the Prussian administration. Only the Jews who did not as mentioned before, would be considered as “foreign” Jews.

The edict stated and still states, that all Prussian Jews, accepted as such, would enjoy the same civil rights and freedoms as the Christians.

They can therefore occupy all academic functions of the school or of the communes to which they made themselves capable. The law stipulated that for other public functions of the state, the Jews could occupy these posts as determined by other laws.

An important point in the law stated also the Jews had the right to live where they wanted, in the towns or in the countryside. They could buy land from the Christian inhabitants, and exercise all allowed handicrafts, as long as they followed the lawful rules.

The Jews were free to exert any craft allowed to the other inhabitants. They cannot become the victims of special rules that might oppress them, differently from the other citizens. The Jews must fulfil all the normal civil duties, the same as the Christians, and bear the same taxes, except for the existent special tax on the Jews. The Jews have the same duties as the Christians for their conscription in the army, in the military service. A military conscription law on Jews would be published later.

The Prussian Jews can marry as they wish, without special permission of the State. This last statement of the edict also counts when a Prussian Jew marries a foreign Jewess. However, a foreign Jew would not be allowed to live in Prussia merely by marrying a Prussian Jewess.

There a lot more such statements in the edict, all guaranteeing the same rights and duties of the Jews, as all other Prussians. The edict was published in Berlin and is still valid. It is the cornerstone of the full emancipation of the Jews in Prussia.’

Antanas paused.

He continued, ‘to me, it seems the Jews in Prussia are therefore normal citizens of the country.

As concerns the foreign Jews who would like to get the Prussian citizenship, the edict stipulated such a Jew can only receive the Prussian citizenship when he has learnt a useful handicraft or trade, for which there is an interest in Prussia, or when he has gained a minimum fortune. He or she must be able to speak German and to write German and be free of criminal charges.

Russian Jews have no right to choose a living place in Prussia. This last statement means only a Russian Jew cannot come to live in Prussia as such! He or she must be or become a Prussian citizen to live in the land.

Any Jew can marry a foreign Jewess only when she brings with her a fortune of five hundred talers.

There are restrictions, too.

The Prussian Jews cannot become representatives in the Prussian Parliament or in town councils. They cannot become civil servants in general. I believe those rules will disappear with time. In the religious education, only professors allowed by the State can be used, and also in the Jewish schools the language of education has to be German.

The edict did not apply to foreign Jews, to Jews who wanted to come to live in Prussia. These needed a special permission to be allowed to live in Prussia. So, foreign Jews who want to become Prussian citizens, have to go to the government of the province and ask for the permission of the Ministry of the Interior.'

'The law on the Jews was prepared by Count Charles Augustus von Hardenberg for King Frederick Wilhelm III. The edict or law was inspired by the laws of the kingdom of Westphalia, which had been strongly influenced by the French republican, Napoleonic views.'

Antanas stopped talking. He reclined in his seat. He almost disappeared in the velvet lining and in the cushions. Asa found it a good moment to come to Antanas's support. He had understood where Antanas had been heading to with his speech, and why.

He said, looking at his glass of brandy to hide a small smile, 'in fact, Antanas, you just said to us we should take care about the opinions of the Russians concerning the Jews. You believe the Russian government will start applying new rulings for the Jews of greater Lithuania, more in line with the underlying and fundamental dislike of the Russians for our people, as expressed in the laws of the core lands of Russia since long, and in their suspicions against anybody foreign. The Prussians, on the contrary, have accepted the Jews as true citizens of their State.'

Antanas was nodding vigorously, but Asa continued, as if musing on the consequences, 'you also seem to say the closest land with the most enlightened rules of living for the Jews, promising full emancipation and equality and full citizenship would be Prussia. You are proposing us to leave Vilna and to move northwards to Prussia to escape future harsher Russian laws and measures.'

Ezra looked at Asa in surprise. Asa caught the look.

'Well, father,' Asa continued, looking at Ezra, 'is that not what our forefathers have been doing for centuries? Flee before the danger realises in harsh repressive measures and in violence against our people? When it becomes hard to live in one country, move to another. Are we not the wandering Jews? Maybe Antanas is right. Maybe the time has come indeed to move on. Antanas has information we don't have about what is concocting in the ranks of the Russian *szlachta*, at the courts of Warsaw, St Petersburg and Moscow. Maybe the time has come to think about moving. Maybe indeed, Prussia has become a more liberal-minded country than Russia. Russia occupies Poland and Lithuania. Russia considers Poland and Lithuania nothing else but Russian territory, although the Poles and Lithuanians still feel they are Poles and Lithuanians first. This must lead to clashes. In clashes, the Jews always lose most.

Russia determines how the Jews are treated. They didn't want foreigners in their country in the past, and certainly not foreigners of other faiths than Greek Orthodoxism. That we know. These feelings run deep in the Russian soul. Those views on all the lands of Russia, including the Jewish Settlement Areas, will mean great pain for the Jews. We also know the tzars will

continue their autocratic regime. They will defeat revolts by the sword, as they did with the Decembrists. Tzar Alexander may have been a little more inclined to a liberal regime. Everything I too heard of his younger brother Nicholas, indicates to the contrary. Nicholas is a despot, who tolerates nothing but his own views and will. The men at his court will talk to his mouth. They are not very generous-minded men as to the Jewish question. The current Tzar Nicholas has the immense power of Russia in his hands. He has survived a trauma of seeing his peers, princes and counts, rebel against him, and that rebellion be terminated in blood and tears, by cannon fire and exile. He knows he can eradicate sects of thousands of families like the Sabbatarians at will. He can displace other thousands of families at one stroke of his pen, such as the Jews expelled from the border zones of Poland. What will he do with the Jews he doesn't particularly like, with the Jews of the Settlement Areas?

I say, let's consider seriously moving to a nation that is more peacefully inclined to our people.'

'You actually mean you would consider leaving Vilna and everything we have built here, and move to Prussia?' Ezra asked, open dismay sounding in his words.

Asa nodded. 'To Prussia, yes. I am thinking of survival and of my family.'

'Moving with our family to Prussia will mean cutting us off from the basis of our income,' Ezra remarked. 'Our trade is in Polish grain. Our enterprises are situated in Lithuania, in Ruthenia and in Poland. We would be moving away from the basis of our income. Moving to Prussia would mean cutting us off from our current means of living! We could build other cigar factories and other distilleries, of course, but what we do casually currently, would have to become a main occupation, a thoroughly different way of working and of thinking for us. A young man might succeed. A man in the strength of his age might succeed. My roots have grown too deeply in Lithuania, in Vilna. I love this country, its people and its history. I love the land I was born in. I think I shall not move. We can weather out new Russian measures. I don't want to impose a strenuous move to my wife. She has her friends here. She only knows one way of living.

You, Asa, and your brother, you could move. I doubt very much Abraham would want to seek a new living in the north. It would be very hard on his wife Abi. Abraham also has strong Polish ties, as you know. He too will want to stay in Vilna. You, Asa, could consider living in Prussia. Königsberg is a fine city and port town, I believe. I have heard people talking of her beauty. Yet, the Prussians have been enemies of Lithuania since always. Think about that, too.'

The three men remained sitting, lost in thoughts. No one cursed Antanas, however, for having brought up the subject.

Asa broke the silence.

'I would like to consider the option of moving to Prussia more seriously. We are not in a hurry. We can prepare and leave later, if necessary in an instant. Antanas, you will travel more in Prussia than I, and you know the land and the situation there. Why don't you just visit Prussia some more and look at other places than Königsberg for us to live in?

Königsberg is too obvious. Too many Jews already live there. Competition will be rude in the capital. Maybe there is a place more inland, more westward. Prussia and Russia are powerful lands. Any clash between them would take place first in Eastern Prussia, around places like

Königsberg and Memel. East Prussia is vulnerable in a great war. Westward, towards Berlin, towards Danzig, might be a better choice.

Can you give our options more thought yet? Funds we can provide. Suffice for you to know I have been receptive to your thoughts. I would like to be considered a simple citizen of a country in which I can live like any other free man. I want no more to be considered a foreigner in the land I live in. I would like to feel at home and at peace somewhere, free of stress and fear, with the same rights and duties as everybody else.'

Antanas nodded.

The conversation then stopped on the subject of Russia and Prussia. Asa began discussing with his father the status of the taverns and of the distilleries he had recently inspected.

Later in the night, Ezra started other reflections on the Jewish question. The subject of earlier talks had remained on his mind.

'The Jews have only done well and preserved their faith in adversity,' he remarked. 'We have prospered despite and in adversity. We have preserved our family ties. Too much ease of living brings corruption, impurity, sin, and the loss of our most sacred values. We have accommodated with the Poles and the Russians. Why change? Why move from Vilna?'

Antanas felt obliged to reply once more.

'Moses Mendelssohn cited the city of Amsterdam as an example. Why, he argued, had Amsterdam prospered and less so Brabant and Holland near to the city? He told only liberty, mild government, equitable laws and the hospitality with which people of all complexions, dress, opinions, manners, customs and faiths were admitted, protected and allowed to do their business, finally brought prosperity, wealth and happiness. I could not express my thoughts better. Do you feel Poland and Lithuania under Russian rule offer this?'

Ezra kept his silence, and the conversation stopped there for the night. Asa stood, and said goodbye.

Three days later, Antanas Svirskевичius left Vilna. He rode on one of Asa Vincevicius' horses. In his bags, sowed into the seams of a heavy cloak, he hid a small fortune of golden coins. Asa had provided Antanas with the money for a long journey in Prussia. Antanas had claimed he would try to secure Prussian papers for Asa's family. Antanas was to find out where the Vincevicius could best move to in Prussia. He was to take an option on a piece of land in the city of his choice, a piece of land on which a house could be built.

Once more, Antanas was astonished at the confidence Asa placed in him. Could he not now simply disappear with a small fortune in his bags?

Asa had indeed hesitated. Could he trust Antanas? He felt certain, however, of Antanas's honesty and of the reasons for why Antanas went so much out of his way to help the Vincevicius. He thought he knew why Antanas would return to Vilna, mission accomplished.

Antanas did not return to Vilna for three months. Asa got worried in the end, wondering whether his trust had been broken by the steward.

Antanas burst in on a bleak Sunday. It had been raining for almost an entire week. He jumped from his horse very tired, soaked, and the horse almost fell through its legs. Antanas was all smiles, though.

Asa could hardly wait for the evening, when everybody but his wife had gone to sleep or left the house. He embraced his friend and sent word to his father to prepare the guest room. Antanas would once more stay at Ezra's house.

In the evening, Asa sat with Antanas and Leah in his great hall flooded in candlelight. Leah poured wine and vodka. Only then did Asa ask what Antanas had been doing the last months.

'I had to stay away for quite a while,' Antanas deplored. 'But I have not been idle! I left, looking for a fine place you could live in. I think I found one. I first thought about the obvious, about Königsberg, then of Danzig. Later still, I rode south and west. I arrived at long last at a nice town, at which I had a revelation. I arrived at the city of Thorn!

You may not know the whereabouts of Thorn. You may not really know where Thorn is situated on the maps. It is not a Polish town, though it was Polish for centuries and was then called Toruń. It is Prussian since the partition of Poland by the Russian czar.

Thorn must be one of, if not the southernmost city of West-Prussia. It lies on the Vistula River, which the Prussians call the Weichsel. As you know, Warsaw also lies on the Vistula. And even more importantly, on the same Vistula lies Danzig, the port town the Poles call Gdansk, now Prussian too. In terms of transport, Thorn lies on the main stream that links Warsaw to the Baltic Sea. Danzig is also one of the most important ports of the Baltic, not unlike and maybe even larger than Königsberg. Danzig lies at the place where the Vistula enters the Baltic Sea!

Actually, Thorn is situated right at the border of the Archduchy of Posen, which is now also Prussian, and Poland. The archduchy are the lands around the city of Posen, of Poznań in Polish.'

Antanas grinned, 'I thought you might like a border town, which is great for contraband and great for commerce over the borders. If ever there might be a need to flee from Prussia, one gets over the border, either to Russian Poland or to Posen in no time.

For commerce, Thorn is an ideal city, almost too fine to believe in. It is relatively small, quiet, a sleeping beauty, with fine roads leading to Warsaw, Danzig, Leipzig and the rest of the German countries. The Vistula can be used to transport goods to be sold in Poland and Warsaw, or to the north, abroad, from out of Danzig and from there to the entire world.

Danzig is a large, booming town, an important harbour. Commerce is intense at Danzig. It might be a lot more conspicuous in a war than inland Thorn. A Jewish family could easily trade at Danzig, and yet live in a quiet, hospitable, a militarily non-strategically situated smaller town inland.

I spoke with some of the German traders of Thorn. The men were desperate for new capital. They would welcome well-to-do Jewish businessmen settling in their town. They told me so! They have great plans for their town. They want to expand the railway connections to Danzig and to Warsaw, and from there to the German towns westward. That would ease much more the transportation of livestock, of hay, of grain and legumes such as potatoes, in great quantities, and even in winter. The wood industry is developing.

Thorn is growing rapidly, though it is smaller than Vilna. It is a city ideal for newcomers wishing to grow with the city. The people seem to be open-minded. The Jewish population

is much smaller than in Vilna, of course. There is a synagogue and a Jewish community. A few traders are Jews. They seem to be well accepted.

Around Thorn, in the Polish parts of the lands, as well as in the Prussian parts, there are not many distilleries. Taverns there are, owned by Christians, but also less than in the province of Vilna and in Ruthenia. You can develop taverns, though you will have to build new ones. No need for leases in Prussia, but the same conditions prevail in Poland around Thorn as here, in Vilna.

Note, Thorn does not lay at the end of the world from Vilna. It is perfectly feasible for you, Asa, to continue managing your present taverns and distilleries out of Thorn. You might want to appoint a steward to manage in your name. No, don't smile at me! I have something else on my mind for myself. Occasional inspection tours of your Vilna investments from out of Thorn seems practical. You may have to stay on the roads for longer periods. I suppose, with time, you will stay less and less in the Vilna region, while you are developing new business out of Thorn.'

'And for yourself?' wondered Asa, his eyes narrowing with suspicions.

'I'm coming to that,' Antanas said. 'Yes, I also thought of myself. I too would want to change my way of living. I have had my belly full of serving the *szlachta*, though it was easy money. I would like to start a new life in Danzig. I shall trade out of Danzig with Germany, with the Dutch Provinces, with Denmark and with England, Norway and Sweden. In fact, I can become your ideal partner. We can deal together. You seek for grain and other products in nearby Poland, ship the stuff to Danzig, and I will sell it to the world. I shall buy your products, your brandy, your wood, your hides, your grain, you name it, all you can buy cheap in Poland and Posen. I shall transport it to the world! You will have to diversify. We can do it all!'

Asa and Leah looked at each other, smiling at the unbridled enthusiasm of Antanas.

'More concretely, I did two things,' Antanas continued. 'I made good use of your money. I may have been too bold in my actions, but nothing has been done that cannot be undone. You can still back out of what I am proposing, out of the scheme I devised.

Firstly, here are your papers!'

Antanas shoved a few pages to Asa and Leah.

Antanas said, 'I met a schoolmate of mine at Marienwerder. Marienwerder is the principal Prussian government administration centre nearest to Thorn. Thorn depends from this centre for important matters. I had to get drunk on several evenings with my friend, to tighten our relations a bit and grow confidence. This was one of the main reasons I had to stay away far longer than I expected.

Finally, to make a long story short, the papers you have in your hands confirm you are now officially Prussian citizens, living in the city of Thorn. You are still marked as Jews. Your names, I adapted a little. You are called Vincius. I changed your name, Asa. I did not change your wife's name, which sounds German well enough.

Vincius sounds close to Vincevicius. When somebody really wants to contest your new name, it is sufficiently close to your original name to claim an error of transcription. Such errors happen all the time. You settled in Thorn a few years ago, with permission of the

Prussian authorities. I had to promise more money for that, though not in amounts you would not easily be able to pay. Much of the needed money I had with me in my bags. The papers, your passports for you, your wife and your children, are quite official and archived. The name Vincius sounds Prussian and Pomeranian well enough. It seems in ancient times Roman families settled in West Prussia, in Pomerania. They brought with them Latin-sounding names, first names such as Julian, Julius and Max – I take it short from Maxentius. Surnames ending on -ius are frequent. Vincius sounds Latin, doesn't it? It means something like victory in Latin. Is it not a good omen? Who will refuse to do business with a man of such a name? If ever somebody sends an investigation at Vilna, like I said, the former name of Vincevicius is close enough to claim a simple error of a lazy clerk. By the way, I did the same for me. I paid by my own money for the change; I did not use any of your golden coins on me!' Antanas opened his arms, 'meet the new-born Anton Svirskius, citizen of Prussia!' Asa and Leah laughed at Antanas's boyish stance.

'Mind you,' Antanas said, more seriously, 'you can still remain who you are, here, in Vilna. Your actual papers are still valid, of course. If you don't want to leave Vilna after all and move to Thorn, there will simply remain inscribed in the books of Marienwerder and of Thorn two people nobody there will ever hear off! No issue! You still have a decision to make. You can even use two sets of papers if you prefer to do so, one set of Vincius in Prussia, and the set of Vincevicius papers in Poland-Lithuania, in Russia. Isn't that all neat?'

Asa and Leah thought for a few moments in silence about the implications. They fingered through the papers, read the German texts. They were for quite a time bedazzled by the sudden opportunities Antanas had created for them.

'The second thing I did for you,' Antanas explained further, 'was looking for a place to live in for you at Thorn. I could have bought a house in town. Finally, I only asked for an option on a terrain, a large piece of land at the outskirts of the town. I'm afraid I spent most of your gold on that option, Asa, and you'll have to bring more gold for the total price. The option remains valid for six months. I assure you, even for the current conditions of Thorn, I got the land relatively cheap. It is a piece of land in a nice, broad street, where Christians and Jews live together. Other Jews live close by, but mostly Christians have comfortable, large houses around. You will have to come and see! You can build yourselves a fine house there, for you and for your children. The synagogue is not far. I suppose you will want to use a coach to drive to the synagogue. Also, the Jewish community is developing at Thorn. You can become one of the esteemed elders of the Jewish community of the city!'

Once more, Asa and Leah needed time to absorb so many new perspectives. They heard about a totally new life. They sat, reflecting on the possibilities. Leah wondered how her new house would look like. She had fine ideas for another structure of her rooms. Her forefront frowned quite more than Asa's, who remained lost in thoughts, leaning back in his seat. Asa felt a little stunned, afraid of the new work, the new environment. Antanas had presented so many new initiatives so rapidly!

Antanas still went on, 'if necessary, I can get papers for your father Ezra too, and even for your brother Abraham and for Abraham's family. More money will be needed, I'm afraid. I

left my friend a little scared about more people in the scheme, but he has tasted of good gold. It is always very tempting to wave with golden coins in which the sun or candlelight plays! He may have shown me some reticence in order to demand higher prices for the papers. As you know, more risk, more coins needed! He will get the papers, though.'

Leah stood up. She went into the kitchen to fetch more cakes. She served more brandy too. She had to do something with her hands to clear her mind. When she returned, she looked more worried than when she left the hall.

She sat carefully in her seat, asking sweetly, almost whispering, 'Antanas, why are you doing all of this for us? Don't tell me it was because Asa has been such a good friend to you, which by the way he has been. Don't tell me it was because you have been so well received in our family. All of that is true, as we and you know. But it hardly suffices for a reason. You are not doing this for money, either. I shall not insult you by thinking you do all of this for money. You have been taking risks for us. Why then, Anton Svirskius, are you helping us?' 'Aha,' Asa smiled inwardly. 'This is the moment of truth, when all the cards have to be laid upon the table. Leah knows the real answer already, I presume. She is smarter and senses better all matters of the heart. Is she too now smiling inside? Or does she think only of the issues and of the possible disillusion?''

Antanas straightened his back. He took a deep breath and he sighed audibly. He sat with the filled glass of brandy in his hand. He placed the glass on a small table next to him. He still played with his fingers around the glass. His hands began to tremble. So did his knees, Asa noticed with some amusement.

Antanas confessed in phrases barely audible. Words came out in jolts and jerks, hesitatingly and broken. He stammered, reddening terribly in the face.

'I love Sarah, your sister,' he said. 'I think she likes me too. I realise the difficulties. If ever she would want to marry me, I would have to spare her to stay in Vilna and face the people she knows best, here. We could start a new life in Danzig.'

'Have you given some thought to the other consequences?' Leah asked. 'Sarah is indeed thoroughly Jewish.'

'I know,' Antanas almost sobbed. 'She would best have to convert to Christianity. I could not possibly convert to Judaism. If absolutely needed, I could, yes, of course I could. I rather prefer not. The life of our children would be easier as Christians. The life of Jews is hard. I'd rather want to spare Sarah the difficulties of Jewish life in a Prussian harbour town. I tell you this without despising any of you Jews in any way! It is just a fact of life. How you keep coping with it, I don't really understand. It is tough being a Jew.'

'It is,' Leah acquiesced. 'We didn't choose to be born as Jews. We accept the responsibility. It is our burden to be the chosen of God with whom we have a covenant. Have you talked with Sarah about leaving Vilna? Have you talked to her about your love, about the future?' Antanas looked sideways.

'We talked about the love. We made no plans. She loves me too, I think. How did you know about me and Sarah?'

‘Do you think I am daft? Do you think my eyes stay in my pocket all day? I know when a woman is in love, and also when she has made love. For that too, is what you have been busy at, isn’t it, my dear Antanas?’

Antanas looked at Leah with bewildered eyes. He didn’t answer. Antanas seemed to want to bolt and run out of the hall in shame.

‘You don’t have to answer, Antanas. I know. Is Sarah pregnant?’

‘No!’ Antanas cried.

‘At least there is that, then,’ Leah sighed with relief.

Leah turned to Asa.

‘How are you going to solve this issue, dear husband?’

‘There you have it again,’ Asa mused. ‘When there is a problem, she knows all about it first, but I have to come up with a solution.’

Asa had expected everything turning back to his lap. He acted as if he were amazed.

‘I will have to talk to my father,’ Asa replied, combing his fingers through his hair and short beard. ‘Ezra will refuse hearing anything of a marriage between a *goy* and Sarah. Sarah will weep and cry. I’ll talk to my father first. Then, Antanas will have to propose officially, according to our custom.’

‘Ezra will refuse to see Antanas anymore afterwards, and also not Sarah,’ Leah objected.

‘Oh, he will,’ Asa retorted. ‘Ezra is more father than Jew. I too am sad Sarah will have to convert to Christianity. Antanas said true, though. It is tough to be a Jew. Moses Mendelssohn wrote the Jews should not think a decent, non-Jewish person could not enter the realm of God. God only made it much harder for the Jews, because we are his chosen people. I agree Sarah should convert. She is a nice woman. I too felt what was going on between those two. Antanas is a friend and a decent man. Their coming together must have been a special design of our God, with a purpose. I bet He must be amused playing a game with them and us. But God is love. Love must come out of the affair, and that is good.’

‘You are blaspheming,’ Leah smiled. ‘God has nothing to do with the love of Sarah and Antanas.’

Asa wasn’t too sure about that. Also not about the result, their move to Prussia.

Leah had expected Asa would have thrown in more obstacles in Sarah’s and Antanas’s paths. Now, she marvelled once more at Asa’s wisdom and tolerance. Her husband was a gentle man. He also loved his younger sister dearly. Sarah and Antanas would be all right with her husband’s support. Had Asa all this time allowed Antanas to act, only because he, Asa, had already wanted to flee to Prussia? Did Asa feel more than he would let her know? Who was manipulating here, then? Was Antanas manipulating Asa or Asa manipulating Antanas? Was Asa using Antanas as his instrument, and through Antanas his own family? Leah thought her husband quite capable of such stratagems!

Antanas looked in surprise at Asa. He too had expected shouts and refusals. He actually managed a smile.

