

# A Shtetl Deep in the Woods

Martin S. Cohen

It happened once many years ago that a young boy grew up in Lublin. In its day, Lublin, in the southeast quadrant of Poland, was one of the great Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Especially renowned for its yeshivah, the town was called by some the Jewish Oxford precisely because students from so many different lands and cities were drawn to study there, not unlike the way students from the world over came in the same years to Britain to enroll at Oxford or some other of England's great universities. Nor was this renown solely in the minds of the Jews who lived there; in 1567, the *rosh yeshivah* received the title of rector from the king of Poland and was thus accorded rights and privileges equal to the rectors of Polish universities. For almost two hundred years, representatives from over seventy Jewish communities met in Lublin annually to attend the Jewish Council of the Four Lands at which were discussed financial and other matters of concern to the Jews of Poland.

It was a prosperous place, a fortunate place. But in Lublin there was a family that had been visited by great sorrow: a woman, both a wife and a mother, died unexpectedly in childbirth while trying to give birth to a second son, a boy who also did not survive. And so left to fend for themselves were her first son, Dovid, the hero of our story, and his father, a shoemaker named Yechiel. Even in places of great prosperity, there are those unblessed with good fortune. Yechiel worked hard, but he remained poor. His son was always hungry, never dressed well enough not to feel self-conscious going to school with the other children in the neighborhood, never possessed of any real self-confidence regarding his place in the world or his father's. Their neighbors were kind, but never quite kind *enough*. The local *g'mach*, a charity fund operated by the Jewish community, was generous...but never quite generous *enough*. And then, when Dovid was a mere lad of sixteen, his father was knocked down in the street by a runaway horse and died later that evening in the Jewish hospital owned and operated by the Jewish community.

And now our story begins in earnest. Dovid had nothing. No money, obviously. But also no trade. And not only no siblings to lean on, but also no relatives nearby—or even not so nearby—to whom he could turn for assistance. For a while, he tried to hang on and live on in his own in his father’s apartment. But he had no way to pay the rent, no one from whom to ask for the kind of assistance he truly needed if he was going to stay permanently in that place. For a while longer, he tried to panhandle enough cash to pay the monthly rent. But his life as a beggar was hard. Non-Jews boys spat at him and mocked him. The Jews he knew made believe they didn’t recognize him when they passed him in the Grodzka Gate, known to all in Lublin as the Jewish Gate because it opened onto the Jewish quarter, telling themselves they were being kind by not shaming him in public but truly only avoiding the need to part with some of their own wealth to help a child in need. Besides, they told themselves, a lad like Dovid didn’t need a few kopecks to buy a glass of beer, he needed a fortune of money actually to support himself and to maintain himself in his father’s rooms. And who had *that* kind of money to offer a lad with no prospects *ever* to pay back even the most modest loan, let alone a huge one? More than once, he was set upon by gangs of Jewish boys ashamed for someone so like them to be reduced to begging in the street. On one occasion, they stole his hat. On another, his tormentors took his clothing while he was in the bathhouse washing up and threw it all into the drainage ditch that led from the privy behind the bathhouse and emptied into the Bystrzyca River. Wherever he went, he was mocked; he looked to his father’s friends for help, but found nothing but closed doors and hardened hearts.

And so Dovid, fed up with his lot, set forth, wandering off into the forest. In those days, Poland was still covered with old-growth forests, woods so dark and so deep that entering them was akin to setting foot in a new world, an unfamiliar landscape in which even the birds and the insects felt foreign and unfamiliar. Surrounded by trees that had never been hewn, submerged in a kind of silence so thick that it was almost palpable, the forest existed on its own terms. Entering it, it was widely understood, did *not* imply eventually exiting on the other side. Indeed, many had entered and never exited. Nor were there paths through the forest that a wanderer might choose to follow, no convenient blazes to guide hikers, no signage at all...and, indeed, no unambiguous indication that any human being had ever been in any specific place in the forest before. As, indeed, *had* no human being ever been in many of them: we are not talking about a national park or a wooded reserve, but about hundreds of thousands of acres of untouched, virgin woodland

that existed without reference to the outside world, to the existence of which the forest declined even to nod, let alone actively to acknowledge.

