

*Eight Weeks in the Summer
of Victoria's Jubilee*

The Queen, the Jews and a Murder

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BOB BIDERMAN

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INTRODUCTION

THE BIG RED double-decker tram clattered down Whitechapel Road, shooting sparks from its iron wheels as they grated noisily along tracks of rusty steel. Two lovers rode atop, gazing down at the bright and colourful regalia lining the boulevard, great and garish posters and signs in English and Yiddish celebrating the Queen's Jubilee. They looked but didn't speak. It was a lovely Sunday afternoon. The world was bright. But in the distance beckoned the unknown.

It was the year before Eric Alfred Leslie Satie composed his maddening brilliant piano composition, *Gymnopédies*. That is to say it was a year before he put it to paper as it was still in his head along with blazing images of undulating whiteness. In fact, it would be correct to say that as these two young people clattered along in their blood-red tram, the future *Gymnopédies* was in a period of advanced gestation. But they knew nothing of *Gymnopédies* and it knew nothing of them. And therein resides the first in a series of strangely disconnected ironies.

Those Gallic gusts which blew northward across the channel, however, were of limited duration, reaching the ears of only a few and fewer still on Whitechapel Road that summer afternoon. Sometime later, when the woman from the tram met Eleanor Marx, who had just returned from France bringing sour loaves from the Baker of the Third Republic, she might have touched the sentiment which gave rise to the musical impressionists who were starting to paint the ossicles of a generation with tonal colours never before heard, though it's far more likely that from her East End

room it would have been the sounds of a Klezmer band recently arrived from Warsaw that assaulted her.

The young woman – we'll call her 'Maggie' – and her beau – we'll call him 'John,' because that's what she called him – weren't ordinary lovers. Not that any lovers are ordinary, but these two were much less ordinary than most. This seemingly subjective observation was actually an objective fact and was true for the simple reason that John did not exist – at least not in the eyes of the world at large that year in the summer of the Queen's Jubilee. (This was also the year that a man named Jean Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris began to wonder about one of his students who had recently returned to Vienna with a trunk full of notes which, unbeknownst to Charcot, would provide the basis for a seismic shift in thought behind the construction of the mental universe, giving new and profound meaning to the term 'alter ego').

For Maggie was John and John was Maggie. And love him she did – as one can only love a cerebral creation. He travelled with her wherever she went and was, in the main, her obedient servant. But there were times – ah, yes, there were times – when John was not as obedient as Maggie might have desired. Yet isn't this true of all lovers?

However, that summer's day on the big red tram trundling down Whitechapel Road toward the great waste at Victoria Park, John was being the solicitous gentleman – a role which Maggie had taught him to perfection. And being a solicitous gentleman that day, he lent her his masculine eyes to observe but it was her feminine hand which wrote the details of these observations into the moleskin notebook he had once given her along with a box of coloured pencils (though doing so had set them both back nearly a shilling which meant that evening they had only bread and mouldy

cheese for dinner).

At the same time Maggie and John were headed for Victoria Park another character, named Z, was making his way to the great market off Wentworth Street which was known as Petticoat Lane. Z was, at that time, in his middle twenties and though it was some years since he had left his East End home to move not so many miles in physical distance (light years in mental ones) to the northwest of London, still he found his way to the market quite often of late. Something drew him back there – several things, actually. First there was money, or at least the promise of money. And second there was ... something else rather vague. It had to do with that duality all of us contend with at one time or another – like the duality of Maggie and John but, in this case, also quite different. Z's duality had more to do with the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of something you long to escape and then find that you're attracted back because the very things you've tried escaping are the very things you feel you've lost – which causes a strange sense of emptiness. It's one of those spiritual paradoxes that make life rather entertaining and unpredictable. And Z, being an individual with a finely developed sense of ironic humour, appreciated everything paradoxical – as long as it didn't injure anyone (especially those he came to call his 'People').

Z, that day, was wearing a wrinkled shirt and an ancient cravat. He was also wearing a very dusty fedora – black – which was showing extreme signs of wear from being carelessly tossed onto chairs, tables, sofas and whatnot (but often ending up on the floor). And over his shoulders he wore a long, ill-fitting jacket – also black – that almost reached down to his knees and looked like something between a cape and an artist's smock. (His future wife was to ask him about that jacket and the rest of his similarly ill-fitting clothes some

years later, wondering aloud why he didn't change his tailor. And he would reply that his tailor was a kind and honest schlemiel who had come over from Russia, was poor as a church-mouse, had a wife and children to support and it would kill him if Z took his business elsewhere. Fortunately for Z, his future wife understood and told him that, of course, he should never take business away from that dear, sweet man – which was also fortunate for the tailor.) Shabbiness was not out of place in the Petticoat Lane market for that was its very essence. Yet beyond the shabbiness, if one could get that far, was something remarkable. Beyond the dirt, beyond the grime, beyond the sputum, beyond the rank smells of unwashed bodies and rotting flesh, there was another world that Z found, to his great surprise, was far more fascinating than the one he had received in exchange for having taken several outstanding scholastic prizes thanks to a razor-sharp, parrot-like memory that had been honed to perfection as a child by his maternal grandmother.