‘I will take good care of Sarah,’ he promised. ‘I shall honour and respect her. There is no other woman for me but her.’

‘Have you discussed to her about conversion? Asa wondered.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Antanas replied.

His eyes sagged.

‘First, you must talk to her. Bring everything out. Tell her about conversion. You are Catholic. Conversion to Catholicism would be best for Sarah. Then you talk to her about moving to Danzig and start a new life. I agree about moving to Thorn. I feel in my bones the Russian are up to no good. The tzar prepares havoc for the Jews of Lithuania. It is time for us to move on. Do not wait any longer talking to Sarah. We must not lose time. If Sarah agrees with all, tell me. I will have to talk to my father. Ezra may want to accompany us to Thorn. I doubt he will want to join us, though. He is too much committed to traditional Judaism. Abraham shall want to remain near his mistress in Vilna.’

Leah chimed in, ‘Asa wants to leave Vilna. He is most probably right. You are right too, Antanas. We should thank you. If ever you hurt Sarah, I’ll scratch out your eyes before Asa kills you, friend or not!’

Antanas receded in his seat. Women could be so cruel! Antanas became a heap of misery in the velvet material of the seat.

Leah continued, ‘if Ezra refuses, you will have to elope with Sarah. Anyway, very few people will be present at your wedding.’

Antanas nodded and bowed his head.

Leah saw his pain.

She smiled, ‘welcome in the Vincius Family, brother-in-law. May you and Sarah live together your entire life and have many children.’

Antanas brought his head up again.

‘You and Asa are good friends,’ he murmured.

Asa allowed Antanas the time to talk with Sarah. As Antanas once more stayed a few days in Ezra’s house, a long conversation with Sarah proved no problem. Antanas returned quickly and happy to Asa and Leah, informing them Sarah had agreed to marry him and to convert to Christianity.

Asa then dreaded his own talk with his father and his mother. He asked to spend an evening with them, two more days later. At the last moment, Leah decided to accompany her husband.

Asa tried to announce the issue as diplomatically as possible. He faced an almost complete family council. The conversation started badly enough, right after Asa bluntly told his parents that Antanas asked to marry Sarah. Asa’s mother knew all about the matter, Asa could tell. Her decision had already taken form. She was relieved Sarah would leave Vilna and Russia. She accepted Sarah’s conversion, telling there was only one God. How one adored God should not matter much. Ezra agreed reluctantly after a long discussion. He liked Antanas well, but Antanas was not Jewish. Ezra wanted a Jewish son-in-law. He spoke of presenting other, Jewish, young men to Sarah.

‘No,’ Leah intervened. ‘Sarah wants Antanas, nobody else. You will make her very unhappy with anybody else.’

Asa, Leah and Asa’s mother pleaded with Ezra. Ezra talked on, but he met a wall. Ezra began very slowly to accept Sarah would have to convert. He was doubly pained, then. He protested

vehemently. The Jewish rites and customs were sacred to him. He didn't care much about the *Haskalah* and the enlightened ideas of Moses Mendelssohn, the ideas Asa brought up. That was all philosophical bullshit! Yes, it was far more difficult for a Jew to enter the realm of the Heavens than for any other person adoring God on earth. But the covenant between God and the Jews was sacred! Ezra rejected Asa's arguments. For a long time, he simply refused to let Sarah convert and marry.

As Leah had predicted, Ezra yielded slowly. At a late hour in the evening, Asa began to understand Leah had already talked about the affair to his mother, and the two women had arrived at a common standpoint. Sarah could marry Antanas! Ezra also listened more to Leah's pleading than to Asa's arguments.

Finally, in the middle of the night, Ezra surrendered.

Asa went upstairs to wake Antanas and Sarah in their respective rooms. They arrived in the great hall with wary, sleepy eyes and dressed in night-gowns. Ezra continued grumbling for a while. Then, he announced the couple he loved them and had agreed to their marriage.

The Vincevicius Family discussed that same night on how the baptism of Sarah would happen, where and when. A solution was found rapidly. Asa and Leah would attend the baptism and then the marriage. The wedding was to take place in a chapel of Kaunas. Asa had still to talk to Abraham.

The conversation with Abraham went more relaxed, quicker and more to the point. Abraham refused to leave Vilna. He didn't care about Antanas's schemes. He didn't find it more prudent to prepare moving to Thorn. As for Sarah's marriage with Antanas, Abraham told Asa he had suspected so much since quite some time already. He would give his blessing to his younger sister.

Abraham did say a few words of regret. He regretted the family was being torn to pieces and scattered over several towns. He grimaced when Asa told the names of his family would henceforth become Vincius. Abraham did not object. He admitted straight away Asa's and Sarah's decisions had been maturing for some time and would not be modified by anything he could bring up. Abraham mentioned his brother would soon become estranged from his Vilna family. Asa said the family would still come together for major feasts. He too thought Abraham had been right in his assessment concerning the family. Yes, a new era would start for Asa's and Sarah's close family.

Asa, Sarah, Leah and Antanas then discussed their move to Thorn. Asa and Leah agreed immediately with Antanas's choice of the place of their new home. Asa and Leah would travel to the city of Thorn to pay for the acquisition of the land, and to talk with a Prussian architect, an old friend of Antanas's family. They would discuss with the architect on what kind of house they wanted to be built, simple on the outside, but large and with the rooms Leah proposed inside.

Asa began to count his coins anew. His fortune would be considerably diminished by the purchase of the land in Thorn and the building of a new house. The move to Thorn would take a few years. Asa wanted to learn a lot about the region he would live in. Regular travels to Thorn would have to be scheduled. He would look for opportunities to buy lands, to buy leases on taverns, or places to build new taverns on. Antanas volunteered to help Asa in

contacting the members of the Polish and Russian nobility. Asa and Antanas talked long about everything that had to be organised for the baptism, the wedding, the new house to be built in Thorn, the taverns to lease, the decoration of the house Antanas had bought for himself at Danzig, and on how to best organise their partnership to trade out of Danzig.

Asa later often wondered whether he had done well to support his sister in her marrying Antanas, now Anton Svirskius. His doubts dissipated each time he noticed how happy the couple were, how they too experienced the love he shared with Leah. Sarah's and Antanas's love taught him how precious his own feelings for Leah were. He too felt happy. Asa threw himself head-on into the preparations for their new home in Thorn.

## Conflicts. 1827

As early as 1826, Tzar Nicholas I had his ministers draft a special military service statute for the Jewish people. He sent the text first for advice to his brother, Grand Duke Constantine, for approval.

Constantine was the commander-in-chief of the army of the Kingdom of Poland, and regent of the country. Another man who saw the draft was the Senator Nicholas Novosiltzev, Constantine's co-regent, the Imperial Russian Commissar in Warsaw, who in practice controlled the affairs in Poland. Both men agreed on the text.

The tzar signed and issued the *ukase*, the imperial law, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August of 1827. Joined to the imperial law was a 'Statute of Conscription and Military Service', which held 62 clauses with supplementary instructions.

Clauses of this statute stipulated the age of the Jewish conscripts to be presented by the Jewish communities, the *Kahals*. The Jewish conscripts to the Russian Army had to be between 12 and 25 years of age. Clause 74 further mentioned the Jewish minors, below 18 years old, had to be placed in preparatory establishments for military training. These minor recruits were called 'cantonists'. The principle of the cantonists existed also for Christian minors, but then only for children of soldiers in active service.

The conscription of Jewish minors applied to all Jewish families. Clause 70 stated that the years of preparatory training should not be included in the active service. The active service started only at 18 years of age. The Jewish cantonists were compelled to serve a term of 6 years (from 12 to 18), over and above the 25 years of compulsory military service!

The Jewish communities, the *Kahals*, had to enlist the recruits. The *Kahals* had to elect from 3 to 6 executive officers in every city to supply the required numbers of recruits. Exempted from military service were children of merchants who were members of guilds, artisans affiliated with trade unions, mechanics, agricultural colonists, rabbis, and children of those Jews who had graduated from Russian educational institutions. The parents of the exempted children had to pay one thousand rubles for each recruit.

Asa's son Max was too young to be called in soon. Abraham was a member of the trade guild of Vilna, and he could pay the exemption money. He didn't fear his sons being called to the army.

The instructions of the imperial law described a ceremony that was to be performed in the synagogues for the swearing in of the new conscripts. The boys had to swear the oath of allegiance to the tzar of Russia. The young recruit had to wear his *tallis*, his prayer-shawl and his *kittel*, the shroud, his phylacteries wound around his arm, standing before the ark of the covenant, amidst burning candles. He had to swear a long, impressive oath, accompanied by *Zofar* blasts, by sound bursts of the Jewish ceremonial ram's horn.

In the places of conscription and on their journey, the conscripts were to be quartered exclusively in the homes of Christian residents. This rule made clear the obvious, yet never written aim of the law: convert Jewish boys to Christianity.

The Jews of larger Russia, mainly living in the Jewish Settlement Areas, trembled under the harsh rulings. Yet, they did not openly rebel against the Russian authorities. The Jews hated the law, which took away from their parents many boys of no more than 12 years old, and that for a period of 32 years.

As everybody detested the law, the recruiting committee in the *Kahals* were forced to act as police agents to find the recruits and extirpate them from the arms of their mothers. Many boys fled to very far from the cities they had been living in, and they were hidden from the *Kahal* officers. The recruiting agents of the *Kahals* had to hire cruel men to hunt down the fugitives. Sometimes, the *Kahals* delivered children younger than 12 to the Russian authorities, when they could not otherwise fulfil their obligations to reach the numbers of boys ordered.

The cantonists were generally sent to far away Russian provinces, far from Jewish influences, into territories where languages were spoken the children did not understand.

The *Kahals* and the Jewish families handed over the weakest and sick children. Many cantonists died already on the long road to the training camps. The Jewish cantonists received a little better treatment when they converted to Christian Orthodoxy. Many converted. Others were martyred.

The military training was harsh. It exhausted the youths. Those who refused to eat lard starved, or were beaten. Obstinate youths who clung to their religion died in the barracks or in the military hospitals.

Many Jewish youths of just under 18, called up to the military service, were already married and had children of their own. They were separated from their family for 25 years. Few returned. Therefore, a Russian law of 1835 would forbid Jewish young men to marry before the age of 18.

The law of Jewish conscription and the principle of cantonist preparation proved to be a cruel catastrophe for the Jews of Russia. Two other laws were signed and issued on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December of 1827.

The first ordered the transfer of all the Jews from the villages and from the village taverns from the province or *gubernia* of Grodno into the towns. The Grodno ruling was meant as a test.

The second banished all Jews living in Kiev out of the city. Two years later, in 1830, another law expelled the Jews from the villages of the *guberniates* of Kiev.

Gradually, the Jews came to know the principal enactments of this period had been drafted already in 1823 by the Jewish Committee established earlier to council the czar. The so-called 'Jewish Committee' had been established in 1823 with the purpose of reducing the number of Jewish people in the empire!

In 1829, the czar followed up on another proposal of this Jewish Committee to expel from Courland all Jews not born in the country, to push them back to the cities into which they were born. The ban stopped the influx of Jews in Courland.

Also, in 1829, the Jews in the cities of Sevastopol and Nikolayev were expelled. In Livonia equally, measures were taken to reduce the numbers of Jews living in the land. Overall, as before, the Jews remained banned from the Russian interior.

When the particulars of the conscription law of 1827 became fully known to Asa Vincevicius, he felt quite satisfied he had begun preparing his move to the city of Thorn in Prussia. Had his forefathers not been doing exactly the same thing tens of years earlier? Yes, one had to move when anti-Jewish attitudes prevailed, but more importantly, one had to move in time!

Antanas had found an architect for the new home of the Vincius Family. Asa was quite pleased with his new name. He did not want anymore to live in a country, in fact Russia, in which anti-Jewish measures, such as the cantonist laws, were promulgated. What would come next?

Asa sent his wife, Leah, and the children to Thorn. They hired apartments, waiting for the completion of their new home. Leah sought schools and stayed in touch with the architect who was building her new home. She learned to know Thorn, its administration, its associations, perfected her German and made acquaintance with the Jewish families living in their future neighbourhood.

In the next months, Asa stayed in Thorn only for short periods. He had a difficult time cutting his roots with Lithuania. He continued to inspect his distilleries and taverns. He now travelled even in the depths of winter, as if trying to deepen his links with the country of his forefathers. He was saying goodbye to a part of the history of his family.

Asa travelled alone, without Antanas Svirskevicius, now Anton Svirskius. Antanas stayed mostly in Danzig. He had bought a large, comfortable house near the harbour. He was feverishly using all of his time to set up his trading house.

Antanas first sought contacts in the harbour with shipping companies and with captains. He learned which men dealt with foreign ports, which ships navigated to the east and which to the west, to which harbours. It took him a few months to know where he had to go if he wanted to transport goods to Sweden and to Denmark, to the Dutch Provinces, to England and France. He even knew how to get to the United States of America, the land of ultimate hope, by which companies and routes and at what cost.

Then, he started to look for providers who could bring him goods at low price to sell at higher price in foreign harbours. He mainly sought partners in Poland. He could ship grain in bulk, but the prices of grain started to fall on the foreign markets. He would make some, steady money on that trade, though merely slightly above the money of brokerage, of a percentage of the value of the bulk transported. Nevertheless, such money enabled him to nurture his family. He could still count on a modest income from the *szlachta* by which he was considered to be a steward, though he had neglected that work since long.

He really began to trade, very modestly at first. He bought goods on his own, selling and transporting them abroad. He relied only on himself for the entire organisation. The trade he could secure this way remained small. Yet, it allowed his family, after many months, to live a little better. The modest income provided for his wife, Sarah, the added funds she deserved to decorate a little more nicely the old house in the harbour, and to think of children. The first months were a test for Sarah. Did she love Antanas sufficiently to live a small life? In fact, Sarah felt complete for the first time in her life. Her finest hours were when she lay in bed with Antanas, blotted in his arms, and when he tried being so sweet to her. She cared not

having no servants. She cared not seeing her walls needed plastering, her rooms filled with finer furniture. She and Antanas thrived on love. She was content.

Asa reflected on his lonely trips about the life he was abandoning. He loved this land of Lithuania and of White Russia. Still, he knew very well he would have to abandon his old ways.

In that winter, Asa began to realise somebody was targeting his business, picking at the sites that brought in the best profits. When he wanted to prolong a lease on one of the taverns that brought him his finest profits, the steward of the owners told him he would have to invest quite more money than currently, or the lease would be granted to someone else.

Asa cursed, and put up the funds for the new lease. He felt the blow very hard. He could still secure profits from the lease, but significantly less than the previous years. He got the lease, though. He continued exploiting that particular tavern and his distillery.

He gave the issue no further thought at first. Business was like this, like the tides of the sea, from the high waters of prosperity to the low waters of loss of profits. He could hold his head just above the tides, but not much better. He would have to change his plans.

Asa had made a list of the taverns and distilleries, of the leases he wanted to hold and of, and another list of the ones he could divest himself of rather rapidly. He wanted to keep a few of his highest profits bringing enterprises, close down the other more rapidly. He added the place for which the owners asked for higher prices to the latter list.

A month later, the same happened with another tavern from the same owner, a Polish petty noble. Asa understood this owner was in need of money, probably to pay off his debts. This particular tavern brought in much money, but had no distillery joined to it. Asa reckoned he could not, with time passing, make sufficient profits worth his management and the far visits, the attention and his time far from Thorn. He let go.

He emptied the tavern of all furniture and provisions he could recuperate, offered the tavern-keeper a position at another site, and wrote off the site. He could not fathom how another lease owner could make good profits from the enterprise after all the new installation costs. In a way, he felt rather cheerful then, for this tavern lay at one of the farthest regions for him to travel to from out of Thorn. It fitted nicely in his plans to divest himself of these farthest enterprises. Yet, the loss of good profits hurt him.

A little later still, the steward of another member of the minor nobility told him he would have to pay far more if he wanted to hold on to a similar land lease and tavern. This tavern was a large one, one of the last Asa wanted to keep. The tavern brought in handsome profits. Asa had built not so long ago an almost new, large, modern distillery in the vicinity. He leased that land, too.

The loss of this tavern and nearby distillery would cost Asa a decent percentage of his gains. He could dismantle his distillery. He had no idea, however, to where he could move the stills. His only alternative would be to move the lot to the environs of Thorn, in Prussia, or to another site closer to Thorn, in Poland. He had not yet such a site. He had not made sufficient contacts with Christian partners to set up new distilleries. He didn't know yet which persons he could trust near Thorn. Building a new tavern and distillery near Vilna, he considered out of the question.

Asa understood he would in the future have to spend much more time in the countryside nearer Thorn, in the Duchy of Posen and in Poland near the borders with Prussia, to find new leases or land to buy there. He thought he had better buy land in Prussia, lease less, and place his enterprises on his own land. That would mean cutting deep into his reserves. As if his anonymous stalker knew his intentions, an offer was made to Asa but a little later to take over the distillery too. The price offered was very low. Asa would lose much of his investment, but less than when he would have to dismantle the enterprise at his own initiative. The offer was therefore very smartly defined, and presented at the right time.

The loss of this tavern and distillery cut deep in Asa's flesh. He started thinking. This was the third site he lost in but a few weeks. What would come next? Asa did not generally feel paranoid in business. Yet, three losses in such a small timeframe could still hardly be called normal.

The alternative to pure chance was that somebody had learned he would be moving from Vilna! This person might think Asa would abandon threatened taverns and distilleries without much ado, without a fight. Asa turned this idea over and over in his head. His opinion and instinct strengthened the possibility. Who was cutting him out of the better business of tavern holding and liquor production in Lithuania? Who was thinking he would be selling fast at this moment of transition? Who knew he was envisaging to leave Vilna and Ruthenia? Asa wanted anyway to abandon taverns, especially those far from Vilna. He should have been grateful, smile, drawn a sad face but be delighted privately, and moved on. Yet, he didn't like the idea of having somebody at his throat. He didn't like the feeling of being taken advantage of, of losing control. And the taverns he lost were among his most profitable ones and which lay not at all far from Vilna. They were easy of access, even in winter. These taverns, his best enterprises, he would have liked to hold on till the last! Were there one man or a group of men pushing him out of the liquor business at this delicate moment?

Asa protested to the stewards of the lost sites. He spoke of ungratefulness. He asked who it was who offered so much money he doubted profits could be made. He pushed against a wall that wouldn't give way. The stewards refused to whisper even a hint of a name of the man or men who offered higher prices.

Asa lost a fourth, very profitable lease, and then a fifth. This concerted effort was no coincidence! Somebody knew he, Asa, was in transition, was leaving the territory and would not put up an arduous fight for the leases. How many men knew about Thorn? Very few, actually! Nobody outside Asa's family knew of what his intentions were. And yet, somebody had heard. Somebody wanted to ruin him just while he was vulnerable, in between established businesses.

Asa thought of Antanas. Antanas had entries into the nobility. Asa was fairly certain Antanas was not interested in leases on taverns and distilleries. Antanas focused on Danzig. Sarah would not allow her brother be hurt. Antanas was developing his trade, and he was very busy at that, too. He did not seek managing enterprises deep into Poland, Lithuania and White Ruthenia. Antanas might help him with his contacts.

Asa decided to talk to Antanas and ask him to investigate discreetly among the *szlachta*, the nobility. It was the only and best idea Asa could come up with to learn who was targeting

him, but the fact of appealing to his friend disturbed Asa. He was supposed to help Antanas, not the other way around! Asa needed another person to help. The appeal hurt his pride. Asa should have had the necessary entries into the *szlachta* and into the petty nobility to fish for answers. He should not have to rely on Antanas! What if Antanas could not hear out the men and provide him with a name?

Asa decided then to dedicate more time to such contacts among the nobility and the wealthier merchants, also among the Christians and among the noblemen near Thorn. This was an important decision for his new life. He needed to get into the circles of the rich, not just into the vicinity of the Jews. Still, this moment, he had to ask Antanas to investigate. He hated this all the more, because he knew Antanas too needed all his precious time to develop his trade. A few weeks later, a fifth lease under regular attack, Asa saw Antanas in Thorn. He exposed the issue to his brother-in-law.

Antanas at first didn't really understand what Asa found so important. He, himself, was not involved at all! Asa told him he knew that. He explained in detail. Antanas finally promised to interrogate his contacts discreetly about the change of leases. Two weeks later, Antanas called on Asa to hold a meeting in a tavern at Vilna.

'A Christian man who serves as go-between in many dealings with the Polish nobles having interests in Ruthenia is involved,' Antanas announced to Asa. 'This man, one Andrei Ogloski, outbids you in all leases he has set his mind to. The men of the nobility know you are moving from Vilna. Word has spread. They fear you are leaving and want to grant their leases to somebody else, much less apt at management.'

Asa paled. He knew of Ogloski, a Lithuanian Christian of Vilna. Andrei Ogloski was the son of a small side-branch family of one of the lower nobles of Lithuania. He was the typical servant, not too smart, the messenger, face almost hidden in hair, eye-brushes as heavy as his beard. The man could be mistaken for a Jew.

This Ogloski, Asa was sure, could not be the brain behind the scheme of depriving him, Asa, of his better enterprises. Asa's brother, Abraham Vincevicius, sometimes employed Ogloski. Was Abraham, his proper brother, secretly buying his best leases, his most profitable business? Was Abraham thwarting his plans and trying to ruin him? Abraham was buying Asa's best taverns and distilleries. He was offering more money than Asa could in these circumstances throw on the table. Was Abraham offering more money than Asa, knowing perfectly well which profits the leases brought? Abraham had seen the list of leases and of the profits. Asa still considered the taverns and distilleries part of the family fortune. Clearly, Abraham did not. The taverns targeted were among the ones which brought in the best profits.

'You may not know this man, Andrei Ogloski,' Antanas told Asa a little later. 'He has no great fortune of his own. He is merely a middleman.'

Asa nodded.

Antanas hesitated. He held a pause. Finally, he came to a decision of sorts.

'Ogloski is your brother's man,' Antanas continued, hesitatingly.

Antanas was embarrassed, having to point this out.

Antanas felt as worried as Asa.

‘Your brother Abraham is buying you out. Abraham is Sarah’s brother, too. Why should he be acting this way? What should we do?’ Antanas wondered.

Asa looked up, ‘we? We? What should we be doing? What should I be doing, you mean?’

Antanas’s phrase had nevertheless pleased Asa. Antanas and Sarah were offering help, he understood. Antanas and Sarah were on his side. Antanas was proposing more help, further reflection on what Asa could do, a discussion on Abraham’s motives, and support.

Asa placed his hand on Antanas’s shoulder.

‘This is family business,’ Asa said. ‘I’ll arrange this with my brother. You have been of great help. You shouldn’t intervene in the family affairs at this moment. Especially not in the nasty ones. Do not upset Sarah. You are family not long enough. For a moment, I thought you might be involved.’

‘Oh no, I was not,’ Antanas replied. ‘You should realise once and for all, Asa, I am with Sarah, and I am one with my best friend. Actually, I only have one man I would like to call my friend. We two should stick to each other. We need to, in our new environment, where we know so few intimately. We two should support each other. Please, count on me and Sarah!’

‘Please count on me and Leah,’ Asa paraphrased Antanas. ‘I have been doing so since many weeks already, count on you and Sarah. Thanks. I count too much on you two already!’

The two men shook hands. They embraced. A pact had been sealed, and actually, a deep friendship confirmed.

Antanas remained seated. Asa would have expected Antanas to stand, now, and leave.

Antanas lingered. There was something else he wanted to discuss. Antanas turned his empty glass in his fingers. Asa served him from the bottle. Antanas drank. He waited, after Asa had explained some more his apprehensions about his brother.

A little later, Antanas reached a decision to speak out.

Antanas added, ‘Abraham is mingling with Polish politicians, Asa. You probably know that already. It has taken another turn, lately. I am more inclined than you to Polish patriotic feelings, so maybe I should not dwell on this. You are my friend. I think you should know what I heard from *szlachta* members and their secretaries about your brother. He has become quite as wealthy as some of those men. He dwells in their circles.’