And so it was to this place that Dovid set forth, determined to find a place for himself in the world. He had nothing with him but a knapsack with some few things that were his: his *t'fillin*, his father's old *siddur*, some undershirts, a second pair of trousers, some socks, and the scarf that had been tied around his father's neck when he had died and which had been returned to Dovid by the Chevra Kadisha.

At first, things went well. The forest was a rich place, after all, not a place of deprivation or poverty. The trees were laden with fruit and with nuts. There were springs of fresh, cold water to drink from. Once or twice, he caught a fish in one of the streams...but unable to cook it and unwilling to eat its flesh raw, he threw the fish back into the stream and instead dined that evening on chestnuts and blackberries. When the sun set on what he felt sure was his first Friday in the forest, he was determined to rest in that place to which he had come and so spent his first Shabbos in the woods snoozing in the sunlight and reading from the Psalms that were printed in the back of his father's prayerbook.

And then, after forty or so days of wandering—it became hard to be sure after a while, in that every day was precisely like every other day—he began, he thought, to hallucinate. But for all he tried to remain sober and fully awake, he knew that he heard something and, having no specific path to follow, he chose to walk in the direction of whatever it was he was hearing in the distance.

And so he came to discover something he would earlier on have thought impossible even to dream *about*, let alone actually to encounter: a *shtetl* deep within the forest consisting of perhaps a dozen and a half wooden huts, one large tent that served as a kind of sylvan synagogue and another that served as the abattoir when the residents managed to capture a deer or an antelope, or even more rarely, an actual bison. And there was a third large tent too, the one in which the forest town's children learned their lessons.

It wasn't obvious at first whose surprise was greater: Dovid's at finding this hidden *shtetl* deep in the woods or the town's residents at finding themselves in the company of an outsider, the first to arrive in that place, they said almost proudly, in more than sixty years. Slowly, both sides'

stories were told. Dovid's was the shorter one and the easier to fathom. The town's story was significantly less likely, but Dovid nevertheless felt certain that he was hearing the truth. And it was quite the story! Exactly a century earlier, the Polish High Court had met in Lublin to try a Jewish man who had been accused of murdering a Polish child and using his blood in some sort of pre-Passover ritual that the court had not cared even to specify, let alone clearly to define. The man was convicted and sentenced to death; his execution took place on a Shabbat morning in front of the Maharshal Shul with the entire leadership of the Jewish community commanded to attend and forbidden to leave until the man was dead. The execution was followed by a riot, in the course of which Jewish homes were burnt to the ground, several synagogues razed, and the largest Jewish schools destroyed. The disturbances went on for a week, in the course of which over 200 individuals were murdered. Scores of women were attacked before being killed...and then, when things finally did quiet down, the community was expected to pull itself together, to rebuild, and to be grateful that the damage wasn't even worse.

But seven families were unprepared *just* to resume life as normal. Quietly, so as not to attract any notice, they made plans to leave...and they did leave, entering the forest not far from where Dovid himself must have entered and finally coming to the place in which they now dwelt. All the original inhabitants had died in the intervening century; the *shtetl's* residents were now the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those original citizens. And here they stayed.

Dovid was their first visitor in decades, but they were hospitable and offered, if he wished, to allow him to settle in their midst. There were, they said, several dozen young women of marriageable age. If Dovid wished, they would propose some *shidduchim* and, if one of the women appealed to him, and he to her, they could marry and settle down in that place.

