

FROM A RUINED GARDEN

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Edited and Translated by
Jack Kugelmass and **Jonathan Bioyarin**
With Geographical Index and Bibliography by
Zachary M. Baker

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Belkhatov Without Jews

Yoysef Raykh

("From a Ruined Garden" pp. 244-246)

I feel oddly alien today in the town where I was born and raised, where I know each corner, each stone, where every house, every store reminds me of familiar people who lived, worked, and dealt here, scrimped and saved penny after penny, built a house for themselves, for children, for children's children. None of them foresaw the bitter fate of those for whom they struggled and built houses.

Here I stand in the marketplace and consider the house which is located right at the corner of Pabyanets Street. Here, a few steps up, was Hershl Plavner's store. I walk closer and am greeted with a bitter sight: now they sell holy pictures and crucifixes there.

I walk through the market and look at the stores of Yoysef-Leybish Grushke, Henekh Adler, Goldshteyn, and others. All of these shops have been taken by the new merchants.

I walk across to the other side of the marketplace and read the new signs on the stores. At one I read, "Village Cooperative," but underneath this inscription is still legible, insistent and accusing, an older inscription: "Tuvye Varshavsky."

Today is Monday, market day in Belkhatov. Once the market was jammed with people. Today, one can walk through quietly. The booths of the new merchants take up only a small part of the marketplace. Today, Belkhatov is like a large village. Of all the textile factories which were built by Jews, Orzhekhovski's is the only one still in operation; the others are idle and empty.

I look at Fraytog's factory. Various objects made of iron remain, the remains of the looms and other machines. I remember how my father used to talk about Perets Fraytog, how he had worked hard in his youth, carrying calves from the villages on his back, until he acquired money and built the factory.

A Pole complains to me that everything in town died along with the Jews, and there's no way to earn a living anymore. The Jews, he says, were resourceful and had initiative, and everything was busy around them.

The walls of the synagogue stand intact, but the windows are gone. Probably they were needed by the neighbors. The interior is utterly empty: the podium is gone, as are the Ark of the Torah, the lecterns, the benches. All that remains are the walls, empty, torn, and dirty. Everywhere there are broken, discarded boxes and dirt. In one place I saw a hole which has been dug, and next to it an iron pot. A Pole explains to me with a burst of jealousy that other Poles had dug up a treasure there, which had been buried in the pot under the floor.

The location of the cemetery was hard to find. I only managed to do so because the grain harvest was long past and the stalks no longer hid the bits of broken graves which lay like signs saying: Here lie the bones of generations of Jews, of our parents, brothers and sisters, and dear ones. Among the shards I recognized two pieces of my father's stone. When I returned a year ago, I saw another piece, which is now gone. Someone took it for sharpening scythes and axes.

On my way back from the graveyard, my eyes downcast, I found out where the gravestones had gone. The road to the Catholic cemetery from Startsev Street is planted with trees. There is a bridge just before the path, which was constructed out of gravestones. The path itself is also paved with Jewish gravestones.

In the meadow between Pabyanets Street and the woods flows a brook. In my days there were stepping-stones which we used to get across, while peasant wagons forded the stream.

Today there's a solid little bridge with massive supports, paved for a few dozen meters with Jewish gravestones. They have also been used to pave the sidewalks in various parts of town. They lie as if disgraced with their inscriptions in the Holy Tongue, with

their engraved Psalms, menorahs, Jewish lions, and Stars of David. As they engraved these stones, the dust that flew from the stones consumed the lungs of my father and brother. How much effort and creativity they poured forth in order to find the right ornaments and inscriptions for each stone: for a young man, a broken tree; for a young woman, a broken candle; for a scholar, a bookcase and two deer; for a *Kohen*, two hands raised in reciting the priestly blessing, and so forth.

Now these stones-torn out of their graves-stolen from the dead, with the holy inscriptions “Here lies” and “May the soul of this holy man be in paradise forever” are trodden by strangers' feet, and desecrated.

An article was printed in the central organ of the Polish Socialist party, *Rabotnik*, which concluded by stating that from being a dirty, isolated town before the war, Belkhatov had grown into a town that was both clean and cultured.

We would like to say to these “cultured people”: you live in our homes, you sleep in our beds and you use our bedding, you wear our clothes-at least do *not obliterate our holy places!*

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