Once more, Asa looked up, ‘what do you mean?’

‘Abraham and his mistress receive in their apartments politicians and agitators involved in pro-Polish patriotic clubs and organisations. A man Abraham seems to meet quite often is called Joachim Lelewel, a professor of Vilna University. This Lelewel is the Vilna representative of a political group in the *Sejm*, in parliament, a group simply called ‘The Movement’.

This Movement is more or less a secret association of men with outspoken liberal and patriotic Polish opinions. They are active in Warsaw, enticing slightly revolutionary ideas among the more passionate patriots in the *Sejm*. Lelewel, as a professor, targets with his speeches the youths of the Polish and Lithuanian academies. The Russian police and the Russian authorities around Grand Duke Constantine, the regent of Poland for the czar, know all about Lelewel’s opinions and covert actions. So do the members of the higher Polish nobility, the *szlachta*, and other patricians. Men like Prince Czartoryski and Prince Radziwill and their entourage know very well Lelewel. Lelewel participated in a very minor role in the

disturbances that happened in Warsaw linked to the Decembrist Revolt in St Petersburg, in Russia. Lelewel was not arrested in 1826, in the aftermath of that Decembrist Uprising. His name was not mentioned at the trials of the men who led the rebellion of Warsaw. Lelewel worked in the background. The Polish uprising of the noblemen who sympathised with the Decembrists did not last long. General Krasinski ordered his Russian troops to open fire on the few shouting revolutionaries. The uprising was suppressed by Polish officers and Polish soldiers in an instance!

Afterwards, still in 1826, the head of the uprising, Count Stanislas Soltyk, was arrested. He was 76 years old, but nevertheless an active patriot for Polish independence. Soltyk was imprisoned in a cell in Warsaw. He still lives in that prison. His son is now involved with the patriotic clubs of Poland. These are the kind of men, Lelewel and Soltyk, Abraham and his mistress are involved with.

Elzbieta Dobrovolski keeps a kind of Polish-Lithuanian salon, where the idealists gather. They are an excited bunch, Asa, with whom I would not want to be associated. They talk of the misruling of the Russian tzar, of his autocratic regime, and of revolt against the Russian government. Can you imagine? What resources can the Poles and Lithuanians muster against the Russians?

Well, Joachim Lelewel escaped the arrests of Warsaw after the Decembrist revolt. He is a prudent, tough, intelligent man. He is very intelligent and prefers to work behind the scenes, pushing others to the forefront. I would call him an extreme patriot, who talks very passionately about Polish independence and a constitutional, liberal Polish-Lithuanian state. Lelewel is a man who wants to grant equal rights to every citizen in the state. This also appeals to the Jews!

The other political parties that seek change in the Polish political system, the conservatives of the nobility and the constitutionalists of the scholars and wealthy burghers, dare not go so far. The first prefer continuing an autocratic system under a king. The second feel a constitution is what is needed, and a government controlled by a president and a powerful Parliament to rule the country. They are for order and progress.

Lelewel was one of the first historians of Lithuania. He hesitates and doubts on his actions. He is a man of the word, of the idea, not a man of action. I don't believe he would be the leader Lithuania and Poland needs. Of course, he can rally his group of civil servants, officers of the Polish army, the Polish and Lithuanian youths of the academies, and the administrative employees of the state in the lower ranks to his cause.'

Antanas paused, then continued, 'Abraham and Elzbieta Dobrovolski are receiving in their house Polish and Lithuanian, mainly petty, nobles. As long as that entire group shouts and agitates with words and gestures, the Russian secret police will not intervene. They let the kettle boil. As soon as the lid comes off the kettle, when it comes to acts, the governor of Vilna will move and throw the lot in prison. Their names have already been inscribed on a list. I doubt there will be a trial, beyond a rapid judgement by military higher officers. Imprisonment may mean execution at the worst, quiet disappearance never to be heard of again as the next worst, exile to far away Siberia or simple imprisonment in a rotten cell of Vilna Castle at the best! Your brother is playing with fire!'

Asa was appalled.

‘There is more,’ Antanas continued. ‘Recently, another potential insurgent has been seen to enter regularly Abraham’s apartment. A woman called Emilia Plater!’

Antanas held a pause, looked at Asa and watched to see whether Asa knew the woman. Asa’s eyes remained astonished and innocent. Antanas sighed with relief.

‘Plater is a Lithuanian countess, the most excited patriot among all. She was born in Vilna. Her parents divorced when she was still a child. She was brought up in a patriotic environment by distant relatives of the Lithuanian nobility. She must be 25 years old now. She is very vocal of her anti-tzar feelings. She dares walking around in some sort of Polish-Lithuanian uniform. She is organising a group of volunteers to join a possible uprising. I do not doubt she is ready to defend Lithuania against the Russian army, weapons in hand. The Russian secret police know about her. So far, they must have been considering she does not immediately form a threat to Russia and to the government troops. Emilia Plater is one who calls the lower nobility to action. It is not very dignifying for a noble Lithuanian to hear being called a coward by an excited woman! Some may be stirred by her appeals to rise against the tzar of Russia.’

Antanas concluded with a whispered question, ‘in the event an armed conflict arises, Asa, which side will you be on, on the Russian or on the Polish side?’

Asa did not have to think through on that subject. His opinion was clear and firm.

He replied, ‘I am a Jew. I serve the ruler of the land. Today, that ruler is Tzar Nicholas. I shall side with the Russians, Antanas. Moreover, I am sorry to say to you, a Polish patriot, the Poles have never considered us, Jews, quite as their equals, not in real life and not in the courts of justice.’

The Russians do not want Jews near them, but here, in Lithuania, they treat the Jews and the Poles the same way rather fairly. Nevertheless, I don’t like what the Russians are doing to the Jews with the conscription laws. They force the Jews out of their territories. In such matters, the state always wins. It is more powerful than any other force in the land. I am leaving for Prussia, hoping for the better.

I bend like a reed in the wind, as my forefathers have done before me. That may sound cowardly, but what can I do against a power so great as the Russian autocratic government? I won’t play with fire. I won’t put my family in danger with foolish sentiments for a nation I already do not belong to anymore. Your proposal to move to Prussia has probably been more effective and right than you may suspect, Antanas! I felt such a need since long, Antanas. You merely confirmed my suspicions and helped me convince Leah.

Abraham is another matter. Abraham is not a man to bend. Abraham thinks I am a coward and he scolds me for it. So be it! I think I have chosen for the wisest solution. I don’t have any particular patriotic feelings, not for any country. Poland-Lithuania had always considered us, Jews, as foreigners. So has Russia. They all still think along that line. I do like the Poles. I truly do. But, as is written in our Jewish laws, I will remain a Jew and show respect to the ruler of the land.’

‘I understand, of course,’ Antanas nodded. ‘I respect you, my friend, even though I am Lithuanian first, and therefore dedicated by soul and body to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to the country we were a part of before the Russians conquered us. The word of “conquer” is important. We did not join Russia by our free will. It seems almost our duty to continue the struggle.’

The patriotic feelings of the Poles and of the Lithuanians have not abated. I understand this feeling so well! In an uprising for independence of Poland-Lithuania, I should be on the side of the insurgents.

Still, I don't think I will actively take part in such a revolt. I too am Russian, now. The main reason, however, is my discovery of a jewel beyond all prize, my Sarah. I could not endanger her for anything in the world. I'll stay quietly at Danzig. I'll come to Thorn to drink my brandy with you while the cannons blast only a little more southernly, and smile happily seeing your Leah and my Sarah exchanging the latest gossip together. We'll have our children on our laps. I'm a coward of the same kind as you, Asa. Is it not stupid to fight, actually to shoot at other people, to kill? No, no, I'll stay out of any fight if I can help it. I know you will too, and I like you the more for it. Let's drink to that!

Antanas emptied his glass in one desperate gulp. He coughed. Asa did the same.

Asa remained silent, then. He and Antanas said goodbye. More than ever, they were bound by friendship and similar ways of considering the situation.

Asa thought on the matter of his brother's involvements for several days. Asa would not fight his brother as hidden, as covert, as sneaky as Abraham had. He went to confront Abraham immediately. He was assertive, but remained kind and polite. He would not be weak. He found the ways of Abraham the acts of a weak man. Asa refused to consider his brother an enemy.

He called on his brother several times in the course of one week. Abi Abramovski told Asa each time Abraham was not in. Asa knew very well his brother was home, staying in his rooms upstairs until he was gone from the house. He noticed the embarrassed lies in Abi's eyes. Abi did not agree with Abraham's attitude, Asa could see. She probably did not really know what Abraham had been concocting.

After several entreaties, Abraham condescended talking briefly with Asa. He said he had been very busy these last weeks. Asa believed his brother had not yet found out he knew all about Abraham's wanting to cut him off from the most lucrative liquor businesses around Vilna. The meeting remained awkward in the beginning. Abraham assumed Asa had come to reproach him for his behaviour. He had guessed perfectly well Asa had found out about his scheming.

Abraham stood before his brother defyingly, ready for a shouting discussion and a breaking up of relations. But Abraham was Asa's brother, and Asa wanted no schism in the family. He avoided the head-on confrontation. Asa told Abraham he had heard of his brother's transactions. He said he was not opposed to Abraham taking over the liquor business around Vilna. After all, that business had been created by Ezra, their father. Asa told he definitely would move from Vilna.

The two men discussed the entire afternoon. Gradually, Abraham came out of his fortress of resentment. Asa proposed for Abraham to take over the taverns and distilleries he desired, but in a planned and concerted way. Abraham could start managing the taverns immediately, saving Asa time. Asa would leave the taverns in the current state, with managers in place and all furniture and provisions intact. The advantage for Asa was he could spend more time near Thorn. The advantage for Abraham was he would spare much money. He would not have to

re-install anew the taverns and distilleries. Abraham would not have to pay more for the leases than Asa currently did.

Asa told Abraham he had given himself three to four years more to abandon all business in Lithuania and Ruthenia, and set up new businesses in Prussia. Yes, Asa told he would demand compensation from Abraham, but Abraham would in the end gain a new, sound business, with better profits than by hostile takeovers. It was better for the money to stay in the family. Asa did not mention once his brother could have gotten to the same kind of arrangement, had Abraham come to talk with him.

Abraham agreed and shook on the deal. Abraham admitted no apologies to Asa. He avoided his brother's questions as to why he had acted the way he had. Abraham never justified his attitude, and Asa did not insist. Abraham gave no sound reasons as to why he had begun to buy Asa's leases. Asa understood Abraham had wanted to take over Asa's businesses to get wealthier still, with a sound and regular new business. He would have gained Asa's place among the traders and among the most esteemed persons of the *Kahal*.

Asa didn't mind anymore. He didn't give in to the bitterness in his heart. He did regret what Abraham had tried to do. He regretted Abraham had acted less well than a friend would have. More than ever, he was convinced his leaving Vilna was what he had to do. He had broken already with his family of Vilna, broken the strongest ties with his father and brother, though he would continue seeing them and honouring them. He was on his own, now. He felt oddly free for the first time in his life, and powerful. A new life waited for him at Thorn. He would found his own family there, in Prussia. His family would now consist foremost and almost exclusively of his wife Leah and their children, and of his sister Sarah and her husband, his good friend Anton Svirskius.

Abraham laughed when Asa proposed him to take over all his taverns and distilleries. No, Abraham said, the ones that brought in little money he would not continue to hold. Abraham threw a paper on the table. He wanted only to grab about half of Asa's leases, the ones which were the most profitable.

All these years, Asa had presented the list with the profits to his father and brother, to see the list now come back to him this way, thrown in his face, almost contemptuously. The list was his work. His father and Abraham had to know just how much the liquor business had expanded under his leadership. He was shocked. Was there no decency in his brother? Asa smiled wryly. So it would be, then.

Asa offered no further comment. He discussed a scheme of cessation in time, against modest compensations above the true value of the domains. He would not lose much money, in an orderly way, at moments in time that suited him. Abraham got the Lithuanian business at a fair price. His fortune would soar in the next years, Asa was sure.

Asa didn't really care anymore. He didn't begrudge his brother his new position in Vilna as one of the richest Jews of the neighbourhood. When they parted, Asa shook Abraham's hand. He did not embrace his brother. The parting remained cold. Asa withdrew in silent resignation. He was sad he had practically lost his only brother. The sadness was the only sign he conceded. He did not tell he had not appreciated his brother's attitude, but when Abraham looked at him a last time, he noticed his brother knew.

They would hold to the scheme, Asa knew, but matters would never be the same between Asa and his brother. For the second time, ties had been broken. They shook hands, scarcely looked into each other's eyes longer than a glimpse. Asa left his brother's house.

Asa never told his father about the arrangement. He merely mentioned to Ezra he had come to an agreement with his brother. In the future, Asa would only rarely set foot again in his brother's house. He walked away, sad and grim. He judged Antanas acted like a better brother than Abraham!

Asa had to modify his financial plan after the arrangement with his brother. He had wanted to keep a few large taverns and adjoining distilleries near Vilna. By the covert actions of his brother and by their final agreement, he would have to hold on to the lesser leases on smaller taverns and liquor producing sites that were dispersed and less profitable. He needed those, though, to survive the years between his move to Thorn and the growing of his new business. His brother had systematically taken the better leases and the higher profits. Asa could hold back from visiting a few taverns, but he was left with a larger number of less profitable sites than he had originally aimed. His taverns were spread over a large territory. The longer he waited getting rid of those sites, the longer the effort of travelling he had to sustain. He would need to grow his trade and business in Prussia faster than he had wished. This meant taking higher risks. He would have to work harder, stay away much longer than hoped for from his family, from Leah and the children. He could devote less time to seek land and new leases near Thorn.

Leases, in a way, were not a bad investment. Leases needed less capital than buying land and building sites entirely from nothing. One merely rented the land. Profits came in earlier. For Thorn, Asa wanted to buy for cash half the land to build new taverns and distilleries on. He foresaw continuing to lease only, mostly in Poland, near the border with Prussia, for the other half. He remained dubious about the Duchy of Posen, he knew least of all.

Leasing land in Poland near Thorn proved far more difficult, however, than in Lithuania and in the rest of Russia. The Polish government had issued more laws against Jewish management and ownership of taverns than in greater Lithuania. Controls were more stringent. The Russian administrators controlled less in Lithuania and in White Ruthenia. The Russians had realised their profits were higher this way. Russian governors looked more to the side when Jewish leases came to be challenged. The governors prospered from the additional funds the Jews poured into the personal treasuries of the Russian notables. The Russian magistrates respected the Jewish businessmen, as long as money came their way, which the Jews considered quite natural. Asa's understanding with the Russian governors and their officials had been cordial. Such fine relations had to be built up from scratch in Poland, near Thorn.

Asa still felt shaken about his brother's involvement. He had asserted his rights in front of his brother, but for the family's sake he had swallowed his pride. He had accommodated his brother. True, most of his currently held taverns were bringing in decent profits. The buildings had been erected out of Asa's own funds. They had been written off financially. Asa lost little money in the arrangement with his brother. He merely had lost time and effort. Now, he had to work harder than planned. As to the motives of his brother, Asa could only

guess his brother desired the wealth Asa's business had brought. Asa believed Abraham had not come open-faced to him because of the grudge his brother still felt for Asa's marrying Leah Perlman. On the other side, Asa was glad most of his best business stayed in the Vincevicius Family.

Asa didn't have to fear the conscription laws of Russia anymore. He had officially notified the *Kahal* of Vilna he didn't live in the city anymore. He had refused to give his new address. He still owned his house in Gaono, but the house emptied more and more of the nicer furniture. Worthless furniture nobody cared for would remain in the house. As the builders added room after room to his more spacious house in Thorn, he and Leah shipped more and more of their furniture to their new home.

By the end of 1827, Leah lived almost exclusively in Thorn, and in her new rooms. Asa's son and daughters were by then officially inscribed and known as Prussian citizens.

The rabbis of Vilna seemed to know quite well where Asa had moved to. As money continued streaming into the Great Synagogue of Vilna, however, they would not react hostilely. They remained puzzled. Many other Jewish families one by one had begun to leave Vilna in the same way.

Asa had no children who would soon have to be taken into account for the conscription lists as cantonists. Asa's only son, Max, was only 7 years old. Abraham had two sons, Iosel of 12 and Edek of 10. Abraham had shouted at Asa that the Russian conscription and the cantonist system were no issue as far as he was concerned. Abraham was confident he could buy his way out of the cantonist system for his sons. Asa didn't doubt Abraham could propose high bribes for his sons never to become soldiers in the Russian army. Abraham also could apply to men he already paid much gold today to be allowed his own, ruthless ways in trade.

Of Asa's children, Rebekah and Esther grew into great beauties. Rebekah resembled her mother most. She had fine and regular traits. She showed a natural elegance and dignity like her mother. Esther looked like Asa's mother, refined with the lean figure of Leah. She was gypsy-like with ample black hair, darker skin, and fuller lips. The Hungarian roots on Asa's mother side showed through. Esther's character was passionate. Her eyes flamed suddenly and terribly. She soon proved to be extremely intelligent. She had inherited fully a natural talent for languages. She read many books on her own, also the religious texts. She could easily measure herself with the boys of the *heder*, of the primary school. She had a very seductive way of talking and acting with boys, which made Asa and Leah a little afraid. Asa and Leah would have to hold a vigilant eye on this girl! Leah supposed Esther would be a fine wife to a rabbi or to a scholar of great fame, but Asa doubted this. He feared a much more troubled life for his younger daughter.

Abraham's children too were smart and handsome boys. Abraham sent them at a very young age to Königsberg for their studies, mainly to have them out of the eyes and attention of the Vilna rabbis. Abraham had predicted rightly. The *Kahal* of Vilna never called one of his sons to serve in the Russian army. Iosel and Edek did not become cantonists. They cost their father much money, but other youngsters were chosen to go the army than the Vincevicius boys.

The *Kahals* in the Jewish Settlement Areas of Russia thus sent mostly boys from poorer families, and sickly boys to the cantonist system. As these were already weaker and less smart, they died or disappeared and were never seen back in their home town. The Jews of Vilna considered the cantonist system as one of the greatest disasters in Jewish history that befell on them, but they bowed their head and suffered their fate.

## The Polish Uprising. 1830

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, about 200 great families formed the *szlachta*, the higher nobility. These owned vast domains in all parts of the historical Polish-Lithuanian provinces, which included the territories of Volhynia, Podolia and Ukraine. Connected to the *szlachta* were about one million men of the lower nobility, the petty nobles and the clients of the higher nobility. Together, they ruled the lands.

In times long passed, about one hundred thousand nobles had gathered in the fields of Wola near Warsaw to elect a king. The crown of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania was not hereditary. Like the emperors of Germany, the Polish nobility chose the kings of their country.

In Poland proper, more than 3 million serfs cultivated the fields and pastures of the countryside, of the lands that were the property of the state or of the nobility of historical Poland. The kingdom of Poland at that time was the Congress Poland, created after the defeat of the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna. This Poland had received a very liberal constitution, but the tzars of Russia, who were now also the kings of that Poland, had more and more acted as they wished with their Poland, the way they acted with their core lands of Russia. The tzars ruled autocratically, without regard to the Congress Polish constitution. The land called Poland still existed as a much smaller unit, and it still had a king, but its king was the Russian czar. It had a separate parliament, the *Sejm* or diet. Men appointed by the czar governed it.

The former Polish land of Galicia – at this time belonging to the Austrian Empire -, counted about 4 million souls.

The Archduchy of Posen, which the Poles called Poznań, now in Prussian hands, had 2 million inhabitants. Posen had been ceded to Prussia since the three-phase partitioning of the Commonwealth from 1772 to 1795.

Lithuania and the territories of Ruthenia and Ukraine that once formed the greater Lithuania, held 9 million people. Lithuania, Ruthenia and Ukraine had been added to the Russian crown lands. These territories consisted politically of *gubernias* or provinces, ruled by the government of Russia. The provinces were directly parts of Russia. Their people were governed by Russian laws, *ukazes* issued by the czar and his court.

The Jewish people were not allowed to reside in Russia. Exception was made for the Jews living in the defined territories of the Jewish Settlement Areas, which were mostly the former territories of greater Lithuania, including Ruthenia and Ukraine. In these territories, and also in Poland itself, industry and commerce were primarily in the hands of the Jews. The Jews were considered foreigners in the lands, subject to special laws.

The Poles and Lithuanians, principally the men of the *szlachta* and of the petty nobility, and the idealistic scholars, aspired for independence from Russia. They longed to re-establish the unity of the lands lost to Russia, Austria and Prussia. A strong Polish-Lithuanian national feeling was kept alive.

In the Congress Polish *Sejm*, 3 political parties dominated the meetings.

Joachim Lelewel and Valentin Zwierkowski led the 'Movement' or the Democratic Party.

Count Vincent Niemoïovski led the Constitutionalist Party, the partisans of strict legality with a constitution.

Finally, Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski and the Counts Ladislaw Ostrowski and Roman Soltik enjoyed the support of the higher classes of society in the Conservative Party.

Congress Poland still had a considerable army. It was for the greatest part under Russian command. Its commander-in-chief was Archduke Constantine Pavlovich Romanov, the brother of the czar. Constantine was married to a Polish countess. Since she was not of the highest nobility of the court of St Petersburg. Constantine had agreed to relent on the crown of Russia at the death of Tzar Alexander I, his brother.

The Polish army consisted of about 30.000 regular soldiers in Poland proper. Eventually, 40.000 men could be added from greater Lithuania, 30.000 men from the Archduchy of Posen, 18.000 soldiers from Galicia, and a further 30.000 men of the reserve army on the Vistula River, also positioned in Poland. The army of Poland-Lithuania could consist in 1830 of about 150.000 men, at most 180.000 in all.

In Warsaw, at the end of September of 1830, took place a secret meeting of the patriotic leaders of Poland-Lithuania. They decided for an uprising against the Russian domination. Had they been spurred by a similar revolution for independence in Belgium?

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, Brussels had risen to a movement of national liberation from the Dutch State. The revolution led to the proclamation on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October of the independence of Belgium. Other revolutionary ideas swept through Europe in that year of 1830, which shook Germany, Spain, Switzerland and also France and England. Europe was torn out of its stupor by ideas of freedom, independence and self-government.

The uprising in Warsaw, decided upon by the secret patriotic societies of Poland-Lithuania, would start on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, 1830. The uprising was not a spontaneous, popular revolt. It was well managed and led from the beginning by a provisional government and a Polish Council. Some of the names of the leading men in these bodies were Count Sobolewski, the Generals Rautenstrauch and Kosecki, Count Fedro and Prince Lubecki, Prince Adam Czartoryski, Prince Michal Radziwill, Senator Rochakowski, General Ludwig Michal Pac, the well-known writer Julian Niemcewicz, and General Chlopicki. Later would join Leon Dembowski, Gustaf Malachowski and Joachim Lelewel. All these names were famous in Poland-Lithuania.

The same day the rebellion started in Warsaw, the Polish Council demanded a constitution (the one of Congress Poland of 1815) of Archduke Constantine, and the execution of the promises made by Tzar Alexander I. Alexander had promised to give back to Poland the provinces now incorporated into Russia. The Patriotic Club, by its President Xavier Bronikowski, put additional demands to the Russian leaders, such as the disarmament of the Russian troops in Poland. Poland entire rose in revolution, and later Lithuania, Volhynia, Podolia and Ukraine followed suit. Everywhere, the Russian eagles were torn down and replaced by the white eagle, the symbol of Poland. The insurgents came also to wear a white cocarde on their breast.

Revolutionary Poland could not count on Galician and Poznanian aid. Prussia and Austria sent their Polish troops to the other frontiers of the countries. Prussia had even disarmed the troops of Posen and sent them to Silesia.