At first, it felt like a dream come true. A Jewish town...but no danger from the outside. A *shul* that no one ever had or ever would destroy. A town of people who were kind and welcoming, eager to share what they had, happy to invite a newcomer to settle in their midst. There would be work too, they promised Dovid, and more than enough of it for him to earn his keep. Of course, they had no money—where would it have come from?—and so they bartered with each other, each trading what he had for what he needed. There would be, of course, no temptation to stray from the path of decency and righteousness. There was no non-kosher meat to consider eating, no non-Jewish wine to consider drinking. There were no poor people to feel guilty about not

helping *enough*. Nor did anyone have to fear anti-Semitism or unprovoked discrimination: there were no outsiders, therefore no non-Jews, no one to be afraid *of* or worried *about*. To Dovid's way of thinking, he had stumbled into paradise.

And so, as you can imagine, things progressed in the expected way. He found a very nice girl, Reizel, whom he married. He learned how to make wine from grapes and how to hunt; in his spare time he attended classes in the school with the *shtetl's* children, unembarrassed to be a married man in their midst and happy to have the opportunity to fill in all the gaps in his own learning, gaps caused by his need to beg on the street when he might otherwise have been learning in *cheder* with the other boys of Jewish Lublin. There was no doctor in that place, but there was also no illness...or at least not as far as Dovid could see. Just the opposite appeared to be the case, in fact: the town's residents all seemed remarkably robust and hale. Almost nervously, the townspeople eventually confided to Dovid that in the course of their century in that place, not one single resident had died other than of old age.

It felt like paradise. It *was* paradise. And Dovid lived there for decades. Eventually, Reizel died. By then, of course, their children were grown up and had married; most were the parents of their own children. Dovid was now well into his sixties; healthy (because they *all* were) but also bored...and restless in a way he would never have imagined he even could be in such a place, let alone that he actually *would* be. Obsessed with the sense that he was breathing but not truly living, he set off into the world again along the path he had travelled all those years earlier. And after almost two months of walking—he walked far more slowly now than he had as a teenager—he found himself back in Lublin.

The city had changed. The buildings were higher and there were more of them. The market place seemed even more frenzied as people came daily to buy what they needed and to sell what they had. The Jewish community, despite everything, had prospered; the Jewish quarter seemed a wealthier place than ever. Dovid, needing to earn a living, got a job as a vintner in a local winery and settled in. Soon enough, his years in the forest seemed like a dream. But he hadn't come back to Lublin just to admire the tall buildings or to earn a living. He came back because he felt called to do something that he had no real idea *how* to do. He had been the victim of a monstrous wrong. When he was starving and all alone, the community had ignored him; no doubt there had been those who had sighed with relief when he finally disappeared. He had been a child on his

own, and no one had come to his aid. And he now understood that his life's mission—the mission which constituted his destiny—was somehow to undo that wrong, to make right *not* a sin that he *himself* had perpetrated, but the one that had been perpetrated *against* him. He wasn't the sinner, he knew. But he could not hide forever in the forest; summoned to the great act of *tikkun* that is the beating heart of Jewish engagement with the world, he could not face death without righting a wrong that not only had no one ever expiated, but that no one even remembered. This, he understood, was his task to perform: to tip the balance of the world to the side of goodness not by looking away because he personally had done no wrong, but precisely because he knew of wrongdoing in the world and felt called upon to undo it...and for his deed to be the great *kapparah* that would make all the difference, that perhaps even would pave the path for the *mashiach* finally to come so that the world could come to resemble the secret *shtetl* deep within the forest to which he had once fled and from which he had now come.

He came back to Lublin just after Pesach. By the onset of summer, he had an apartment and a job. He was recognized by no one, merely respected as an older man with remarkable oenological skills. He lived alone. He davened in *shul* alone. He was as unremarkable as any citizen could possibly be. He ate by himself, spent Shabbos by himself, dropped occasionally into the great *beis-medrash* located within the Maharshal Shul to read by himself and to better himself intellectually. Once or twice, he came across one of the boys who had tormented him decades earlier; they were, of course, now men in their sixties now just as he was. He expected to hate them, but found himself unable to muster that level of emotion in their regard. Whether they had ever atoned for their sins, he had no idea and no interest in finding out. They seemed prosperous; one was well-known as the father of seven daughters. He thought briefly of introducing himself, of forgiving them...then thought better of it and just set the whole concept out of his mind.