Archduke Constantine immediately fled from his palace in Warsaw, where his life was in danger. Some said he disguised as a woman to flee the palace while Polish insurrectionists invested it. He joined his troops outside the city. Later still, he moved his soldiers inland. One by one, his Polish soldiers and his Polish officers defected and joined the uprising. The Polish Council formed the new provisional government of Poland.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of December, Warsaw emerging slowly out of the chaos of the fights in the streets, General Jozef Chlopicki took command of the army. He received the title of dictator. From the beginning, Chlopicki did not like his position. He didn't really want to fight the Russians. He thought negotiations could solve matters. The tzar would listen to the rightful claims of Poland. Chlopicki wanted to negotiate and hoped an armed conflict with Russia would prove unnecessary. Nevertheless, the radicals in the *Sejm*, in Parliament, pressed for war! The Polish Council declared a national uprising against Russia on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December.

Dictator Chlopicki had sent Prince Drucki-Lubecki to Russia for negotiations with the court of St Petersburg. The tzar demanded nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the Polish forces and of the *Sejm*. The envoy of Chlopicki returned to Warsaw with this message on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January. The next day, Chlopicki resigned.

Nicholas I was still king of Poland. He had taken the crown of Congress Poland on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May of 1829. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1831, the Polish *Sejm* declared Tzar Nicholas I dethroned as king of Poland. The proclamation also declared Poland independent. It stated all the power in the land emanated from the people.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, The Polish Council formed a new government with Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski as leader. Prince Michal Gedeon Radziwill was chosen as the successor to Chlopicki. He would henceforth command the Polish army. Chlopicki continued to serve the army as general. Another declaration defined the powers of the commander-in-chief of the army.

Both the princes Czartoryski and Radziwill were of Lithuanian origin. No doubt remained, a Russo-Polish war would be waged and had even already started!

The war with Russia began the same month of January 1831. Field Marshal Hans Karl von Diebitsch entered Poland-Lithuania with substantial Russian troops. Several Russian generals marched with him, leading about 60.000 soldiers. A good number of these had to be used as garrison troops, so that in the early months of 1831 merely about 45.000 Russian soldiers could be used to manoeuvre in Poland proper.

Armament factories existed in Poland, but these only repaired old guns. The factories had not yet delivered new guns, sabres and bayonets. The Poles could lay their hands in the military warehouses on about 66.000 guns. About 6.000 of the guns disappeared mysteriously in the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1830. Rumours told these 6.000 guns had been bought by Jews.

The Polish army had secured about 150 cannons. A powder factory had been established at Marimont near Warsaw. It started production of powder only 2 months later. The powder warehouses of Cracow delivered only small quantities of gunpowder.

The Polish generals considered the left bank of the Vistula the last territories to hold on. Here, the government could continue working. On the Vistula, only the fortresses of Modlin and Praga could form obstacles to the Russians and stop them from passing the Vistula to the left bank. No other fortified places near the Vistula had been erected to protect the heartland of Poland from eastern invasions.

The Polish generals began to realise they were up against a giant in every aspect of war. Nevertheless, when the Russian battalions advanced, they met obstinate, heroic resistance. Prince Radziwill and his generals counted only on the regular Polish troops, little on the partisans, which nevertheless ceaselessly harassed the oncoming Russian troops of Diebitsch.

The Russian Field Marshal's troops swelled to 120.000 men and 300 cannons. The most important Russian army commanders of Diebitsch were the Generals Szachoffskoi and Mandersten, Geissmar and Kreutz, Generals von Pahlen, Witt and Rosen. Grand Duke Constantin led the Russian reserves. The Russian battalions were perfectly organised. They carried with them all the materials necessary for a war campaign.

Soon, Prince Radziwill proved an indecisive leader, and a man not really up to his task of organising the movements of a large army. From the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, the Russian forces pushed through the frontiers of Congress Poland.

In January of 1831, the insurrectionist Polish army could still pass the rivers Vistula, Bug and Narew over the ice. This facilitated the movements of the various insurrectionist army divisions. From late February on, the ice began to melt, so that the rivers formed difficult obstacles to the Russians. Bridges became tactically very important.

The Russian army of Lithuania had joined Diebitsch. It consisted of more than 2.700 men and 120 cannons. It marched under the orders of General Rosen.

In February 1831, the Polish army was composed of about 47.000 men, whereas the Russians still advanced with 75.000 men. The Russian Field Marshal pushed to Warsaw. In a series of battles and quick army movements, he could not force a straight, open way to Warsaw. The Polish Generals Krukowiecki, Szembek, Iankovski, Skrzynecki, Uminski, Dwernicki, Klicki, Sierawski, Chlopicki and others still, stopped in arduous combats the Russian lunge for Warsaw.

The result of the battles of early to mid-February, some of the fiercest of the war so far, pushed the Polish army ever backwards, westwards, to the left bank of the Vistula. A large battle was waged in the suburb of Warsaw, in Praga, but the Russians were stopped and could not take Warsaw. Severe skirmishes and outright battles developed end February in the environs of Warsaw. Thousands of victims fell on both sides.

The Russian troops finally occupied the suburb of Praga, but the Polish army barred the way into the capital. Most of the houses of Praga were built in wood. Praga was in flames. The

spectacle of a large town in flames, close by the capital, proved terrible for the inhabitants of Warsaw and very frustrating for the Polish Council.

The Russian Field Marshal Diebitsch had lost many men in the battles of Warsaw. He had to protect his army from roaming Polish troops at his back and from other Polish troops attacking from the south. Diebitsch had to concede he could not take Warsaw!

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, Diebitsch left Warsaw and retreated eastwards, inland. He did not pass to the left bank of the Vistula. The approximately 10-day combats for Warsaw came to a halt.

The Russians had not reached their aim. They still stood before Warsaw with 70.000 soldiers, whereas the Poles only had 40.000 soldiers in the city. The Vistula was still frozen over. It could give the Russian troops free access to the environs. Yet, the task of capturing Warsaw and its institutions of government proved too hard for Diebitsch.

The Battle of Praga had also made many Polish victims. The Polish generals and members of the *Sejm* covertly accused Prince Radziwill of incompetence. They elected the General Jan Zygmunt Skrzynecki as commander-in-chief of the army.

Skrzynecki was still relatively young, merely 45 years of age. He had been born in Zebrak of the county of Siedlce. He nurtured high ambitions, and he was very courageous as an army commander. His officers liked him, he was very popular in the army. He also enjoyed the approval and protection of Prince Czartoryski. Though intelligent, he later proved to be no genius of war.

Skrzynecki used the temporary halt in the fiercer battles and army movements to reorganise the Polish army. He appointed to Quarter-Master General the former Colonel Prondzynski, newly promoted to general. Skrzynecki's chief of staff became General Chrzanowski, also newly promoted. Chrzanowski and Prondzynski were even younger than Skrzynecki. More changes were effectuated. The former Colonel Count Jan Stefan Krukowiecki received the title of general of the infantry, and he became the governor of Warsaw. He had fought in the wars of Napoleon, in Napoleon's armies. He too was extremely ambitious, and a skilled schemer.

Isidore Krasinski was replaced as Minister of War by General Morawski.

General Szembek disputed with Skrzynecki over the changes and was promptly dismissed. Szembek had fought courageously at Praga. He was one of the best generals in the Polish army. Skrzynecki was not all a man of valour. He hesitated and doubted in his decisions, and could not rally all of his generals to his decisions.

In March of 1831, General Skrzynecki started officious negotiations with Field Marshal Diebitsch. Nothing tangible followed from these informal talks between envoys of the Polish and Russian commanders-in-chief. Until Marshal Diebitsch broke off the negotiations, the Polish army grew with many volunteers from Galicia in Austria, from Poznań or Posen in Prussia, from the free city of Cracow and from the Russian, but former lands of Poland-Lithuania in the east. The Russian army, on the contrary, suffered from illnesses, from cholera and typhus, and from difficulties of provisioning in a hostile environment.

In the months March, April and May of 1831, both armies moved around each other, delivering occasionally skirmishes and battles. Sometimes, several battles were delivered on

the same day in different places of Poland. This was the second phase of the intense war, after the initial uprising and the first campaign of Diebitsch.

Both armies had about 60.000 men in active service in the field of war. The Polish army knew better the terrain.

It was spring. The roads were reduced to mud, as the ground ice melted. The Polish divisions could surprise the Russians several times. Moving Russian heavy artillery over water-soaked roads proved close to impossible. This war was a war of movement, in which cavalry charges won the day.

Field Marshal Diebitsch occupied Siedlce and concentrated his troops in the environs. Skrzynecki remained cautious. He took a defensive stand. He refused to attack Diebitsch head-on, fearing the famous Russian artillery.

The Polish generals fought with success against the Russian troops of General Rosen, nearly annihilating him, but with less success against the veterans of General Kreutz. The most important Polish generals in the movements of April were Sierawski and Ludwig Michal Pac. Skrzynecki fought also in these troop clashes.

The uprising of the Polish-Lithuanian people happened not only in Congress Poland itself. Also in the former lands of greater Lithuania, the dissatisfaction with Russian rule had intensified. In November and December of 1830, these lands remained relatively quiet. The nobility at first didn't move. Then, slowly, Volhynia, Podolia and Ukraine joined the insurrection under the Lithuanian Count Tyszkiewicz. Warsaw and the Polish Council reacted.

The Polish General Dwernicki launched a small force against the Russians in these lands of the former greater Lithuania. He brought not much more than 4.000 soldiers, yet he attacked the Russians incessantly with his cavalry. Dwernicki would have to fight against the troops of the Russian Generals Kreutz and Rudiger. Dwernicki had before him from 30.000 to 40.000 soldiers of Russian troops! He got little or no aid from the local troops of Tyszkiewicz. He could do not much more than manoeuvre and avoid being massacred to the last man. His campaign was not useless! He could keep busy the Russian troops evolving in greater Lithuania, so that these could not participate in the skirmishes in central Poland. The campaign of Dwernicki took place in April of 1831.

A third Russian General called Rott, arrived in Volhynia, where Dwernicki operated. Dwernicki fought heroically, until General Rudiger reappeared with his troops. Dwernicki feared being crushed by the divisions of Rudiger. Rudiger attacked Dwernicki in the rear, after having passed undisturbed through Austrian territory. Dwernicki came to an arrangement with Austria. He could retreat with his army to a camp in the territory of Galicia. After 5 days of negotiations, he deposed arms. Dwernicki's small army became the first prisoners of the Austrian empire in this war.

The combats and the surrender of Dwernicki did stir up the patriots in Volhynia, Podolia and Ukraine. The inhabitants of these lands equally rose against the Russians at the beginning of May. At that moment, the Russian army of General Rott was at Kameniec with 12.000 men.

The uprising was not very popular in the eastern Polish-Lithuanian lands. Count Tyszkiewicz could only assemble 4.000 men under his command.

The Russian troops of Ukraine had gathered in the environs of Odessa. They attacked Tyszkiewicz and threw the insurgents against the Russian army of Rott. Rott rather quickly destroyed the troops of Tyszkiewicz, still in the same month of May 1831.

The insurgents, meanwhile, had chosen as military commander-in-chief General Kolysko. His head of staff was Major Orlikovski. Other brave men joined the rebellion, entire noble families, such as the brothers Lebowicki, the brothers Potocki, the brothers Sobanski, and Rzewieski, all nobles whose names sounded as bells in the country.

The Russian General Rott surprised the small army of Kolysko near the village of Grodel. In the subsequent battle, he exterminated the rebels. Orlikovski found himself responsible for the retreat to Daszow, where the final battle took place. He committed suicide, not before suggesting to his commander to do the same as Dwernicki and surrender to the Austrians. Kolysko succeeded in gathering the survivors of the battles. With them, he moved to Volhynia in the north, to join the uprising there. After many skirmishes, he and his men finally indeed fled to Galicia, as Orlikovski had proposed, and surrendered to the Austrians. At least, their lives were saved.

In Volhynia, the land proprietors assembled a small army under a former major of the Polish army, one Charles Rozicki. In mid-May, Rozicki heard of the debacle of the Podolian and Ukrainian rebels under Kolysko. Rozicki never had more than a few hundred men of cavalry. The Russian, in far greater numbers in what they considered now as their own lands, massacred them.

In May of 1831, Field Marshal Diebitsch still had about 55.000 soldiers to oppose the Polish armies of Skrzynecki. General Kreutz was busy fighting in the region of Lublin. Diebitsch merely waited until his victorious forces of Volhynia, Podolia and Ukraine could march up to him. He took a defensive stance in the meantime. By then, the rebellion had equally started in Lithuania and in Samogitia, the north-western regions of Lithuania. Diebitsch did not doubt that, as in the south of the former greater Lithuanian lands, his troops would easily crush the opposition in the north, and then join him. In the meantime, he waited and lingered. On, the Polish side too, Skrzynecki waited. His chief-of-staff, Prondzynski, urged him to attack Diebitsch, but Skrzynecki refused. The war continued with a multitude of skirmishes, some of which were won by either side.

The Polish army often attacked at night to surprise and harass the Russians. This war of attrition went on quite some time. When suddenly and totally unexpectedly Diebitsch did launch a massive attack on the Poles, Skrzynecki retreated hastily. Diebitsch did not move far anyway. He stopped his army. He marched to join the Russian army of his General von Pahlen at Kaluszyn. Together, they advanced to Minsk, where General Gielgud, with a large force of Polish soldiers, waited for him. When the Russians attacked him, Gielgud had to abandon Minsk. Diebitsch once more stopped and retreated to his former positions at Kostrzyn. This happened while Dwernicki was still fighting in the south. Skrzynecki then ordered General Chrzanowski to march to Lublin, against the Russian General Kreutz with the aim to defeat Kreutz. Chrzanowski's leaders were the Generals Ramorini and Andrei

Skarzynski. Heavy skirmishes followed between their troops and those of Kreutz. Afterwards, Chrzanowski rested for a month without moving to new initiatives. General Ramorini left his army to take up another command in the main army of Skrzynecki. Commander-in-chief Skrzynecki had by then assembled about 68.000 infantry and 13.000 cavalry, with over 140 pieces of artillery, a considerable army.

Around that time of Mid-May of 1831, the Lithuanians finally rose against the Russians. They soon asked for help from the Polish commander-in-chief Skrzynecki. The Polish general answered the plea favourably. In the meantime, Skrzynecki did not dare attack Diebitsch frontally. The Russian army still stayed in the environs of Kostrzyn. Skrzynecki aimed to attack in surprise an elite corps of the Russians, in which the highest nobility of Russia served. This corps had remained between the Rivers Bug and Narew.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, Skrzynecki, with 46.000 men, marched to the far, but to him strategic town of Sierock. Skrzynecki had left a smaller force under General Uminski to guard Diebitsch's moves.

Diebitsch soon enough heard of the movements of the main Polish army. He attacked General Uminski's small force, left behind by the Polish upper command to guard him. The Polish resistance to the advancing Diebitsch was so great, however, Diebitsch thought he had somehow stumbled against the entire Polish army. He withdrew to Kaluszyn, and from there back to Kostrzyn. General Uminski followed Diebitsch, so ordered to guard the main Russian army.

Skrzynecki, having heard of these developments, quite satisfied, continued to the Bug and Narew, to attack the finest Russian Guards. With him marched the infantry divisions of the Generals Rybinski, Malachowski, Raminski and Gielgud, as well as the cavalry divisions of the Generals Skarzynski, Turno and Iankowski. Other generals with him were Lubienski, Chlapowski and Iankowski.

The Polish army made contact with the surprised Russian Guards. Grand Duke Michael Pavlovich Romanov of Russia was among these troops. The capture or annihilation of these, finest among the Russian troops, would have shocked the world.

Skrzynecki established his headquarters at Xienzopol, at about one mile from the positions occupied by the enemy. The Russian Guards formed an army of about 18.000 men. The Poles had brought 32.000 men to attack the pride of Russia.

And then, Skrzynecki hesitated attacking and annihilating the Russian Guards! His various generals moved their troops around, harassed the guards, but did not attack straight on. The Russians used the occasion to escape to Tykocin. They had won a day's march on the Polish army. Though the belligerents fought skirmishes, the Russian Guards continued to move and retreat.

The army of Field Marshal Diebitsch then also set itself on the move. Battles developed against the Polish troops of General Lubienski. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, all these soldiers stood once more before one another at Visocki-Mazowiecki. The Russians had by then gathered

65.000 men. The Polish army, more dispersed than the Russians, confronted them with 40.000 men.

Skrzynecki retreated. He marched to the town of Ostrolenka on the left bank of the Narew. As of the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, a series of hard battles finally ensued. A large, general battle of the two entire armies was finally waged. The Battle of Ostrolenka lasted the entire day. It rather developed to the advantage of the Russians, but ended undecided. The next day, the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, the Polish army retreated.

Field Marshal Diebitsch could have annihilated the Poles at that moment, but he too hesitated to new attacks.

The Polish army fled to the Vistula and back to Praga and to Warsaw.

Both Diebitsch and Skrzynecki had made mistakes, the one having let pass the occasion to destroy the main Polish army, the other to not have destroyed the prestigious regiments of the Russian Guards, despite the early plan.

The Battle, of Ostrolenka was one of the bloodiest clashes between the two armies of Poland and Russia in the second phase of the Russo-Polish war. The Polish army may have lost as many as 8.000 dead, the Russian army lost about 6.000 men.

After the Battle of Ostrolenka, the reputation of General Skrzynecki diminished ostensibly. Yet, no important changes were made to the Polish government and to the leadership of the army. With Ostrolenka ended the second phase of the war.

The West European countries provided no help in the Polish Uprising of 1830-1831 to the insurgents against the Russian regime. Poland, that revolted against its established ruler, received no marks of sympathy from other powers.

England nurtured its best relations with Russia. When the sultan of Turkey proposed to attack Russia with an army of 200.000 men, in support of Poland, English ambassadors stopped the initiative.

France also, did not at that time wish to enter into an open conflict with Germany and Austria. These last two great powers preferred, of course, to hold on to respectively the Grand Duchy of Posen and to Galicia.

France did send a cargo of rifles and ammunition to the insurgents via the norther Lithuanian port of Polangen (called Palanga in Polish), the only port of any importance on the Baltic for Poland-Lithuania. This only happened relatively late in the war. Its contribution did not change the balance of forces.

England and France feared more revolutions in their own country, and with good reason. In France, in the 3-day revolution of from the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, an end was made to the reign of King Charles X. A constitutional monarchy was created. Charles's son too abdicated. A distant cousin, Louis Philippe d'Orléans, agreed to rule.

The French painter Eugène Delacroix produce his monumental 'Liberty guiding the People' in that same year of 1830. Ideas of revolt against the rulers were fomented almost everywhere in Europe.

From the beginning of his Polish campaign, Field Marshal Diebitsch experienced issues of his own. He had at his disposal several arsenals of weapons. These were the arsenals of the Russian army of occupation. They had not been captured by the Polish insurgents. The

arsenals had been installed in heavily fortified places, guarded by strong Russian garrisons. Diebitsch had to organise food provisioning for his men, though, fodder for his horses and other products an army on campaign needed and did not bring with it. For instance, he needed grease for the wheels of his chariots, uniforms, soap, wine and brandy, fresh legumes, fruit, and so on.

The provisioning of his troops from out of the Russian heartland by road and by water proved difficult in a hostile country, dangerous, long to organise, and expensive. Oxen would have eaten up most if not all the fodder they transported, merely to arrive where it was asked for. The partisans targeted his provisioning trains of horse wagons. A much shorter way was to get the provisions from friendly nations, the shortest being from Prussia via the town of Thorn. Guns and ammunition and other materials could be bought and brought in via the port of Danzig on the Baltic Sea, through western Prussia.

Anton Svirskius and other Prussian merchants having good relations with the Russians, were soon providing vast quantities of everything that Diebitsch's moving army might need, from out of Danzig and Thorn. Asa Vincius could get hold of large quantities of grain from Samogitia, from north-western Lithuania, and from other parts of greater Lithuania. The grain from Lithuania and from Volhynia and Podolia, as well as from Ukraine, could be transported to the port of Memel or Klaipeda, brought by ship to Danzig and then sent over the Vistula or Weichsel to Thorn.

Antanas mostly dealt with the trade. Asa Vincius negotiated with the Russian generals and ultimately delivered the goods. From them, he received letters of free movement for himself, his chariots and his convoys, within the lands he had to pass. The Prussian authorities did not wish to antagonise the Russians. They did not interfere with some contraband destined for the armies of Russia. Antanas and Asa were quickly constructing a fortune in gold in these times of war. They showed little scruples.

Asa was slower to add to his fortune. Still, he too made his new wealth in the Russo-Polish war.

Both Antanas and Asa were soon known in the Russian army for their crucial effort and contribution in the provisioning of Diebitsch's divisions. Asa relinquished more of his taverns, and he closed distilleries in Lithuania, particularly in the environs of Vilna. He installed new, modern factories of vodka near Thorn. In the end, by moving to Thorn, he did not lose money! On the contrary! His investments in new taverns, liquor distilleries and cigar factories were paid by the profits he made in the trade with the Russian generals during the Independence War of 1831. He could divest most of his enterprises in Lithuania before they were destroyed by the war.

While the war lasted, Asa still visited Vilna. His travels in Lithuania became increasingly dangerous, though. He diminished these visits gradually. He also bought liquor and cigars from his brother, but never answered on Abraham's entreaties about who were the consumers of the brandy. Abraham got substantial profits from the trade, too. He did suspect the goods went to the Russian troops, but he never refused what Asa asked.

Abraham's grudge against his brother seemed to melt away when Asa provided him with handsome profits.

## The Lithuanian Uprising, Asa's War. 1831

The Lithuanians began their revolt later than the Poles of the Congress Kingdom. They rose against the Russians on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March of 1831.

From the beginning, they lacked the means to plan large operations. They had not enough guns and not enough ammunition. The arsenals of Dunaburg and Riga contained a sufficient number of weapons, but strong, Russian garrisons guarded those warehouses. The garrisons were powerful. They could ward off any attack.

Nevertheless, the Russian General Bartholomeus, who had at his disposal about 12.000 soldiers of infantry, had to retreat before the pressure of the Lithuanian irregular troops, and flee to Prussia. After 2 weeks of palavers, the Prussians allowed these troops to return to Samogitia and to continue the hostilities.

The insurgents rather rapidly became the masters of the land, except for the fortified towns of Vilna, Kovno and Szawle, in which the Russians had left important garrison troops.

Szawle was called Schaulen in German and Siauliai in Lithuanian. It was with Polangen the largest town in Samogitia and served as its capital. Polangen in German, Palanga in Lithuanian and Polish, was a port town, the only one in Polish-Lithuanian hands. It had been purchased in 1824 by Count Michal Tyszkiewicz, the organiser of much of the greater Lithuanian revolt.

In all the Russian *gubernias* of the former greater Lithuania, the inhabitants rose against the oppressor, in search for freedom and independence.

In the *gubernia* of Grodno, many of the young men had already abandoned their home to fight in Poland. Grodno could now propose very few men to join the insurrection.

In the province of Vilna, however, about 5.500 men gathered around their leader, Count Zaluski. The partisan groups of Zaluski could not capture Vilna. They were not with enough combatants.

The Revolutionary Council ordered them to move to the port of Polangen, the only port on the Baltic Sea, where a ship was to arrive with arms. The cargo had been organised by a man called Evans, an Englishman. The ship never arrived, Evans having preferred to sell his guns elsewhere. The partisans of Lithuania remained in desperate need of modern guns. Only in September, a French ship would bring 5.000 rifles and ammunition to Polangen. The group of insurgents of Vilna refused to march so far north. A smaller group of other Lithuanians ran into troops of about 2.000 Russian soldiers, who drew with them 8 cannons. They too did not succeed in reaching Polangen.

To quench the unrest in Lithuania, Field Marshal Diebitsch sent his Generals Malinowski and Nicolai Sulyma to Lithuania. They brought two regiments of infantry and two regiments of cavalry, as well as an artillery detachment serving 12 cannons, to fight against the insurrectionists of Lithuania.

General Sulyma, a descendant of the former Ukrainian Cossack Hetman Yvan Sulyma, was one of the Russians heroes of the Battle of Austerlitz against Napoleon Bonaparte. He had been made prisoner by the French troops, and was later exchanged against French prisoners of Russia. Malinowski and Sulyma defeated on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May the Lithuanian rebel troops of Zaluski.

Zaluski dispersed his men. They turned again to their former warfare as partisans. In the meantime, General Malinowski fought against the Samogitians for a while. Later, Sulyma moved in.

Samogitia was the land that lay left of the Niemen, partly against the coast of the Baltic Sea, in the northwest of Lithuania, close to the East Prussian frontier. This land had first been Lithuanian, then Prussian from 1792 to 1807, and later again ceded as part of Lithuania to Russia.

Malinowski's Russian troops received reinforcements from regiments having been sent from inland Russia. Malinowski drove with his men through the country like a madman, pillaging, killing and raping. He destroyed all the resources of the insurgents, pillaged the castles in the country and burned the fields. He massacred the population of a few villages entirely. Nevertheless, everywhere in Samogitia and Lithuania, the inhabitants ran to their old arms and resisted the campaign of the Russian troops, harassing continually the foraging enemy battalions.

General Sulyma was wiser and tougher than other Russian generals. He took over most of the campaign in Lithuania. Sulyma was less bloodthirsty and less vindictive. Asa Vincius knew Sulyma well. He had done business with Sulyma for the provisioning of the Russian troops.

Many of the former taverns, distilleries and shops of Asa Vincius were totally destroyed in the first Russian fury. The same fate happened to the best enterprises of Asa around Vilna. Asa had gotten rid of all of these, and had been able to sell them off for good money. He suffered no real financial damage beyond what he had already planned. He could only feel some gloating, estimating his brother had done very badly in taking over his more profitable enterprises. Most of those now lay destroyed near Vilna!

About 340 young academicians of Vilna succeeded to join at Troki the partisan leader Matusiewicz. The partisans of the province of Minsk joined these Samogitian partisans. Very many skirmishes took place between the partisans and the Russian troops. Then, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, the Polish General Chlapowski arrived in Lithuania. Chlapowski was a very able commander. Though only with only about 840 soldiers, he fought the Russians successfully.

Chlapowski arrived with his troops on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May at Bransk. He won large, Russian storehouses there, but did not destroy them. His troops advanced to Bielsk, where they found 1.000 guns and a large depot of uniforms. Chlapowski attacked a detachment of Russian infantry and cavalry and made 400 Russian prisoners. He moved on to the centre of Lithuania, where Count and General Tyszkiewicz joined his forces with several hundreds of Lithuanian insurgents. Chlapowski did not allow these troops to fight as they liked, as partisans. He transformed them into his idea of a regular army, in the discipline of Polish troops. Only, that was not how most of the Lithuanian troops liked to fight.

Nevertheless, Chlapowski marched from success to success. Even Grand Duke Constantine, who occupied Slonim with 4.000 soldiers of the Russian troops of Lithuania, retreated to Nieswicz before Chlapowski's pressure of arms. Chlapowski advanced to Vilna. The Russian

garrison received the support of new Russian troops, however. Chlapowski left Vilna aside, and marched on, to Zydmyr. There, a large number of other Lithuanian forces, led by Prince Oginski, joined him. One of Oginski's commanders was Emilia Plater!

By that time, the lands around Vilna had been thoroughly plundered by the passing troops. Practically all the taverns and distilleries in the region, which had once belonged to Asa and now to Abraham Vincevicius, had been plundered and destroyed. The same must have happened to Abraham's cigar factories. Asa's brother must have suffered staggering losses.

The partisans of Lithuania fought with the old guns they had inherited from their forefathers. They had no modern rifles. The Russian troops guarded well the arsenals of Lithuania, knowing their strategic value. The huge depots of weapons and ammunition were situated either in the larger cities, included Vilna, or in fortresses held by strong Russian garrisons. The Lithuanian partisans who roamed the forests were not strong enough to dare attack the Russian arsenals with some hope on success. Especially the partisan groups in northern Lithuania and in Samogitia were desperate for better weapons and for more ammunition. This was especially the case for the troops of Prince Oginski.

It was very dangerous to roam wide in the Lithuanian countryside while the Russian war was on. Patrols of Russian Hussars rode on fast horses in the environs of Kevno or Kaunas, and Vilna. If you didn't meet a Russian patrol and did not have to justify why you were there at that particular moment, you risked being halted by a Lithuanian partisan group, or worse, by Polish revolutionary regular troops, and being asked the same questions.

Asa Vincius returned to Vilna as little as he could. He yearned still to talk to his mother and father, and to meet the rest of his family. Leah was eager to hear from her family, too. The Perlman had moved to Prussia, in an effort quite similar to Asa's. They often visited their daughter in Thorn. Asa and Leah had more rooms added to their house.

Leah complained bitterly she saw Asa only intermittently and worried a lot about what he was doing where.

Asa was very busy. He took the opportunity of replenishing his fortune, his cash funds. He delivered to the Russian army in Poland whatever the soldiers needed for food and clothing. Asa had many contacts with the quartermasters of the Russian divisions. He was a welcome guest in the tents and headquarters of Russian generals. He provided the Russian troops with good meat, fresh legumes and unspoiled flour. The generals recognised dealing with Asa Vincius and his associate Anton Svirskius went smoothly, honestly and in confidence, despite prices which were not among the lowest.

Asa and Antanas were to their word. Asa delivered exactly what the Russian generals asked for, in the exact quantities and in time. His products were of good quality. He paid the bribes that were expected from him. Asa still possessed his Lithuanian passport, allowing him to ride in the Lithuanian countryside. He also had been given letters from Russian quartermasters allowing him free movement.

The partisan groups that occasionally stopped Asa on the roads, showed distrust and they despised him, because he was a Jew. They too did not molest him, however. He could always innocently continue his way, undisturbed and unharmed, despite sometimes long delays. For his transports by wagons, he used the only locally known, smaller paths. Often, he received the help of Russian Hussars to escort his goods on Polish soil.

Asa still stayed in Vilna at his former home. The building in Gaono Street had not yet been sold. By then, the house had been stripped of practically all furniture. Asa had kept only a bed and a wooden bathtub in his bedroom, a table with four rickety, worthless chairs, a fireplace to cook a small meal in his kitchen. He was definitely thinking of selling all his last possessions in Vilna. He could stay in a tavern of the city on his rarer and rarer visits to his parents. In a Vilna to which transport by road of goods was becoming an adventure, finding food was not easy, and costly. Real kosher food was scarce.

Ezra Vincevicius did what he could to keep his small family from going hungry. He hoarded meat in larger than usual quantities to pass the winter and a part of next year. He preserved the meat in his salt containers. Ezra admitted openly to Asa he too would move to Thorn if the present difficulties of war continued beyond the following winter. Asa sighed and made a mental note to yet add two more comfortable rooms to this house of Thorn.

In the high summer of 1831, Asa arrived for a fortnight visit to his parents at Vilna. Ezra welcomed him warmly. Asa talked about the dangers of the war in Lithuania. Ezra explained how life happened and lasted in the almost besieged town of Vilna.

The Vincevicius feared a true siege that could last for months and starve the population, with at the end a ferocious battle for Vilna proper, which might continue in the streets. Asa told his parents his new home in Thorn was sufficiently large to receive them. Ezra thanked Asa profusely, and much delighted. He seemed genuinely relieved. If matters really got worse in the city, it felt good to be assured of a safe haven in Prussia.

Ezra expressed great hope in his children, in Asa and Abraham. He repeated time and time again how well Asa had acted to take Leah and the grandchildren out of Poland-Lithuania. Ezra was also much pleased to hear how the marriage of Asa and Leah seemed to work out quite well. Asa talked of his wife's qualities all the time! Only a man truly in love and happy could talk that way of Leah.

On one of those evenings, Abi Abramovski entered Ezra's hall. When Abi saw Asa sitting at ease in a comfortable chair, she embraced him, and burst out in tears. Ezra and Asa wondered why she looked so sad. Was somebody sick in the family? Neither Ezra nor Asa dared fear the marriage of Abi and Abraham, Asa's brother, was on the cliffs and wrecked.

'I worry so much about Abraham,' Abi indeed started. 'I know he lives a lot with that slut of a Polish actress of him. I mostly fear that woman pouring odd, dangerous ideas in his mind. She must be expert at that, or Abraham must be entirely smitten by her. There is worse.

Abraham meets reckless insurgents in that Elzbieta's apartments. If ever he gets into real trouble with the Russians, those cruel officers may well imprison him and torture him. What then may happen, nobody can tell. I fear constantly for his life!'

'Is it truly as bad as that?' Asa wondered. 'Abraham generally knows what he is doing, and how far he can go in antagonising the Polish or the Russian authorities. He will not wander in seven brooks at the same time!'

'Oh, he is doing just that, I fear,' Abi sobbed. 'I fear he is involved in the Polish War and now also in the Lithuanian uprising for independence. If ever he gets into trouble with the Russian authorities, those foreign troops may imprison him. The Russian troops are coarse

regiments, called in from far lands. They are uncivilised. What will happen then to Abraham, I am convinced nobody can tell! I may never see him again.'

'Can it truly be as bad as that?' Asa asked once more. 'Abraham generally knows what he is doing, and how far he can dare in antagonising the Russian generals and their provincial governors.'

'He does,' Abi sobbed, 'but this time is different. He is walking on very dangerous paths indeed. I don't know anymore what to do. He never listens to me, and also not to reason. I heard he not only continues to see that Elzbieta actress, but he also mixes with partisans of the uprising, and with leaders of the revolution. I heard he was quite smitten by that Countess Emilia Plater, who has been seen in men's clothing, pursuing the Russians on horseback. Can you imagine?'

'No, I don't believe that,' Asa replied, smiling. 'The Plater woman and other partisan leaders may need Abraham to deliver to them what they need to wage a war, among which foremost his money, but Abraham never leaves his good, common sense at home. He will hide what he is doing from the Russians. He is much smarter than they, and no doubt also than the partisans.'

'Smarter than generals? I doubt that,' Abi snorted. 'And the affair with that Plater woman is real, I heard. That woman may well draw him into her reckless schemes.'

Abi began to sob harder and to wail. Ezra understood something really bad, dangerous, had come to Abraham's mind.

'What has he been doing, Abi? Speak up, woman, what do you know about my son?' Ezra shouted.

He frightened Abi even more.

'Abraham accepts visitors of the rebellion even in our house, here in Gaono,' Abi whispered, leaning back from Ezra. 'I overheard them. I heard what they said through the chimney, in the room above. I never lighten a fire in that room. I can put my ear close to the open chimney. There is a small opening in the fireplace, covered by an iron grid. Abraham doesn't know about that opening. We practically never use that room, a large closet, really. So, I heard them talk the other day, my ear in the fireplace. I could distinctly hear what they were talking about.'

Asa smiled. Ezra did not.

'Come up, woman, what do you know?' Ezra urged Abi to confess.

'Abraham has secured a load of weapons, thousands of guns. Modern rifles, rifles belonging to the Polish army. How have those guns come to him? I don't know. He has brought tens of wagons loaded with the guns to a village in Samogitia where he owns a cigar factory and two taverns. The partisans have promised to pay him much more for the guns than he spent. The partisans have only old, inaccurate weapons. They are in dire need of better, deadlier guns. They don't have enough of those.'

Abraham is smuggling the guns over from Poland, along the border with Prussia. For the first loads, he even passed for a long trajectory in Prussia proper. That has become too dangerous, lately, as Prussia organised more patrols of their troops on their frontier with Poland and Samogitia.

Most of the rifles are hidden in a village called Kiduliai, in Abraham's factory and taverns. More and more Russian troops patrol there too, now, for Kiduliai lies near a ferry over the

Nemunas, the Niemen River. Skirmishes are being fought in that region north of Marijampol. Abraham has hoarded the largest part of the guns in a place only he knows. The guns have not yet been delivered to the partisans. I heard the name of Plater be mentioned. She seems to be paying for the rifles, I guess with Tyszkiewicz or Oginski money.

Abraham is now going to bring the last load of guns from Poland to Kiduliai. Then, the partisans will move to Abraham's hiding place. They will fetch the guns and pay Abraham. Abraham's men have brought the rifles already to close Samogitia. Abraham has left Vilna two days ago to join the convoy of wagons, not more than five or six wagons loaded with crates. They also bring crates of ammunition. They should arrive at Kiduliai in a week from now. They mentioned the date. I heard, believe me! I am not lying, and I heard what I heard.'

Abi again began to cry. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Her body shook uncontrollably when the tears came. Asa believe her. Ezra looked more dubious of the matter.

'I am so worried,' Abi wept. 'Abraham is the father of my children. What will become of us if something happens to him? The Russian generals are filling the land with troops, ever more troops. They add patrols in Samogitia, as they seem to know the Polish rebels deem Polangen, Memel and other ports of the Baltic Sea very important to their victory. What if the Russians catch Abraham and execute him? What if there is a shooting while Abraham's convoy is travelling? He would be but a smuggler then, and an enemy of the Russians. He is risking his life without thinking of us! He has a mistress. In some way, he is also involved with that awful Plater woman. Yet, he is the father of my boys and girl. I don't want my children to go through life fatherless. I don't want them to be regarded as poor orphans. How can Abraham so much think only of himself?'

'How indeed?' thought Ezra and Asa, appalled.

They tried to console Abi, remarking Abraham was smart and would avoid Russian troops. What could Ezra and Asa do?

'If only somebody could tell Abraham he is playing with hellfire,' Abi sobbed miserably, 'maybe he would repent and return home to Vilna. I don't care he sees that Elzbieta woman now and then. I understand a man's needs. Abraham is a very passionate, a sensual man, a force of nature. I can forgive him that. It is his character. He can't help how he is. But he should think of the children when he runs enormous risks. The Russian generals are bringing thousands of new soldiers into Lithuania. These don't care a dime for us. When threatened, they will not hesitate. They will shoot at first sight, and then ask who rides there. Abraham is risking his life under the influence of his mistress and of the Plater woman. That seems to be all that counts for him, currently.'

Ezra said nothing for a long time. He sat, stooped, head bent. The shame was on him. He noticed well the scorn of Abi. He couldn't say once more she worried too much. She was right in all she had complained.

Asa too, remained silent. He too shook his head in disbelief.

'We must hope for the best,' Ezra murmured. 'Abraham is reckless, but he checks on everything and he is clever. He will not walk on two paths at the same time. He will know where the Russians patrol, and at what time. Don't worry, Abi. Soon, Abraham will return. Then, I will talk sense in him.'

'And what if a Russian patrol catches up with him?' Abi wondered.

Abi blew her nose several times. More hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She couldn't help herself. She spoke in a panic.

Asa sighed, and yielded.

He knew why Abi had come this evening. All the time, she had been desperate for help from Asa. She wanted Asa to stop Abraham, and bring Abraham back to her, to Vilna.

'I ride tomorrow morning,' Asa agreed to calm Abi. 'In three, four days, I can be at Kiduliai, in time to meet him in his tavern. I'll talk to Abraham, refrain him from worse errors. If necessary, I'll beat sense in him.'

Abi looked up. A sparkle of hope suddenly gleamed in her eyes. The grin of a woman who has had her ways appeared in her eyes, just for a fraction of a second. Was this what she had wanted? She bowed her head again, and let it hang. The hope was small. Maybe she already regretted having appealed to Asa. She didn't want Asa being hurt too.

'I hope you may succeed, Asa,' was all she could say.

Asa noticed she was yet a little relieved. Somebody was ready to help. Two prudent men were better than one reckless one.

Ezra said nothing. He was torn between having one rash son in danger and one more prudent one, thoughtful one, equally at great risk. Yet, he too felt some comfort from knowing the wise Asa would be at Abraham's side.

The next morning, Asa took the lightest coach in his father's barns, and he received his father's fastest horse. This animal was also the sturdiest of the house. Asa loaded provisions for a week in the chariot and hid a revolver in a secret locker within the beams of the coach. In principle, he would remain in Lithuanian, Russian territory. He took his Lithuanian passport with him. He was taking a risk. He wanted equally to take his Prussian papers, hidden in the seams of a heavy cloak of bearskin. At the last minute, he changed his mind. He would travel to frontier territory. A Prussian passport could denote a spy. Spies were executed instantly. He hid the Prussian passport in the walls of his house. He could not have these all-important papers to be found on him in Lithuanian territory! Nothing should point to the Vincius Family of Thorn! He also did not take his Russian papers of safe conduct with him! He could not endanger the position of Leah.

Asa said goodbye to his father. He and Ezra embraced a long time. Father and son knew Asa would have to confront great danger. Asa had explained to his father what he might do. Ezra had agreed. Asa also embraced his mother. She stood near the door as a small heap of misery.

Asa Vincevicius did not drive to Kiduliai immediately. First, he went to see a Russian colonel in Vilna, who was in charge of the garrison of Vilna Castle. Asa needed to know where General Sulyma had set up his temporary headquarters. Where stayed the Russian cavalry of Sulyma at this moment?

The meeting with the head of the Russian garrison troops proceeded awkwardly. Asa refused to tell exactly why he wanted to see Sulyma. He merely told the general was an old friend of his. The colonel was suspicious. The name of Sulyma and the confident, calm claims of Asa made him hesitate to refuse listening to the Jewish merchant who was richly dressed. If what Asa claimed was but half true, the colonel had better not throw the man in prison. Sulyma

stayed in his temporary headquarters, in camp. The general manoeuvred almost constantly with his troops. The colonel of Vilna thought Sulyma would stay where he was for a few weeks, before moving on. He told Asa where General Sulyma might be. Sulyma was a true soldier, a man of action, a strict and dignified nobleman just over fifty, a figure of fame at the court of the czar. The colonel of the garrison warned Asa. Sulyma was a natural leader of thousands. Sulyma moved a lot. Yes, General Sulyma could currently rest in Samogitia, north of Kaunas, close to the Nemunas River, resting his cavalry for new raids against the partisans. This had been the last he had heard of the general's whereabouts. Sulyma could have marched on already, and stay or fight only God knew where!

Asa thanked the Russian colonel. He almost ran out of Vilna Castle, jumped in his coach and rode off. He rode for two days, pausing only to give his horse the rest it needed to travel on. Asa found Sulyma's troops still at the place the colonel had mentioned to him, just north of Kaunas, in a village near the Nemunas river, close to a ferry over the river. The Russian general was clearing the area around the ferry of rebel troops.

Asa rode up to the soldiers after one day more. Arms in the air, he told he wanted to speak to the general on confident matters. The Russians brought him to Sulyma's tent, for the cavalry hid in a wood. Sulyma received Asa warmly. They had met a few times in Poland, in the northern regions of Poland near the Prussian border.

Nicolai Sulyma knew Asa as a Jewish, Prussian merchant. Asa had mostly dealt with the general's quarter master, the man in charge of provisioning for Sulyma's troops. Sulyma once had wanted to meet the man who brought in fine quantities of good food at decent prices. Russian guards had taken Asa to the general.

The two men had liked each other after a few short phrases. They had talked long and drank much more of the finest vodka Asa had delivered to the general's staff. Sulyma had put the condition of Asa to the test. And Sulyma knew his Bible, the history of the Jewish people, as well as Asa.

It had not been easy to reach Sulyma, now. Three officers with more gold on their uniform than Asa had in his pocket, interrogated him before he got to the general. Asa told each time he had a message to deliver to the general, and only to the general. Despite threats, Asa repeated and stuck stubbornly to his story. When finally, he was brought to the general's tent, Sulyma looked up in anger from his table and maps. He was angry, because the partisans proved practically invisible. He recognised Asa, though, went up to him and shook his hands jovially.

'Ah, my friend the Jew,' Nicolai Sulyma exclaimed. 'The Jew who is not just merely a Jew! How are you? You came to see me? You surprise me. Well, sit down, grab a chair. Sit down with me. Time to have a drink from your best vodka. Yes, I brought some with me on this campaign. Remember! I still have a few bottles, reserved for the better days. Sacha, get one of those bottles of devilish drink, will you?'

Sacha was the general's orderly, a Russian giant, a lieutenant, dressed as a Ukrainian Cossack with all but the regular uniform of a Russian officer. No gold on this one's shoulder, though, Asa noticed. A real soldier! The man was new. Asa had not seen him before.

Sulyma knew Asa as a man without fringes on his words, a man who always immediately came to his point. He liked that.

After a few words of Asa, Sulyma shouted, ‘everybody out, you all! Sacha, please stay. Hurry up first, get us that vodka!’

The officers of Sulyma’s staff hesitated with grim faces. They showed all too clearly, they didn’t like being ousted out for a Jew. They must have thought Asa was one of Sulyma’s best hidden spies. They reluctantly obeyed and left.

Sulyma waved to a chair in front of him, for Asa to sit. The general lit a pipe, then waited until his orderly returned with the vodka. The general poured the brandy in three small glasses. The glasses were small, but Asa knew they would be emptied and refilled in less time than words could describe. Sulyma filled, drank, and re-filled. He smiled. He was thinking, of course. What could the Jew want of him? He relaxed. He waited patiently, and as Asa did not start to talk either, looked questioningly up at him. Asa decided the general had chosen his moment for him to speak.

‘General,’ Asa began, ‘do you remember how, at the beginning of the Polish revolt, the rebel army could recuperate 66.000 guns from the kingdom’s arsenals near Warsaw?’

‘I do. Bad news. Not unexpectantly, though,’ Sulyma replied, ‘and I seem to remember also 6.000 of our rifles mysteriously disappeared. Rumours went unscrupulous soldiers sold the guns to the Jews. I suppose that was but a quack.’

Nevertheless, Sulyma looked expectantly at Asa.

‘I guess so too. Suppose I told you those 6.000 guns have turned up here, in Samogitia!’

Sulyma sat straight instantly.

‘Those guns are the property of the kingdom of Poland,’ he remarked slowly, ‘and therefore of the king of Poland, the czar of Russia. Whoever holds those weapons but the army of Russia, especially if the guns were to be sold or moved in Samogitia, would commit the crime of treason against the Russian State.’

Asa did not even blink.

Asa continued, ‘the partisans of Lithuania fight with old guns, the guns inherited from their forefathers, the guns they fought with in the Russian army against Napoleon. What would happen, you think, when the new rifles would fall into the partisans’ hands?’

‘That would be very unfortunate. Mind you, it would not modify the balance of forces. The czar is sending more troops to Lithuania, and also to Poland. Even with new rifles, the partisans of Lithuania will be hunted down and eliminated. It is all a matter of time.’

‘The new guns for the partisans would make it more difficult for the Russian troops to bring order in the land, wouldn’t it?’ Asa insisted.

‘It would. I won’t lie over that issue,’ Sulyma answered, shaking his head in agreement.

‘Now, Asa Vincius, Asa the Prussian Jew, we must stop this game of hide and seek. We are not men of words, you and I. We are men of action. Do not turn around me with words. Show your cards. I was practically born a soldier. I came out of my mother’s womb, a sabre between my teeth. That is what my men tell of me. My father and grandfather and his father before him, were soldiers, warriors, Cossacks. If you know something about those rifles, where they are and who got them, come up with the information. I expect I will have to pay for the particulars. What is your price? Don’t forget this is some other matter than providing grains and meat and vegetables to our army. We are talking about the worst treason, arming an enemy, and about the lives of many men. I may seem a cruel being, a tough commander. I can be ruthless, I admit. Know, however, I am so stern and so strict and so callous, to save

my men's lives. You may not believe me, but I prefer to spare my men rather than push them into death's throngs! So, be quick, Asa Vincius, what do you want from me and where are those damn rifles?'

'If I tell you where the weapons could be, who may have them and when they will be brought together, what is that information worth to you, general?'