When the fall came, he settled into the holiday spirit. He *davened* in the Maharshal Shul on Rosh Hashanah, threw bread crumbs into the Bystrzyca as a way of formally indicating his resolve to lead a good life, to avoid sin, to rise to the level of goodness that he considered himself capable...and then perhaps to surprise himself by transcending his own expectations and becoming a finer person than even he thought likely.

On Erev Yom Kippur, Dovid rose early. His winery was closed for the holiday season. He went to *shul*, then went to the *mikveh*. By nine o'clock, he was already home. He had the full day in front of him...and no specific plans. Guided by, some might say, destiny, he went for a walk, going to the cemetery to place a stone on his father's grave and on his mother's, and then, because he knew his father revered him, on the grave of Rabbi Jacob Isaac ben Avraham Eliezer Ha-levi, the Seer of Lublin, as well. He had no further reason to remain in the cemetery, yet for some reason he did not leave but walked deeper into its recesses, soon coming to its oldest section, where people who had died two or even three centuries earlier were buried. To these graves, obviously, only very few ever came. To some of them, no one ever came at all. Dovid had no personal connection to any of the people buried anywhere around, yet he kept walking, penetrating deeper and deeper into the furthest recesses of the cemetery.

Eventually, he came to the back edge of the cemetery...and there he found what he had been seeking all along without knowing it: a flimsy lean-to set up in the dirt completely invisible other than to someone like himself who suddenly found himself standing right in front of it. He opened the cardboard flap that functioned as a kind of combination door and window, and there he saw, not himself, but a boy *like* himself, a child of twelve or thirteen, lying on the ground fast asleep. He could see the boy's ribs clearly. He could smell the odor of someone who never bathed. He looked around and saw...his old house. In the house, he could see the things he took off to the forest resting on the ground: his spare socks, his second pair of trousers, his pile of filthy undershirts, a torn *t'fillin* bag. Was the child himself? That seemed impossible...and, of course, was impossible. But who then *was* this boy?

He gently roused the lad from his sleep. The boy, confused at first, then terrified, tried to run off. But Dovid just remained seated, calmly waiting for the boy to come back, which he eventually did. He sat back down on the ground and told his story, which you all already know: an orphan, unloved, uncared for, unwatched over, disliked by all because of his foul odor, mocked by the other boys because of his rags, always hungry, scared, nervous, not really expecting to live to adulthood, no livelihood, no friends, no family, no hope...and no expectation that he would ever have any of the above.

Dovid helped him to his feet and hugged him, allowing himself to kiss the boy on the forehead and to promise him that he was alone no longer, that he would right the wrong done to both of

them with one single great act of kindness. He took the lad from the cemetery, paid for his entry into the bathhouse, and then, after waiting patiently for the boy to wash up, he took him home and dressed him in some of his own clothes. Together, like father and son, he took him to hear Kol Nidre that evening in the Maharshal Shul. The boy insisted on fasting, which Dovid thought was probably not such a good idea. But the boy was insistent and completed the fast.

The next day Dovid took the boy by the hand and brought him to the edge of the forest. Hand in hand, they stepped into the dark, dense woods...and forty-eight days later they came to the *shtetl* and there they both lived out their lives in peace, not as father and son—because Dovid was not his father really and the boy, whose name was Doniel, was not really his son—but as friends. Eventually, Doniel grew to adulthood and married one of the girls from the forest *shtetl*. They had children too, many of them. And then, many years later, Doniel, seized by the need not merely to survive but actually to do good in the world, fashioned a walking stick for himself...and set out for Lublin.