'I said to stop the game of guessing,' Sulyma exclaimed, quite calmly. 'I can throw you in prison and have you hanged by dawn. I could have you shot just outside this tent. Enough trees stand around my tent to tie you to. I am not playing anymore, Asa Vincius, my Jew. Tell me what you know. If there is a price, I will determine it. This is the moment to put your cards on the table!'

Sulyma slapped his flat hand on the table with a loud bang. Asa was on the point of being scared.

He leaned back and said, 'my price is cheap. I want two letters from you, stating the bearers of those letters are agents of General Nicolai Sulyma of Russia, and therefore should not be harmed by any Russian soldier for whatever reason.'

'I surmise you know, then where the rifles are and who has them,' Sulyma stated.

'I do.'

'I should have you be thrown in prison and have you tortured until you squeak like a baby,' Sulyma threatened.

'There is a much quicker, safer and less violent way to get to the information, one better also for my health,' Asa smiled, trying with all his might not to tremble before the general's open wrath. It was an impressive act.

Sulyma smiled too.

'All right,' he calmed. 'Who are the letters for?'

'I want no names on the letters,' Asa replied. 'I'll tell you the names, though, just for our ears alone. One name would be mine, the other letter would be for my brother.'

Sulyma showed surprise.

'Aha, a family affair,' he exclaimed again. 'You don't have the rifles, don't you, Asa, my Jew. I know you. You are an honest man. It is strange. I trust nobody, you see. And yet, I trust you. We drank together. I know you. I trust you. You may well be the only honest man I ever met. I feel I can trust you. So, your brother has the guns, and he may not be so honest. He may be on the side of the partisans. That's it, isn't it? You are trying to save his life by betraying him. Or has he gotten scared suddenly and sent you? Is he betraying the partisans? No. Both of you are other sorts of men. You are just trying to save your brother's life. There, my precious friend, I pierced your secret!'

'You did,' Asa admitted. 'My brother did a foolish thing. Is it bad to want to save my brother's life? Should we not have values beyond the horror of this war?'

'It isn't bad, my friend. So, we are at the end of the game. We keep this conversation a secret. Suppose I gave you the letters you asked. The letters would make a Russian spy out of you and your brother. A price not too high to pay, I guess. There is one small problem, though. I don't want those letters to fall into other hands. I don't want the letters to be used for anybody else and not for anything else but to save your and your brother's life. And I want to recuperate the rifles.'

‘Promised,’ Asa agreed. ‘I’ll tear up the letters as soon as this affair is finished and I and my brother have returned to Vilna safe and sound. Can we do business as usual, no special conditions, afterwards? I would like to continue bringing you everything you and your Russian cavalry need in the future. No exclusive contract, though!’

Sulyma laughed uproariously.

‘You truly remain a trader in all circumstances, don’t you, Asa Vincius? The deal is agreed to. Let’s drink on it, hand in hand, eye in eye, and let the devil grab us both by the collar if we deny on our agreement. That is a soldier’s oath!’

Sulyma placed his right arm on the table, hand high, glass near his other hand. Asa did not hesitate. He had seen this soldier’s oath. He too placed his right arm and hand against Sulyma’s. He then looked Sulyma firmly in the eye. The general saw how Asa’s eyes did not waver. The Jew’s gaze was open and strong. He had not expected less. Asa took his glass of vodka, drew it high, saluted with it, and put it to his mouth. He drank the entire glass in one movement. The alcohol bit. The general did the same. Both men drank together. The glasses had barely touched the table again, when Sulyma’s orderly refilled the glasses. He was smiling, as the general and the Jew did.

‘So, where are the rifles?’ Sulyma wanted to know, suddenly impatient. ‘The letters you will have this evening, my word on it.’

Asa again hesitated. He would have liked to receive the letters now, before speaking out, before the general would have heard his precious information.

Asa could not afford to distrust Sulyma at that moment. He sighed and yielded, taking a great risk, but trusting the word of the experienced soldier.

‘The guns are at the village of Kiduliai,’ Asa relented. ‘My brother owns two taverns there. The guns are at the tavern closest to the ferry over the Nemunas. Not all the guns are hidden there, though. A last load of about one thousand rifles are now being brought from Marijampol to Kiduliai. I don’t know by which roads. I know the wagons will reach Kiduliai five days from today. You have just the time to intervene with your men. Take care, general, my guess is in five days equally the partisans will home in on Kiduliai to take possession of the guns. You may not be able to recuperate the guns without a serious skirmish.’

‘Do you know where the guns will be taken to after the partisans have got them?’

‘North, over the Nemunas. North, by the village of Jurbarkas – the Prussians call it Yurburg, for there was a Teutonic Knight’s castle there - to Taurage, to the partisans of the north of Lithuania’.

‘To that damn Tyszkiewicz,’ Sulyma cursed, or to the prince and Countess Plater.’

‘That is what I too believe, general. I want the life of my brother. Nothing else.’

‘You will have what you desire, Asa Vincius. But you will have to come with me until the fulfilment of our understanding, until I have the guns in my hands. I cannot sign unnamed safe conducts! Tell me, what is the name that will have to go on the second letter?’

Asa did not hesitate any longer, the dice were thrown, ‘the name is Abraham Vincevicius!’

Sulyma looked up once more. ‘Another name, almost yours but not entirely. You told me you were a Prussian Jew, Vincius. Vincevicius is a Lithuanian name. Just how long have you been living in Prussia, Asa Vincius?’

‘About three years,’ Asa confessed, smiling. ‘I became a Prussian citizen officially. Do I show you my papers again? I was a Vincevicius of Vilna before.’

Sulyma threw his hands in the air and laughed. He roared with laughter and ended only in a series of coughs that needed to be quenched with vodka. Even then he kept shaking his head and smiled. The three men remained sitting in the tent till very late. Asa got very drunk that night.

Asa Vincius rode in a canter on his horse on the road of Kaunas to Sakiai, over Ritiniai, to the village of Kiduliai. Asa cursed to himself for about half the way. The Russian general had kept to his word. Asa had two sealed letters on him. He had read the contents first and agreed. General Sulyma then sealed the letters, which offered safe conduct and life to the bearer in Poland, Lithuania and Russia. Finally, no names had been mentioned. Asa had to promise to use the letters only in extreme situations.

But then, the Russian general had forced a Russian Hussar’s officer dress on Asa. Asa rode now, dressed as a lieutenant of the Russian army. The uniform was gaudy. Asa suspected Sulyma’s Hussars were elite troops, consisting of officers of the Russian nobility. The view of Asa in a Russian uniform seemed to please Sulyma as a fine joke. He kept Asa close to him, and laughed all the way, seeing Asa’s face.

Asa was not happy. He had never thought of riding in the Russian army. He had wanted to ride as fast as he could to Kiduliai, on his own, a lonely traveller. He had wanted to arrive at the village some time before the Russians, to find the convoy organised and led by Abraham. He intended to have a tough talk with his brother. He would hand over Sulyma’s letter only at the last moment. He could not do more. His intentions were to convince Abraham to change sides, to leave the convoy and the partisans. Asa would have returned with Abraham to Vilna. Abraham would know from which road the partisans would centre on Kiduliai. Together, Asa and Abraham could choose a safe direction to flee to.

Now, Asa guessed, he was being kept on a tight rope. The Hussars guarded him. He was their prisoner. He was in some danger, too. The partisans might hesitate shooting on a civilian, not on Russian officers. Another line of thinking told Asa the Russians would not hesitate to open fire on a Lithuanian civilian found amidst Lithuanian partisans. At least, the Russians would not shoot on a Russian officer! Asa might look like a threat to the partisans, not to the Russians. In all lines of thought, one side would always want to kill him! Was that why Sulyma laughed so heartily when he looked at Asa? Asa was once more a Sulyma’s soldier’s joke!

Asa diverted his mind and thoughts to more tranquil reflections. How beautiful nature was in these, almost god-forsaken lands of Samogitia! The weather was calm and mild, not too hot, bright and dry. The tough eastern wind had subsided. Asa rode with General Sulyma through fine woods for hours on a row, then next to yellowing pastures and fields. It had not rained in these parts of the world for several weeks.

‘Why is it,’ did Asa muse, ‘that in the finest landscapes of the universe, men are the cruellest to each other? Why, instead of coveting one’s neighbour’s lands, not peacefully profit from work and trade? Why are men always so haughty, so stupid to fight? What fine life could one not have in a small farm in these parts of Lithuania, grow one’s products of the land, become well-to-do from what one’s mind and hands could provide? Why fight, kill other people and

maybe be killed? Is the universe not large enough? Is love not a powerful force, more powerful surely than envy and hatred?’

Asa rode. After three days, he began to recognise the roads. He had been here. The Russian Hussars were nearing Kiduliai territory.

Asa saw Sulyma sending off scouts in four different directions. That was a smart move, Asa thought. In this war, danger, armed clashes, skirmishes and battles could happen at each moment. The fights were won by those troops which had the best and most correct information on the enemy’s whereabouts. Where were the Lithuanian partisans?

True to his decisive nature, General Sulyma immediately entered the village of Kiduliai at the gallop. He caused quite a stir. He aimed for the tavern where Asa had told he supposed Abraham had hidden the weapons. It was of prime importance for Sulyma to secure the rifles, overwhelm the possible few partisan guards in Kiduliai. Asa did not believe the partisans would linger in the village. They did not know where the guns and ammunition had been hidden. They would prefer riding into the village while escorting the convoy of wagons, to where Abraham would lead them. Would the buoyant, impetuous and charming Countess Plater ride with the partisans?

The Russian scouts arrived with news from the whereabouts of the partisans. A large group of Lithuanian horse riders had assembled on the road from Marijampol, coming from Bunikiai and from farther south, from Volodino. The scouts had found the small convoy of wagons. The Lithuanian insurgent forces escorted the wagons on the roads.

Sulyma placed three hundred of his Russian Hussars armed not only with swords but also with carbines, around the road leading from Volodino.

Asa didn’t really know whether the riders of Sulyma were Hussars or Dragoons. They rode with the dash and exuberance and the fire of Hussars. Their dress looked as gaudy as that of Hussars, and they wore the shorter, somewhat curved swords of Hussars, but they all wore carbines or even the more accurate rifles. Sulyma could use these men as infantry, if he wanted.

Sulyma would attack the convoy and the partisans at a place of his choosing. His principal target was the Jewish wagons, presumably loaded with the guns. Sulyma didn’t care much for the partisans to escape. The weapons, however, should be taken possession of. This had to happen before the partisans could pass the load of the wagons over the Nemunas by the ferry. The partisans, succeeding in escaping over the stream, could hold the ferry-boat or the raft on the other side, and thus secure their escape. The ferry-place was essential to the Russian troops and to the reputation of their general.

In the meantime, the Russian Hussars now rode into Kiduliai with much noise of shouts from all sides. They closed off the roads to the village.

Kiduliai was but a small, rather miserable village, living mostly from the small toll paid by travellers for passing the ferry over the Nemunas. The village consisted of a few poor houses, small farms all, built with walls of daub and wattle and covered by low, thatched roofs. The two taverns stood, one on the road north to Jurbarkas over the ferry and the other on the road to Mastaiciai along the Nemunas, leading eastwards. A large tobacco and cigar factory had been built at Kiduliai. This was the property of Asa’s brother, but not the wine factory, which

could have been the main provider of work to the villagers. The village took pride in a large, high, Christian Orthodox church, mostly built in wood. Asa did not expect the Jews using a Christian church to hide weapons. Only the largest tavern, the one north, could more or less safely hide the treasure.

The Russian Hussars thus rode into the village with great show of power. The entire population of Kiduliai was driven at gun-and-sabre point to the place in front of the Christian Orthodox church. Recalcitrant people got hit by gun butts and fists. Children cried. Woman wailed.

When all the villagers had been made prisoners, the men who had tried to flee were caught, beaten, and thrown into the place too. General Sulyma rode as a vengeful lord around the frightened people. He showed off on his marvellous, white, prancing horse. Two of his men dragged near the Jews who worked in the northern tavern to before the general. The women huddled together between a ring of carbines. The men knelt in the dust at the general's feet. 'You will show my men where you keep the Polish weapons,' Sulyma shouted in Russian. 'If my men do not return quickly to tell me where the weapons are, 6.000 of them, I will start killing your wives and children. Then, as you will be useless to me, I will kill you all. You have but little time!'

The crowd murmured, as the words of the general were translated and repeated to everyone. Four Hussars pushed the Jewish men towards the large tavern. The other troops of Sulyma waited, grinning, short carbines readied for shooting at the crowd.

Asa looked at the general. This was not the man he had known during his visits at Sulyma's headquarters. Was it all but show, or was he seeing another aspect of the general? He sought some hope in the eyes and face of Sulyma. The old soldier remained on his horse in calm determination. Asa did not doubt Sulyma would at least execute part of his threat.

Sulyma did not have to execute the villagers. The Hussars returned, dragging the tavern Jews between them. They had found the hiding place with the filled wooden crates from the Warsaw arsenal. The stamps on the crates had been recognised. Sulyma had the guns! The general was very pleased, then. He sighed audibly from relieve.

Sulyma left a small part of his force in the village. With the other men, still accompanied by Asa, he rode to the hiding place. The guns had been stored in a large barn. The crates lay under straw, and hay was stacked around them. Sulyma ordered a few of the crates to be opened. They did contain rifles and ammunition. The numbers of crates allowed to estimate the number of guns at around 5.000. The partisan guns were in Sulyma's hands.

General Sulyma left but a few men to guard the villagers. He left a larger force to guard the barn with the guns. He rode off with Asa to his place of ambush.

The road to Volodino ran to Kiduliai between woods of birch trees on both sides. The birches did not grow very high in the sandy soil here. High bushes grew between the trees. It proved an ideal hiding place for a small army. Sulyma and his aides used it to disappear totally from view of the road. Asa did not really expect partisan scouts or men on horseback from Abraham's party to roam in these parts of the Samogitian countryside. Abraham would not have scouts! The wagons rode on the dusty road. Their well-oiled wheels turned silently. Nobody shouted. Orders were not necessary.

The Russian cavalry waited patiently in the woods. These men knew war meant for the largest part just waiting. As long as the men waited, they ran no danger. They relaxed. Few anticipated the coming fight with anxiety. They would teach a lesson to the cowardly partisans! Only General Sulyma could give the sign for the attack. The men stood calmly, consoling their nervous horses with smooth touches of hands at the neck. Only the animals sensed and feared a coming battle. Asa hoped the Russian horsemen would very rapidly encircle the Jewish wagons for the drivers to surrender instantaneously. Not a shot needed to be fired.

Asa had not at all expected what happened next. Not a small wagon train, but a group of galloping armed partisan riders rode wildly on the path lined by the dense, magnificent woods. General Sulyma and Asa looked nervously at the wild bunch of riders passing at the gallop. Sulyma hesitated. He saw no wagons yet. He expected the wagons with the guns to be drawn behind the partisan guards. Asa noticed a youngish boy to lead the partisans. This could be no other but the Countess Emilia Plater, hair cut short as a boy's. Asa was nervous, now, eager to jump on the pack of partisans and force them to surrender for surrounded on all sides with Russian cavalry.

Indeed, chaos broke loose quickly. General Sulyma heaved his curved sword out of the scabbard, released a loud shout of victory and of action. He dashed forward on his white stallion, right into the middle of the Lithuanian partisan riders.

Sulyma cried, 'surrender! Surrender! For Russia and the czar!'

He rode into the partisans and threw immediately two enemy warriors to the ground.

The partisans were extremely surprised to see the on-riding Russian troops surround them and shout their war cries. In no way were they intimidated. Part of them, the riders in front, dashed on for a few moments, until they understood they had fallen in an ambush and were under attack.

The partisans didn't flee at all. They also did not stop their horses and simply surrendered, as Asa had hoped. They engaged the enemy with drawn sabres and carbines. The next moments would be hard to be described by Asa. He rode, shouting wildly, in a whirling mêlée of prancing horses, duelling men of proud Russian Hussars and coarse Lithuanian master riders. Sabres flickered through the air. Carbines shot, leaving brown and white fumes among the trees. The partisans on the road were being pushed together, so that their horses rode in each other's ways. The horses danced around and hit out with their ironed hooves. Sabres clang. Men fell. Acrid, burnt powder filled the air and limited the view.

Asa found himself battling against partisans. He left the Russian general's side, his head behind his horse's neck. He pushed to the back of the Lithuanian group, to where he thought the wagons and his brother rode. He could see wagons a little farther. Men in what looked like civilian clothes directed the horses. The battle raged everywhere on the path and among the birch trees.

The Russians had attacked from both sides simultaneously. They rode impetuously in, on and among the Lithuanian horse riders. They held their naked, glimmering sabres forward as if they were lances, and attacked straight on. The Lithuanians had been surprised. Asa noticed

several partisans falling almost instantly, transpierced by sabres, or heads slashed with mortal cuts. Horses collided.

Asa avoided the fight. He was no warrior, he had never trained with a sabre. He held his weapon feebly in his right hand. He advanced to the midst of the skirmish. He reached the wagons, dodging a few sabre trusts. He noticed something odd.

Asa didn't recognise the drivers as Jews. These men engaged the fierce Russian Hussars with equal ardour! Also, some of the wagons were stacked high, canvases drawn tightly over the contents. Crates of guns would be low, would not be piled high. Asa rode to closer the wagons. He continued warding off heavy slashes from partisans' swords. He did not fight back. He warded off and rode on.

At a middle wagon, he cut through the ropes securing the load. He found only hay and straw and soft sacks. He pushed his sabre deep. His steel penetrated far without resistance. Asa rode to behind another wagon. Once more he found only hay and straw to down beneath, no crates of any sort. He rode to a third wagon. He only found kitchen utensils, uniforms, food, meat, and sacks of grain, flour sacks, loaves of bread thrown carelessly on the planks.

Even when Asa probed at the front, in the contents of those wagons, he found no crates filled with guns. The wagons contained only the provisions for the partisans on a short campaign.

They did not have reserves of guns. The drivers were no Jews. Where was his brother?

The Russian scouts had discovered the largest group of riders, the Lithuanian partisans. They had not discovered the wagons loaded with the gun crates! The gun wagons had either to be moving far behind, or coming from the road leading from Bunikiai to Kiduliai, the other road from the south! The Russian scouts had found the wrong party!

Asa spurred his horse back to the front of the on-going skirmish. He rode between the birch trees, still avoiding all duels. He arrived at the point where he imagined Sulyma had to be fighting. He soon saw the general. He rode up to him, helped him fending off a huge partisan. The men fought with sabres. Together, Asa and the general dispensed of the man. The general's sabre thrust through the partisan's chest.

Sulyma, tired, blood spattered on his splendid nobleman's Hussar dress, turned to Asa.

'Isn't this a jolly fight, Jew? Glad you brought us into this. We'll have finished with this lot soon enough!'

'General, something is wrong,' Asa shouted. 'Your scouts have found this main group of partisans, readying to meet the gun wagons. They saw wagons, and concluded these were the wagons loaded with guns. This group has wagons, indeed, but not the wagons loaded with the rifles. There are no Jewish drivers at the end! Either the wagons loaded with the guns are way behind, or they are coming by another road, I presume by the paths to Bunikiai! I'm going to have a look there.'

Sulyma took hold of Asa's reins.

'Wait!' he shouted, 'wait! Are you sure there are no wagons with gun crates behind? Have you looked well?'

'No Jewish wagons, no Jewish drivers, no gun crates in the wagons! These are merely partisans, well trained in battles. Good swordsmen! No Jews! No wagons loaded with guns, merely provisions for a group of partisan troops on campaign. I'm sure!'

Nicolai Sulyma cursed as if he had suddenly met all devils of hell together. He paled. He looked left and right, saw the chaos of the fighting men. He had to continue this fight and see it finished. His men were winning the battle. Partisans already fled to left and right, seeking safety in the woods. Sulyma was sure the leaders of the partisans had escaped first. He would not be able to catch them. Where would they ride to? Getting reinforcements? The guns were all-important to them. The partisans used such tactics, attack or defend, but in any engagement, you cannot win by riding to safety. Regroup and attack later, when a battle was likely to be won and the odds were better on your side. Here, the partisans had been surprised and ambushed. They could not win here. Their leaders knew that, and some had fled and escaped.

Sulyma's orderly, the Russian lieutenant, was fighting a little farther.

Sulyma shouted, 'Sacha, I'm off! I'm taking ten men with me. You're in command, from now on. Finish this lot. Bring the wagons at the end to Kiduliai. If I'm not in Kiduliai, ride to the ferry-place over the Nemunas. I have to ride to the road from Bunikiai, and then to the ferry. The weapons may be moving on that road. Finish here, then join me at the ferry-place or on the road from Kiduliai to the Nemunas. You are in charge here!'

Sacha nodded. He began to shout orders to his men. More carbines shot. Sulyma turned his horse. He shouted at the battling men. Soon, about a dozen Hussars stood around him, all still on horseback.

'Follow me,' Sulyma cried.

He rode back on the road to Kiduliai.

While riding at the gallop, Sulyma shouted to Asa, 'if the wagons with the guns are coming by the road from Bunikiai, they may already have passed the village by now. They will have heard of the commotion, the gun shots, the noise of the battle. They will head as fast as they can for the ferry to Taurage. We'll ride to the ferry-place first. If the wagons are not there, we'll turn back to Kiduliai. Goddamn, I told the scouts to look for wagons loaded with crates! Those fools have bungled once more. Can you hold on?'

Asa nodded feebly of yes. Still, as fine a horse rider as he was, he was no Russian Hussar, bred to be part of a horse. He could barely keep his position near the general. Sulyma rode at breath-taking speed, leaving it to his horse to jump over obstacles or avoid branches as it liked. The Hussars behind him cheered at this unbridled gallop.

On they rode, on this road to Pervazninkai, past Kiduliai, to the ferry over the Nemunas. The landscape changed while they charged. Marshland reigned near the Nemunas. Woods became lower, bushes smaller. Low grassland and pastures of low bushes lay around the road from Kiduliai to Jurbarkas. Asa longed for the destination, for the ferry. It could not be far off. On they rode, as fast as the horses could bring them. At this speed, they would catch up with any convoy moving to the ferry, at the same time the partisans had moved to Kiduliai. The sun still stood high and hot in the cloudless sky. Where was the ferry-place? Would a boat wait for the wagons to bring the load already to the other side of the Nemunas? Asa panted.

Suddenly, Asa noticed a cloud of dust rising up from the road before them. They had reached the wagons, Asa immediately supposed.

General Sulyma spurred his horse on, shouting a cry of victory. He too surmised he could reach the last consignment of modern rifles before it reached the Nemunas. Several Hussars then passed Asa, as the hunt was suddenly on with renewed urgency. General Sulyma definitely also outpaced Asa.

The ferry-place was near! The wagons might yet reach the stream and escape before the Russian group. Asa now rode practically after the last wagon. He saw four wagons and a few riders on horseback, not more than ten men in all. He remarked sidelocks flowing in the wind on several wagon riders. These, indeed, were the wagons driven by Jews!

They must have heard the gunshots of the ambush on the road to Pervazninkai. The wagon leader had harried his men on and forced the wagons to full speed towards the Nemunas. Asa noticed a man among the Jewish riders, who looked from behind like his brother. He wasn't sure, but he tried to catch up with this man. His horse ran at the end of its power. Soon, it would collapse. It had spent an effort far higher than the other, younger and better trained animals. Asa spurred his horse frantically on.

The ferry-place came in sight. It was not much of a ferry. Asa could not discern a boat in the water, although a flat boat or a large raft could be hidden by the river bank. A wooden landing-stage ran a few feet into the water. It merely consisted of a few thick wooden beams forced into the bank and into the water, covered by wooden planks to form a primitive floor on which a boat or raft could embark and disembark passengers and loads. Railings protected the side of it. A shaky ferry-house, not more than a wooden shack used in winter by one man as a guard, stood aside. On the other side, a wooden floor led directly into the water. A raft could accept wagons here, to float them over the Nemunas. In winter, when the stream was frozen over, wagons could drive from here to the other side over the ice.

The Russian Hussars had passed almost all of the carriages. The cause of the Jews was desperate, now. Never could they still reach the ferry before the Russian riders. Never could they unload the weapons and put the load, the cases filled with guns, on a boat. Yet, they rode on, as fast as they could. What did they expect? A miracle?

The Russian Hussars had practically all passed the wagons. They halted right in front of the ferry-place and formed a human barrage. The wagons would crash through the men. Only, the Russians, including Sulyma, had brought their carbines to their shoulder.

General Sulyma cried a loud, 'fire!'

A cloud of fumes of burnt powder filled the air right in front of the ferry-place, while the Jewish riders still advanced rapidly. Asa's heart almost broke.

Asa had ridden somewhat to the left of the wagons. Just before he knew the Hussars would open fire, he veered further to the right. He looked to that side. The convoy rode straight into the bullets. Several riders and also the front wagon driver slumped aside, out of the saddle or the seat.

The wagons rode on. One rider-less wagon charged right into the middle of the line of Hussars, overturning the men, and continuing the gallop on to the wooden structure of the ferry. It looked like a miserable hope. The wagon clashed against the wooden railing, and then slowly, so slowly, whirled over with a loud sound of cracking wood.

The second wagon rolled at full speed into the side of the ferry-house and into the front, gliding on, totally broken wagon. Chaos was the result. It too was stopped with a loud noise of breaking, exploding wooden beams.

The third wagon ran at high speed on. It too could not avoid the other wagons and crashed into them. It broke into the overturned wagon in front. Sound of splintering wooden frames was heard. Crates flew over both wagons, a man was projected high, screaming. Crates flew and fell, broke open and spilled their contents of rifles on the road and on the wooden floor of the short landing-stage.

The last wagon-master had seen the danger. He tried desperately to bring his wagon to a halt, probably realising his journey had ended anyway. When that wagon almost stopped, to the right of the ferry-place, the man used the momentum of the movement to jump from the wagon into the Nemunas. It was a brave try. The man was thrown high in the water, and disappeared in the slow waves. He splashed into the water nicely, brought his head up and swam farther on to the right. He hoped to escape. Two Hussars reloaded their carbines and took aim. They shot. The man's back righted out of the river. The water coloured red, and the man sank into the deadly waves. He did not come up again.

In this general chaos, Asa had also stopped his horse. White foam stood around the animal's mouth and dripped to the ground. The horse panted terribly. Asa bound the animal to a low tree in front of the ferry.

He had seen the rider fall, the rider on whom all his attention had been focused. Was this his brother? The man had at first slumped in the saddle, gripped his leg. Then he had fallen, and rolled down the river bank, out of the chaos and the further shots. Oblivious of what happened at the ferry-place, Asa ran to the place where he thought, he had seen Abraham fall. He ran downwards, to the river, to the place where the ground began to descend towards the dark water. He saw a man lying with his face in the flowing water. The man had lost conscience. Asa stepped cautiously down, as fast as he could. He recognised clothes he had seen beforehand, in Vilna, on, his brother. He turned the man around, so that he did not lay anymore with the face in the brackish water of a small bay of the Nemunas. Asa looked into the face of his brother.

Abraham was a heavy man. Asa had it difficult to draw his brother higher up the river bank. Abraham was still breathing. He had not been lying longer than a minute into the water. Red blood gurgled from a wound in his leg. Abraham had been stunned by the uncontrolled fall from his horse, down the bank. He was not dead. Asa would not have to say *kaddish* over his brother's lifeless body. He ignored what happened higher up and around him. He looked at his brother's wound. He used his knife to cut open Abraham's trousers around the wound on the left leg.

Asa heard a terrible noise of an animal in pain. He did look up, then, and saw his brother's horse lying in the grass, kicking out with its legs not far from him. The animal glided down the bank.

The bullet of a Hussar's carbine had passed through Abraham's leg and severely wounded the animal.

A Hussar must have noticed the animal moving, for another bullet broke into its head. The legs stopped thrashing about. The animal lay still.

Asa looked again at his brother. He tore a piece of the white sleeve of his shirt and bound that around Abraham's leg, higher than the wound. He applied pressure until the blood stopped pouring out. Some blood would clear the wound, Asa thought. The passing bullet must have been red hot. It must have cauterised the interior wound, but more burning with red-hot iron would have to be done to close the wound from the open air. Abraham lay still and unconscious. He didn't move.

Asa stood. He should draw Abraham away from the soldiers. But how? He felt powerless. At that moment, a horse rider stooped near Asa. Asa grabbed his sabre, ready to slam it into the Hussar's head. At the last moment, he noticed he was looking up at the face of General Sulyma.

'So, Jew, I suppose you found your brother after all. I thought I should have a look at the man who brought so many weapons to the partisans.'

'I did find him. Yes, this is my brother. He is wounded. He can do no more harm. I have to take him away from here. The wound needs to be tended to.'

Sulyma nodded. He looked around. He jumped out of the saddle. He looked at Abraham and at what Asa had done to the man's leg. He nodded again.

'My friend,' Sulyma decided after a few moments, 'I have what I wanted most. I have the guns. All of them. I owe you. It would be better if few people remembered you and your brother. You have my letters of safe conduct. I could take them from you, now, but I am not a man without honour. You and your brother should disappear. I propose you bring him to the tavern on the other side of the village. I'll keep my men from probing there. I'll order that tavern out of bounds. You can stay there for at most two days. That is the advance I give you. Two days is all I can give you. You'll have to bring your brother from there to Kevno, to Kaunas. Follow the Nemunas. You will find better doctors at Kaunas than the tavern-keeper. Cauterise the wound in the tavern, no matter how much your brother may shout from pain.'

Sulyma stood, but he continued, 'I thank you, Asa Vincius. You are a patriot for the Russian cause. You have been a man true to your word. I will not forget you. You will always be welcome in my tent and in my house. We may do business again, some time in the future. Not in guns, I hope,' Sulyma grinned.

To Asa's astonishment, General Sulyma shook Asa's hand.

'Get home unharmed, my friend. I'll help you put this man on your horse. Ride slowly, that horse is almost dead of fatigue. Remember, two days. Then, I must burn down this village. I won't kill the villagers. Be out of the southern tavern before dawn of the third day from now. Don't make me want to ignore or to regret those letters I gave you!'

Asa nodded. He took Abraham's shoulders, Sulyma took the legs. Together, they straggled up the river bank to Asa's horse. They heaved Abraham on the animal. Asa jumped in the saddle.

'Heavy man, your brother,' Sulyma panted. 'One who lived well. Why, in heaven's name did he join this war? Jews do not have to fight our wars.'

'He thought he was a Lithuanian, not anymore just a Jew,' Asa said. 'He longs to be a free man, equal to all other men. The guns, he hoped, would have made him belong to something else but a religious community. He counted on some gratefulness of the Lithuanians.'

Asa and Sulyma pushed Abraham better in front of the saddle. Asa took the reins. He gave a last, grateful, ‘thank you!’ and rode on. He made the horse walk slowly.

Sulyma looked for some time at Asa, who urged his horse on, not faster. The animal walked slowly, head bowed, on the road, back to Kiduliai, past the wreckage of the wagons. Several Hussars looked at their general.

Sulyma shook his head, ‘what are you looking at? Forget those! They were my men! They are not to be touched!’

The men grinned. Their general was cleverer than most men. Was it not they, who had the guns now, and nobody else? Asa disappeared beyond the bend in the road.

Sulyma shook his head again, thinking, ‘what a sentimental fool am I, sometimes. I always admire courageous men, whether friend or enemy. Why do I have to be so sentimental?’

He turned around, grabbed with his right hand through his hair, and began to shout orders. His men could draw upright two of the chariots. They found two horses that could draw the wagons. Then, they looked for the crates and the guns. They charged the two wagons. The weapons in the crates would not have to go far. Kiduliai was near. Sulyma wanted the weapons assembled at one point, in the barn that had been Abraham’s hiding place. That farm, Sulyma could defend against more partisans. Sulyma had to defend his treasure now against troops of Lithuanian partisans. He would have to send out messages fast, to get the rest of his Russian army to Kiduliai. He had other worries on his head than two Jewish men!

Asa brought his brother to the southernmost tavern, at the other end of the village. The Jewish tavern-keeper was more than surprised to see Asa come riding in with the owner of this tavern slung over the saddle of a horse. This was Jewish territory. The tavern-keeper was a Jew. In many villages of Samogitia and in the lands of Marijampol, the majority of inhabitants were of the Jewish faith.

The tavern-keeper brought Abraham to a clean room. He dumped the man of Vilna on the bed. He spoke Yiddish to Asa. He explained painfully there simply was no doctor in Kiduliai. Asa would do best to take his brother to Kaunas. Yet, Asa should change clothes to civilian dress. A Jew in a Hussar’s uniform was most certainly a spy! The tavern-keeper could offer Asa a light coach to bring Abraham as comfortably as possible to the city.

‘I know all that, and I agree,’ Asa said. ‘Abraham will pay you. But he cannot be moved as he is. The wounds must be cleansed thoroughly first, cauterised and closed. Then only, can he be moved. Is there not some barber in the village who know at least the basics of surgery and wounds, to have a look at Abraham?’

‘My wife possesses some of the skills. She can wash the wound and clean it, cauterise it if necessary. She has the tools. She may even succeed in controlling the fever, which inevitably will come. Then, you can drive on to Kaunas.’

‘I have to be out of Kiduliai in two days from now,’ Asa defined. ‘Call your wife and have her do the best she can. You will be rewarded.’

Asa remained in a quite desperate mood at that moment.

The wife of the tavern-keeper was a small, plump woman with an agreeable face. Her bright, grey eyes pierced through Asa’s mind. She brought a servant with her, a young girl of near fifteen, her daughter. The woman ushered Asa out of the room. Asa remained standing in the

corridor to the bedroom. The woman's daughter came, entered the room and left. She brought water, towels, soap and herbs. She also brought in soup and other broths.

When the girl passed with the towels before Asa, he dared asking, 'is he awake?'

The girl nodded and smiled. Asa felt relieved. She entered a room close by and came out with a chair. She showed the chair with her hand, inviting Asa to sit down. He obeyed.

After a couple of hours, the woman and her daughter came out of the room together.

In her best Yiddish, the woman said to Asa, 'he is better. He has regained conscience. He slung out wildly in his later sleep. He is a disturbed man. He should find peace. I had to constrain him. It is over, now. I think he will live. I had to cauterise him on both sides of the leg, though but lightly. He screamed a lot. A better doctor should check on him and look whether bone is touched. I don't think so. I felt no broken bones. He may limp in the future. That is all. The next hours will be crucial. I gave him herbs and extracts of the birch tree to diminish the fevers. He will sleep. You can wait inside the room, but don't touch him. I hope the wound does not fester. If it does, his leg may start rotting and by then you should have reached Kaunas and a true doctor. In that case, he may lose his leg. We must hope for the best.

If the fever diminishes by tomorrow evening, I suggest you leave at dawn the day after.

Better get him as fast as possible to a real doctor. He knows what happened to him. He didn't tell me much. He is in great anger. His anger eats his insides. There is great passion and anger in this man. You may talk to him. Not for long. We will bring him more soup and chicken broth and herbs in an hour or so. My daughter will bring it. Then, he should sleep again. He must sleep much.

I will come back tomorrow morning. Until then, I can do nothing more. His leg was clean, remarkably clean, when he was shot. That makes a big difference. I think he will survive. He will limp, for muscles are torn. We will pray.'

Aza nodded again. He said nothing. He entered the room. Abraham lay in the bed, naked breast, one leg under the covers, the other, the hurt one, above. The leg was bandaged. The bandages were white and clean. Asa was satisfied. He took the only chair in the room and sat next to his brother.

'That damned woman burned me. She hurt me! It is always the women that hurt me,' Abraham cursed and complained. 'She burned me twice! Her soup was tasty. The broth she forced into me was bitter. So, brother, we meet again. What do I have to call you? Saviour or traitor? One never knows with you, is it not?'

'Both, probably, yes,' Asa replied a little callously. 'You know how I think about the Russians and the Poles. This is not our war. The Poles, like the Russians, regard us as foreigners in their lands. This is their country. They are in dispute over who should rule it. It is not our country. Why take sides, then, when so often we have been denied sides and justice by both of them. I am a Prussian citizen now. I repeat, this is not my war.'

'Why, then, did you intervene?' Abraham snapped. 'We are not exactly great friends! You have thwarted my designs. You made me lose much money!'

'You are my brother. Had you delivered those weapons to the partisans, the war would have lasted longer in these parts, in Samogitia, around Vilna and in Lithuania. The Poles cannot win this war. You, of all men, should know that. The Russian tzar has far more means, far

more men, far more gold, far more arms, and better leaders. No foreign country supports Poland.

A country like Belgium might receive its independence because a German nobleman of high standing in Great-Britain, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha had to be given a crown. Isn't he married to an English princess? Not so for Poland and Lithuania. Poland is too large and too important in Europe. Russia is too powerful. Russia is needed as an ally against Germany by the other western powers. Nobody will assist Poland. We, Jews, should not support lost causes of people who never took us up as full-fledged citizens and who closed their most important cities to us. We owe nothing to Poland. We owe nothing to Russia. Both countries own part of their well-being to the Jews. Better to side with the potential, probable victors, rather than with the probable losers!

'I chose the wrong side. That is what you are saying. Maybe I did. What did you know of my motives?'

'Was it because of Leah and because of fear you moved to Prussia? This war will end soon, you know. Then, we'll be Jews again,' Abraham added after a while.

'No, not fear,' Asa responded. 'I thought it would be nice to say "I was a Prussian" first and only then "I am a Jew", not the other way round.'

Was he telling the entire truth, Asa thought? Had he not wanted to put a great distance between Leah and his brother? Had he feared Abraham might as yet conquer Leah? Had he moved to Thorn out of jealousy and fear? No, not out of jealousy! Leah was his. He did have more peace of mind knowing Leah far from Abraham, for Abraham's sake. Asa wanted no conflicts.

'How did it really, really happen with you and Leah, honestly?' Abraham asked. 'I never took your earlier answers for truth. Have you talked to her without my knowing, behind my back? How, actually did you seduce her? After that, I thought I owed you nothing anymore.'

'The moment she stepped through the door of our hall in Gaono, I realised she was the ideal picture hidden in my mind, a picture I had not formed in my dreams before, an image that must have existed unconsciously, but of which I was not aware. The image emerged to the surface and became reality. No words were necessary. Leah was the image of the ideal woman for me. We exchanged not more than a few banal words, and the intimacy set in. We were inexorably linked. She was my ideal of a woman. What I told earlier was the absolute truth.'

'My ideal woman was all tits and buttocks,' Abraham grinned. 'All four big, preferably. Elzbieta was my ideal, and a very real idea from the very beginning. I didn't find myself bettered by her, however. I still don't. Leah was all mind and eyes. I felt life would be more decent, pure, dignified with her. She seemed my chance for a purer life. When she rejected me, I went back to Elzbieta. I suppose Leah and you hurt my feelings. I had been defeated, rejected, ignored for the man I was. My very nature had been regarded as trash. I have never experienced such trauma before. I hated you for it. Time heals, I guess.'

Asa nodded. He did not answer. Everything was said. Matters stood as they were. He didn't say he also had wanted to leave Vilna to take Leah out of Abraham's reach. It was better this way. Better for Abraham too.

'You should take care,' Abraham remarked. 'You are an honourable and an honest man. You think other men are honest and honourable too. They are not. I am not. You are my family, though.'

Asa just looked at his brother with big, saddened eyes.

Abraham kept a silence. Then, he turned his head back to Asa.

‘The damn women! Women dominated my life. First, Elzbieta turned my mind to the Polish cause. Then, that other woman, Emilia Plater, seduced me to her Lithuanian independence cause. She is a remarkable woman, you know. You should get acquainted with her. She would spin you around her little finger in an instance. Then, there was Leah. My Leah. Your Leah. With her, all could have been so very different. I would not have felt the need to choose sides. I fell in love with her at first sight. She was mine, too. You stole her from me. That was not nice. I hated you for it, you know!’

‘Yes, I know,’ Asa answered, coolly, rationally, head high, as he had always been with his brother. ‘Leah and I fell in love. It just happened. We didn’t calculate. There was nothing we could do against it. Why refuse? The marriage between you and Leah had been arranged without her being involved. We followed our feelings for each other. We were swept away. Our union is a success. We are happy. I cannot be sorry for our union, to nobody. It may sound cruel, but I’m merely being honest and open-eyed. You being my brother, I regret you may not have found love.’

‘Oh, I found my kind of love, all right,’ Abraham laughed coarsely.

He coughed and asked for water. Asa handed him the glass that stood next to Abraham on a small table. He let his brother drink. He took the glass back from him.

‘Heavens,’ Abraham exclaimed. ‘I know what love is. I love Elzbieta, I love Emilia, I love Abi, all in different ways. I fear they love me too, each in her different way. Well, probably not Emilia. I am nothing to Emilia, only an instrument to be used temporarily. What that woman not would do to get to what she wants! But, yes, I do know what love is, brother, and I too have loved and have been loved by more women that you are aware of. The love I have received is quite different from what you have. I think I could have loved Leah the way you do, brother. I did not get the chance!’

‘Are we then to be enemies because of love?’ Abraham asked on after a while.

‘Not for me,’ Asa shook his head. ‘You are my brother. To me, that means something. I don’t know exactly what that is and means, though. Like I don’t really comprehend what all family ties mean. The love that ties me and Leah is very real, though, and true.’

‘I understand. Passion and reason, that is what we are. Beware, brother, passion and reason are in our blood. Who knows what will be expressed in your offspring? Family ties are strong, after all, brother. They are the ties of the blood! That is why you are here. I am a fool. I am Abraham Vincevicius! Clever, powerful, passionate, rich Abraham Vincevicius! Does that not sound well? Hence the victim and playing-ball of many. Yet, many admire me. You changing your name will not modify what is in your blood, my blood too, and in the blood of our children.’

‘You are everything other men want to be,’ Asa gave in, ‘though more arduously. Your power of living is stronger than in any man I know. You are a remarkable man. You will live after Kiduliai too.’

‘You, in your special way, you also are a remarkable man, Asa Vincius. Why in hell did you intervene with the arms deal? Plater, and the noblemen around her, would have paid me a fortune for the rifles. Now, I am half ruined. Plater will never pay me. You burned me with

the partisans of Lithuania, with the Poles and with the Russians. What do I do now? Hide? I don't want to hide in Prussia. Elzbieta will not follow me into Prussia.'

'If you want to stay in Vilna, you can go on doing what you did best in Lithuania.'

Asa told Abraham about the Russian letter on his name.

'You are safe in Vilna. Money you will lose, but what is money? You can always get new and more money. You will have replenished your reserves in no time. There is a war going on, remember? A war brings many opportunities for a trader! A lot of money is made in all wars.'

'True,' Abraham laughed. 'So true! I am very good at making money, am I not? And I have plenty of reserves. But this was so much money, Asa! Luckily, Elzbieta and Abi don't know how much money I have. They also don't know how much you made me lose!'

Asa laughed in his turn.

'You have your life back, and a fortune still, Abraham,' Asa consoled. 'Why did I thwart your scheme? Maybe because Abi asked to help. I like Abi. She appealed to me. So, I came. She is a better woman than you think. Also, on the path you were riding on, ultimately, you would have been found out by the Russians, and maybe executed against a tree in a dark wood, maybe exiled. You would not have gotten out of this war unscathed, Abraham. At least, now, you have a new chance. You will have to drop the Plater woman, cease being her puppy. You will have to drop the Lithuanian partisans, and maybe even the Elzbieta woman. But you will have your life, you will still have Abi. You will still have your children, a family of your own, and the family of our parents and of Abi's parents. That should be worth something.'

'It is, it is,' Abraham murmured.

Abraham grinned, 'so, I suppose all is well. I have been chastised. Better by you than by Poles or Russians. Chastised by a Prussian! I, Abraham Vincevicius!'

'Don't speak nonsense,' Asa protested. 'Who would be able to chastise the great, unbeatable Abraham Vincevicius? Don't you think I don't envy your power, your force of life? I am but a blot on the wall, Abraham, compared to you. The place suffices me. I am content with who I am and what I have. I have accepted what I am. I guess you will never be content with what you have. In a way, I admire that very much.'

'Well then, brother, you should know I too admire you for what you are. And I envied you for what you had and for what I could have had. I think we were both wrong. We'd better accept our fate.'

Now, I feel a little drowsy. I want to sleep. What are we going to do?'

'We need to be out of here by tomorrow evening, at the latest by dawn the following day. Better not to taunt the Russians until the very last hour. I'll drive you to Kaunas in a light coach. The trip will not be easy on you. I'll bring you to a real doctor in Kaunas. I know a fine, Jewish one there. The tavern-keeper's wife has done a good job on you, I feel. Still, we return to Vilna as quickly as we can. Our father, Ezra, and our mother must hear of us. Then, I'll return to Thorn. My life will be in Thorn, henceforth.'

'Yes,' Abraham whispered, and slept.

Asa did as he had told Abraham. Abraham's fever lasted the night and the next day. The fever did not run higher. At the end of the day, though Abraham remained in a healing stupor,

caring for nothing, Asa left Kiduliai with his brother lying down in the coach, behind him. Asa rode to Kaunas in the last night of the day. He rode rather slowly, not wanting to hurt his brother more. He slept in the open, in the coach for a few hours during the night. Before dawn he rode on. He rode the entire day. He found another tavern for the night. Abraham could stand on his legs and feet by then. With the help of Asa, he could get to a room and sleep again. Asa gave to his brother some more of the broth the Kiduliai tavern-keeper's wife had given him. The fever subsided slightly the next day.

Asa reached Kaunas that next day. They went to see a doctor. The doctor could do not much more than the woman of Kiduliai had done. Asa and Abraham stayed for two more days in Kaunas. Then, they rode on to Vilna. In Vilna, Asa delivered Abraham to the loving arms of Abi Abramovski. He heard from her how the war had proceeded in Lithuania.

In that period, General Chlapowski's Polish regular troops in Lithuania had swollen to 7.000 men, 2 regiments of infantry and 4 of cavalry. He had an artillery battalion with 5 cannons. With this force, Chlapowski threatened Kowno, and hence also the city of Vilna. But at that moment, Chlapowski heard of the arrival in Lithuania of the Polish General Antoni Gielgud, known in Lithuania as Antanas Gelgaudas.

General Gielgud would be the commander-in-chief of the revolutionary troops in Lithuania. He was a Lithuanian; he knew the country. Gielgud had left Lomza in Poland and arrived with more substantial forces, with 11.000 men and 24 cannons. He marched to the troops of the other Polish General Dembinski at Ravgrad. Dembinski was engaged against the Russian Sakien Division. Gielgud and Dembinski gave battle to the Sakien Division, a battle they won. The Poles made more than 1.200 Russian prisoners at Ravgrad. Nevertheless, Gielgud missed an occasion to destroy more Russian troops. He allowed the Sakien Division to escape with still about half the men. Gielgud moved to Augustow in South Samogitia. His orders were to march north, to capture the harbour of Polangen, where General Skrzynecki hoped to receive weapons sent by France.

The Sakien division had not been beaten entirely. The Russian division had been reduced to about 2.000 soldiers. They occupied Kevno, the strategic town on the roads to inner Samogitia. The Russians also still held Vilna, under General Chrapowicki, with about 3.000 men.

The Polish General Gielgud split his forces. He sent Dembinski with his brigade to Kevno. Gielgud built a bridge over the Nemunas at Gielgudyszki and called for Dembinski to join him. Dembinski had not been able to attack the troops of the Sakien Division.

Gielgud then sent 1.000 men and 2 cannons to northern Samogitia, and he marched on to occupy a defensive line on the Rivers Swienta and Vilya. Gielgud later marched to Szawle, his forces having been augmented by 4.000 Lithuanians.

He first lost 500 men in a skirmish against the garrison of Szawle, of Siauliai, and did not succeed in the effort of gaining a victory. Later, he tried again to take that town, the largest of Samogitia, and lost a further 500 men. In the beginning, he did not meet much resistance, but the Russians counter-attacked and made him lose those 500 men.

At that moment, Gielgud commanded 11.000 Polish soldiers and 11.000 Lithuanian insurgents, 22.000 men in all, a large army. He sent 5.000 of his soldiers under General

Szimanowski back to Samogitia, to fulfil his orders. Gielgud himself attacked Vilna and the Russian garrison of the city, aided in this assault by his Generals Dembinski and Chlapowski. The Battle for Vilna started on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June of 1831. A third Polish-Lithuanian corps under General Zaliwski marched to the Polish troops. The Russian generals Tolstoi and Kouronte advanced to Vilna to come to the aid of Chrapowicki. In the meantime, Gielgud formed a provisional Lithuanian Government. He appointed the Senator General Count Tyszkiewicz to President, and Prince Oginski to Vice President.

The Russians had reinforced the garrison of Vilna to about 21.000 men when the Polish army arrived under its walls. Gielgud, Zaliwski and Chlapowski attacked Vilna with 14.000 men, of which, however, only 9.000 were in good fighting order. Gielgud attacked frontally 18.000 Russian soldiers. A force of 3.000 more Russian troops guarded the interior of the city against the advance of General Dembinski.

The Russians mostly occupied the heights of Vilna. Deep ravines lay between them and the oncoming Polish soldiers and Lithuanians. Gielgud did not succeed in defeating the Russian garrison of Vilna. He lost 600 more men in the battle, before he withdrew. Gielgud retreated in the afternoon of the battle. His troops dispersed under their generals. The army of Gielgud was thus further reduced by 2.000 men.

Gielgud's authority had been much diminished by his defeat at the Battle for Vilna. His chief-of-staff, Colonel Valentin, had drowned in the Vilya. Gielgud then appointed Chlapowski as his head-of-staff. Chlapowski took the necessary measures to reorganise the Polish troops.

Abraham Vincevicius lost all of his cigar factories, his taverns and distilleries in the region of Vilna. All his buildings had been plundered and burned down. His investments in the leases he had taken over from his brother were practically all lost.

On the Russian side, General Kreutz arrived on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June of 1831 to take command of the Russian forces assembled at Vilna. He sent part of his troops to Kowno. His generals captured 700 of the 1.200 Lithuanian insurgents that had gathered there. A second Russian column passed the Vilya and marched beyond Becze. A third column attacked the troops of the Polish General Dembinski near Wilkomiecz.

On that same 30<sup>th</sup> of June, Gielgud reached the town of Keydany. The Russians attacked him. He retreated to Plemburg. He retreated still. The troops of Colonel Szimanowski marched to him at Cytowiany. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, the troops of Gielgud were back at Szawle, at Siauliai. The Polish general still had 14.000 men with him, but an army mostly consisting of Lithuanian insurgents, badly disciplined and badly organised. The Russian garrison of Szawle consisted of 4.000 men. The attack on Szawle began on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July. Gielgud was ill. General Roland took over the command temporarily. The Polish-Lithuanian army did not succeed in winning back Szawle, despite heroic attacks. More than 2.000 Lithuanian insurgents defected.

General Gielgud was left with 11.000 men. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, Gielgud once more split his army, this time in 3 parts.

One part, led by Dembinski, would march to the north, to Kurland, and execute the plan for Samogitia given by General Skrzynecki, by the upper Polish command.

The second part under Chlapowski, should return to Poland, to the Vistula, passing by the region of Augustow. Gielgud would march with this group.

The third part, under General Roland, had to march to Polangen and take the harbour.

Under strong pressure by the Russian troops, the divisions of Gielgud and Chlapowski finally marched with 8.000 men north, to Memel. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1831, strong Russian detachments attacked this force. Chlapowski and Gielgud sought refuge in Prussia near the village of Schnaugsten. They deposed arms.

The army units of General Roland soon heard of what had happened to their commander-in-chief and the main army. Roland's troops were still fighting the Russians. They felt betrayed. Roland's troops advanced, still in far view of Gielgud's column. Soldiers of Gielgud wanted to take up arms again, but their officers refused them.

A Captain Prince Czertwertinski nevertheless rode to Roland's column with 6 pieces of artillery and the men to handle them, and with a few detachments of cavalry.

Among General Roland's officers, one Skalski of the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Line, rode from Roland's column to the group of officers of the main army, among whom he knew stood Gielgud. He rode a wild, impetuous horse. He held a gun in his hand. He broke through Gielgud's officers, and killed the general with one shot. Gielgud fell, still claiming his innocence. Skalski reached Roland's troops on horseback.

Roland's soldiers marched along the Prussian frontier. They too were soon obliged to save their lives in Prussia. The Prussians obliged them to depose arms on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July of 1831.

These actions were the last of the Polish insurrection of Lithuania. With them ended the armed revolution in the lands of greater Lithuania. The last phases of the war in Lithuania took place in Samogitia.

The Vincevicius family, mostly Abraham Vincevicius, lost all of their possessions in those territories. Abraham would have to reconstruct everything.

## The End of Hope for Poland. 1831

When the Generals Chlapowski, Gielgud and Roland deposited arms in Prussia, the insurrection of greater Lithuania in practice stopped. This happened from the beginning to mid-July of 1831.

For what happened during this time in the war of independence in Poland itself, we have to go back to the month of June of that year.

Field Marshal Diebitsch still commanded about 60.000 Russian troops. His campaign had not really succeeded. Diebitsch died at Pultusk on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June from cholera. A little later, in the same month of June, also Grand Duke Constantine died of the illness. General Toll, the chief of the Russian staff, took temporarily command of the army.

General Skrzynecki still commanded the Polish army. His headquarters were at the Praga suburb of Warsaw. He reorganised the Polish army in four infantry divisions led by the Generals Sierawski, Malachowski, Milberg and Rybinski, and in three cavalry divisions under the orders of the Generals Turno, Skarzynski and Iagmin. Skrzynecki had only about 40.000 soldiers left. He split his forces by division. He aimed still to defeat the Russian General Rudiger, while continuing observing Diebitsch and push through to Brzesc, to conquer the extensive arsenal of weapons there.

At that time, the court of St Petersburg sent another Russian general to replace Diebitsch. This was General Ivan Fyodorovich Paskevich. Paskevich took command of Diebitsch's remaining army of 60.000 men. He was a more determined man. He belonged to the Ukrainian Cossack nobility, had fought against Napoleon at Austerlitz, against the Ottomans and in the Russo-Persian wars. He had but one aim: to push to Warsaw and take the city. He reckoned rightly that who won Warsaw, had won the war.

Meanwhile, Prussia took sides. It continued to support massively the Russian army, provisioning it via the Vistula or Weichsel from out of Danzig. The Prussian merchants delivered everything the Russian army needed, in great quantities. The traders of Danzig and Thorn were among the best organised to provision the Russian army.

Among these, Anton Svirskius at Danzig and Asa Vincius at Thorn worked together and got very rich. Despite Polish protests, the court of Berlin allowed and even encouraged the Prussians at Thorn to purvey the Russians. Asa Vincius had nurtured fine relations with the Russian generals. He became one of their prime contacts on the other side of the Polish border. He received Russian safe conducts to transport his goods in Poland.

The Polish insurrectionists only enjoyed some sympathy from the Hungarian provinces of the Austrian Empire. They got no active support from Vienna. Poland received no support from any European power.

The Russian forces led by General Paskevich were moving to the Vistula along the Prussian border. The intentions of Paskevich, march to the region of Warsaw, were very clear by then. The Polish army under Skrzynecki moved to the strategically fortified place of Modlin to stop

the Russians in their track. Other Polish troops joined the Polish commander-in-chief, so that he could attack the Russians with about 40.000 men on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July.

Paskevich advanced by Plock. The general only waited for the arrival of provisions there. He moved his men on. Paskevich marched to Osiek. The forces of the Russian General von Pahlen had prepared a bridge over the Vistula for him, for the Russian army to pass to the left side of the Vistula, the side on which lay Warsaw.

General Skrzynecki did not attack the Russian army! He stayed at Modlin. His ultimate strategy was to give battle to Paskevich near Warsaw. This was a defensive strategy, and one that left the initiative mostly to the Russian army.

When the Russian troops passed on the left side of the Vistula, the Polish Commander-in-chief Skrzynecki was still at Siedlce. The force of about 1.000 infantry of General Rozycki took Siedlce on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July. The Polish troops re-assembled at Modlin.

In contrast, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld was crowned as King Leopold I of Belgium on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1831. Belgium's revolution against the Netherlands had been successful and its independence accepted by the most powerful nations of Europe.

The inaction of Skrzynecki irritated the Polish Parliament. A new, large Council of War was called together, with about 25 members. The Council debated, but finally allowed Skrzynecki to continue leading the army. The commander-in-chief could bring about 60.000 men to Warsaw.

By the end of July, Paskevich advanced to Warsaw in three columns, led by the Generals de Witt, Szachoffskoi and von Pahlen. The Polish troops retreated before him. These troops now counted about 50.000 men, and they disposed of about 160 cannons. Paskevich established his headquarters at Lowicz.

The Polish army of Skrzynecki set itself in movement, then. Skrzynecki marched on to Skierniewice, and from there to Bolimow. The first skirmishes between the Russian troops and the Polish troops of General Ramorino took place near Lowicz.

Girolamo Ramorino had not been born in Poland. He was an Italian from Piedmont. He had fought with Napoleon in Russia and in the Piedmont uprising of 1821 in Italy. He helped the Polish army in the November uprising of 1830. He was a very able and courageous commander of armies.

The Polish General Dembinski had continued to operate for a time alone in Lithuania. He marched south, passed the River Bug, fought several skirmishes, and arrived on the 3<sup>th</sup> of August at Praga, near Warsaw. His march out of Lithuania was regarded as heroic. His entry in Warsaw was applauded, but Dembinski knew it was a bitter triumph he received. He was appointed general and governor of Warsaw. At once, he became a political force to be reckoned with.

The Polish Parliament sent a group of deputies to interrogate Skrzynecki for his continued inaction at Bolimow. Its president, Prince Czartoryski, did not well know what he should tell Skrzynecki or demand of the man. Any movement of the Polish forces could be justified by sufficient plausible reasons!

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, a majority of the committee criticised General Skrzynecki openly and judged him incapable of continuing to command the army. The delegation relieved Skrzynecki of his command and handed it over to the popular General Dembinski. Dembinski immediately proceeded to reorganise the Polish forces. The reserves remained, however, under the orders of Skrzynecki. Skrzynecki's face was more or less saved.

When panic rules, chaos sets in rapidly.

In Warsaw, the deputies of the Movement Party were organising a new rebellion. This had to take place on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August. The events thwarted this uprising.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, the Polish army retreated fully to Warsaw. One column, under Skrzynecki and Uminski took the large road to Warsaw. The second column, under Ramorino, marched to Szymanov. The third column, under General Kaski, marched to the right of the large road to Warsaw.

Ramorino had to give a battle near Szymanov. He retreated. Also Uminski fought a skirmish at Paportia against the Russian avant-garde troops.

In the meantime, Parliament proposed to several generals to take command of the army, replacing Dembinski. All the generals refused.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, Warsaw was in uproar. Several political meetings took place. Excited speeches were held in Parliament. General Krukowiecki added his intrigues for power to the general panic. The crowd forced the gates of Warsaw Castle. Many prisoners, enemy of the state, were killed. At the prison of Wola, thirty spies of Grand Duke Constantine were massacred. Elsewhere too, prisoners and real traitors to the cause of Polish independence lost their life.

At the height of the chaos, at the beginning of the night, Krukowiecki showed himself as the providential man who could appease the crowds. His men applauded him. A little later, members of the government appointed him to governor of the city.

Then, Prince Czartoryski, the Generals Skrzynecki and Dembinski sat together to find a solution to the growing anarchy. These three men decided for the retreat of the Polish army to Warsaw. To satisfy the public opinion, Dembinski would leave his command of the army.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, however, nobody seemed ready to take command of the Polish army. The crowds continued their killing in Warsaw. People, supposedly to the gold of the Russians, were massacred without trial.

A delegation of Parliament proposed to General Prondzynski to accept the command of the army. He did accept at that moment, though only for one day. Several members of Parliament resigned.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, General Dembinski entered Warsaw, accompanied by Prince Czartoryski and General Prondzynski. They rode to the palace of the government, where men such as Vincent Niemoiowski, Barzykowski and Morawski had been meeting. Joachim Lelewel was absent. These men were members of the Polish government. They appointed Dembinski officially as the commander-in-chief of the army.

Dembinski brought back order in Warsaw. General Chrzanowski received the order to arrest several members of the Patriotic Groups. Dembinski threatened Lelewel, who had also by then arrived in Warsaw. The Parliament, the Polish *Sejm*, was called upon to meet.

Dembinski thought to curb parliament and impose his will, but the deputies cried him down. Nevertheless, Dembinski remained commander-in-chief of the army. Parliament decided on a law, whereby a government of five people was installed, to be led by a president. The president would appoint the commander-in-chief of the army.

In the subsequent voting, General Krukowiecki was chosen as president of Poland. He had reached his goal. He would not get much honour from his position, and certainly not held it for long.

During the street revolts in Warsaw, the wife of General Skrzynecki had sought refuge at the ambassador's of Austria. General Skrzynecki joined her a little later. His involvement in the war was over.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, the Russian army of General Paskevich arrived before Warsaw. The troops of the Russian General Rudiger advanced still. They destroyed the arms factories of the Polish army at Wonchok and Suckedniow, depriving the Poles of more weapons and ammunition. Skirmishes happened between the Russian corps led by the German Prince of Württemberg, who led Russian regiments, and the Polish troops of General Rozycki. The Russians pushed to about a mile distance from Warsaw.

Meanwhile, President Krukowiecki handed over the command of Warsaw to General Chrzanowski and the presidency of the city to Bronikowski. He installed his government. Vice President was Bonaventure Niemoïowski and as Minister of Foreign Affairs he chose Theophile Morawski. Dembowski was Minister of Finance, General Morawski (the other Morawski) remained Minister of War, Garbinski Minister of Public Education and Lewinski Minister of Justice.

Krukowiecki promised to not pursue the men of the Patriotic Clubs who had fomented and prepared a revolution in Warsaw for the 18<sup>th</sup> of August. The intended new revolution would not take place. He appointed a general of over 80 years of age, Malachowski, to commander-in-chief of the army. President Krukowiecki gave him Prondzynski as Quarter master General.

Soon, however, Krukowiecki took himself the command over the army. He called together a War Council to discuss a plan for the defence of the capital. The Polish army could hold the environs of the city with over 78.000 men and 144 cannons.

The Polish army of Warsaw had provisions for about 20 days, fodder for about ten days, and three complete provisionings of gun powder.

The Russian army brought about 54.000 soldiers to Warsaw, but in the environs remained 35.000 more men, so that general Paskevich could count on 89.000 men. The Russians expected about 42.000 more men to arrive before the end of August.

The Battle for Warsaw started.

Warsaw had two lines of defence. The war evolved first into a battle of movement. Division fought against division for many days, until the real siege of Warsaw began. The Russians first destroyed bridges over the Vistula and immense Polish provisionings, assembled at Brzesc. The skirmishes around the city really began mid-August and lasted into the first two weeks of September.

The Polish forces of the Generals Ramorino and Lubienski marched forwards, to the enemy, and fought to far from the capital, spread even to 50 miles from the capital. The Russian Generals Kreutz and Rudiger came from the interior to participate in the siege. General Paskevich wanted to negotiate before the battle proper. All hope on an arrangement soon vanished. Paskevich decided for the direct attack, for one hard battle.

Paskevich placed General von Pahlen on his left wing, Szachoffskoi in the centre, the Guards on the right, and he kept Kreutz in reserve. Paskevich attacked first by Wola. The cannons sounded on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September. The Polish troops defended Warsaw heroically. The Russian artillery demonstrated its superiority. In a few hours, the Polish batteries were overwhelmed. The Russian forces broke through the Polish defence line.

Around ten o'clock in the evening, President Krukowiecki returned from the battle to the centre of Warsaw. He declared Wola lost, the Polish artillery destroyed. He considered it impossible to hold Warsaw against the Russian onslaught with Wola captured.

Around 6 o'clock the next morning, Krukowiecki, without consulting his government, asked for a conference with General Paskevich. Several ministers, among whom Niemoiowski, the Minister of War, resigned. An armistice set in.

In the meantime, the Polish Parliament debated and spent many fine phrases without making effective decisions. No agreement was reached with the Russians. On the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> September, the Russians united the mass of their army at the centre. They placed more than 190 cannons against the Polish defences. The Polish army had still about 45.000 soldiers to resist the final assault. The Russian army opened fire around 1:30 in the afternoon. All Russian columns advanced in one massive thrust. The Russians pushed through the first Polish defence line. Around 4 o'clock, the forces of von Pahlen and Kreutz attacked the suburb of Czyste. The Polish infantry retreated to onto the gardens of the Warsaw suburb.

At about the same time that day, the Polish parliament deliberated on, the note of resignation sent by Krukowiecki. This happened while the Russian General Berg was already negotiating the surrender of the Polish troops with Krukowiecki! Krukowiecki agreed with Berg on the unconditional surrender of the Polish army around 6 o'clock in the evening. Krukowiecki signed as general and as president of the Polish government.

The other Polish generals recognised it seemed impossible to hold the city further on. They wanted to save the army, but only one bridge over the Vistula was still open to flee.

The Polish General Prondzynski and the Russian General Berg brought to Paskevich the letter of surrender signed by Krukowiecki. Berg wanted now only to negotiate with Krukowiecki. The Polish government had to fetch back Krukowiecki for the rest of the

negotiations. The new President Bonawenture Niemoiowski refused to discuss. Berg and several Polish generals then talked about the details of the armistice during the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of September. Ostrowski, the marshal of the Parliament, and General Dembinski were present at these discussions. They decided upon the capitulation of Warsaw. Warsaw was to be given over to the Russian army. The Polish army received 48 hours to evacuate the city. It had to lay down arms and join the forces of General Ramorino at Kostrzyn. Ramorino still had 18.000 men in arms.

As soon as the surrender was signed, the Russians opposed to the reunion of the entire Polish army with Ramorino. General Malachowsky, the new Polish commander-in-chief, ordered the Polish troops to assemble at Modlin, and that including Ramorino's men.

Ramorino, in his headquarter of Opole, heard of the surrender of the Polish troops on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September in the morning.

Ramorino then wanted to join the troops of General Rozycki and continue the war with him. Rozycki also had continued to fight the Russians. The Russians manoeuvred to not let these two generals join forces.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, Ramorino passed with his troops into Galicia, into Austrian territory. He deposed arms. Ramorino surrendered to the Austrians. He only had still 1.700 men with him.

Another force, led by the Polish former commander-in-chief Skrzynecki, could also not assemble with the troops of General Rozycki. Skrzynecki fled to the Republic of Craców.

General Rozycki fought a last battle against the Russian forces of General Rudiger near Lagow. He had to retreat. The Russian troops pursued Rozycki until the frontier with the Republic of Craców. There, Rozycki deposed arms. The Russians occupied Craców.

The army of the Polish Commander-in-chief Malachowski still marched on with 27.000 men. It gathered at Modlin. The army was totally discouraged by the surrender of Warsaw. Malachowski deposed his command.

General Rybinski was chosen as the new commander-in-chief. He was an able military leader. He had fought for Napoleon and served Grand Duke Constantine. He was an honourable, courageous leader.

Rybinski's main Polish army then stayed at Modlin. Modlin occupied a strategic position. It lay not far from Warsaw and was well fortified. The army of Modlin remained a great danger for the Russian forces.

The Polish Parliament had been assembling since the 10<sup>th</sup> of September in the small town of Zakroszyn. By the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, the armies of General Ramorino and Rozycki formed no threat anymore to the Russian army, so Paskevich formally proposed the unconditional surrender of the entire Polish army. The Russian and Polish armies manoeuvred for a few days between Modlin and Plock. The Prussian army intervened. It placed about 20.000 men at its frontier with Poland.

After a few days more, in the chaos of the last days of the revolution, General Rybinski ordered the retreat of the grand Polish army to Prussia. Thousands of soldiers then left the army and dispersed in the countryside. Rybinski arrived at the Prussian frontier with the remnants of the insurrectionist Polish army, only with about 21.000 men.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1831, Rybinski, the last Polish commander-in-chief, passed the frontier with Prussia and deposited arms. There was no Polish army anymore in Poland. The war of independence was over.

Russia had won the war. General Paskevich was appointed Prince of Warsaw and *Namestnik* or Viceroy of the kingdom of Poland. He would fight several wars yet.

When Asa Vincius returned to Thorn, he swore an oath to Leah Perlman, his wife, never again to roam for months in Lithuania or Poland.

He kept his word only half.

He did abandon the taverns and smaller liquor distilleries, selling what he could to the men who were his stewards. Much had been destroyed or plundered. He stopped all trade and enterprise in Lithuania. He resolutely turned his attention to Prussia. Occasionally, he continued travelling to Vilna, exclusively to pay shorts visits to his parents. Leah and the children often accompanied him.

Asa still occasionally met Abraham and his sister-in-law Abi. He saw them rarely more than a few days per year. Abraham and Asa did no business together. They respected a taciturn agreement of going out of each other's ways.

Asa also rarely travelled in Poland. He lived in Thorn and exploited a few taverns south of the Prussian border, as well as distilleries and cigar factories. He built out most of his business, taverns, distilleries, wineries, tobacco factories and his general trade in Prussia. Many goods, however, sent to Danzig, he brought in from Poland.

Asa Vincius was sorry for what had happened to Lithuania and to Poland. He understood the profound longings of their people for independence, for freedom and self-determination. He was too much a Jew, however, to think life was impossible under foreign rulers. He now lived in a country that had no aspirations for violent revolutions, for already free and united under respected rulers. Not everything was perfect, but he could feel free of his movements and actions.

Asa Vincius and his family kept close contact with Anton Svirskius' family in Danzig. Leah and Sarah travelled to and fro Danzig and Thorn with their children, often in boats on the Weichsel. During the long winter months, they avoided travelling. The relations between a Jewish family and a Christian one diluted their religious ardour. The Svirskius feasted the most important Jewish events, the Vincius found themselves feasting Christmas in Danzig. Asa never wore earlocks and he discarded the long, black coat of the zealous. He walked around in Thorn dressed as a German burgher. Everybody knew him as a respected businessman of Thorn.

Asa lived a very happy marriage with Leah Perlman. He learned to respect her temper and her character. They were very happy with each other's presence, when they sat in their comfortable chairs next to each other in the evening, and talked. They were still fine

members of the small Jewish community of Thorn. Their house was very large, with many rooms, though a simple passer-by would not have expected so much.

Asa often thought of the happy days of his youth in Gaono Street of Vilna, but he did not regret his choice for Prussia and Thorn.

## Notes

This novel is a work of fiction. As in most of my historical novels, I mixed real history with fiction, hopefully not too much distorting real facts.

For the Polish War of Independence, the November Uprising of 1830, which lasted for about a year, I preferred to rely heavily on Count Roman Soltyk's account, on his 1833-1834 originally French work, and also on its German translation.

The paragraphs on the conflict between the Russian General Sulyma and the Lithuanian partisans are pure fiction, of course. Roman Soltyk did write 6.000 guns taken from the Warsaw arsenals disappeared, allegedly sold to Jewish merchants. How they fell to Abraham Vincevicius makes the fiction start. Emilia Plater was a real historic figure. Having her met Abraham is pure fiction.

The life of the Jews in the Pale Settlement areas has been documented by several fine non-fiction books by Jewish authors and scholars.

Hereafter the reader can find a short list of books relating to the period and to the story. I used these and many, many other texts on the subjects of the novel.

The Family Vincius will be continued in the next novel, entitled 'Thorn'.

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