Thus Z saw this amazing market with very different eyes than did Maggie. For Maggie, Petticoat Lane was dark, dingy and unpleasant – a dank and dirty place where foreign people with ghostly faces and bony arms and hands with sores that never seemed to heal would fix you in their terrifying gaze (trying to sell you something you never really wanted) sending a diabolical chill down her back that caused a twitch in her Achilles tendon.

Yet, curiously, Maggie came to Petticoat Lane with the same regularity as Z himself and a similar objective – though different reasons. For Maggie had taken it upon herself to right the wrongs of the world. And for her there was something terribly wrong about a place where people lived with so much filth and squalor – something terribly evil. Of course, having been brought up in the quiet protection of

the English countryside, Maggie, as a sensitive, God-fearing, Christian would have found it quite shocking and unsettling to see the other side of Britain in the 1880s. Whereas for Z, it was home.

Z had also come to Petticoat Lane to observe. But he saw the market very differently. Yes, he saw the dirt and the grime – though, as we have noted from his demeanour, dirt didn't particularly offend him. And, to him, the people of the market didn't look particularly foreign – unless he looked foreign to himself when he gazed languidly into his mirror. Of course there had been times when he did look foreign to himself, especially in the early days when he had first moved away and found himself surrounded by people who had a distinctly 'Christian' look (whatever that meant, he wasn't sure). As the days went on, finding more and more of his friends and colleagues had that 'distinctly Christian look,' he tried to curry such an appearance in himself. Not knowing precisely what that 'look' entailed presented problems, for if you can't precisely define something it's very hard to emulate it (and even if you do finally come up with a definition, it's still hard to 'be' it – for 'being' and 'knowing' are essentially two different things). Finally, realising the problem was insoluble, he gave up. Curiously, the people at the market felt he actually had succeeded in this bodily transformation which they saw more correctly as a metaphysical process of transition. His new friends, however, noticed nothing different. To them he was still 'exotic' no matter what tie he chose, how he combed his hair, what paper he read or even how he pronounced his vowels.

Z was, so to speak, between two worlds. He had grown up in one but had chosen to live in another. Though he had left the world of his father by choice, he never truly left it in his head. There were things about his former life he rejected

and there were things he cherished (although what he accepted and rejected was not always clear to him). So when he returned, he returned both as a denizen and a stranger. He spoke the languages (some of them at least) but had lost much of the meaning. Maggie, on the other hand, spoke only English (and only a certain kind of English) and thus had to create her own meaning.

Not that the meaning Maggie had imposed on the Petticoat Lane market was entirely incorrect. There was poverty and there was misery. Yet that was only part of it. Later, when they had met, Z tried to explain the difference between Petticoat Lane and the Jago which was only a stone's throw away. The Jago, he told her, was poor and impoverished. The people who worked Petticoat Lane and lived in the densely packed streets and alleys of Whitechapel were poor and impoverished, too. But they were poor in a different way. In the Jago people were abjectly poor. Poverty for them was a way of life and they accepted it in a manner that a terminally ill leper might accept his disease, continuing to beg until his arms finally fell from their sockets. The people of Whitechapel (and here he was speaking of his People) saw poverty as a temporary situation which related strictly to immediate bodily comforts and could change from day to day according to circumstances. These people, Z told her, had three things the people in the Jago had not and those three things were Faith and Hope and an Abiding Sense of History.

Of course, Maggie responded, they have their God. And that is what is missing in the Jago. But even God might weep at the number of children who found their way to the morgue because of disease brought on through malnutrition.

At first Z hadn't told her that 'their God' was also his God because at the time he wasn't absolutely sure their God

was his God anymore – though it had been clear to her from the start there was something beyond curiosity linking him to Whitechapel. And therefore he interested her all the more because he came to exemplify in her mind what good could happen through the transforming nature of education.

They had met in the summer of 1887. By that time both had gone some distance down the road which was to bring them, in one case, a certain amount of fame and glory and, in the other, several interesting but short-lived books which would rest, neglected, on library shelves for the foreseeable future.

Z, at the time, was going through something of a crisis which would occur now and again throughout his peripatetic life. He was torn between two vastly different worlds. On the one hand he had made friends with a rather interesting set of people from his student days who liked to call themselves the ‘New Humorists’ (though the word ‘humour’ to them wasn’t necessarily synonymous with ‘funny’). They were young and free-thinking, nurtured on Huxley and Spencer, and quite into the vanguard stream of literature coming to them from both America and the Continent. They would take long, languid boat trips down the Thames discussing the curiously absurd nature of life and would sketch out whole series of frothy articles for a magazine venture they planned to call ‘The Idler’.

On the other hand, Z was by nature a serious man. Certainly, he could see the humorous side of life and that was doubtless one of his saving graces. But he was also drawn to another world that went far beyond the sunny days basking in the light of Imperial England. That side of him had not yet been fully developed, but it was beginning to emerge.

For her part, Maggie had been attracted by the likes of Charles Booth, Beatrice Potter and Fredrick Engels – who

the following year would write back after reading her first novel which she had sent him unsolicited, saying simply, 'Not quite real enough.' She considered herself a Christian Socialist – more Christian than socialist, which is why she once made her hero into a Salvation Army officer. But she, too, was a committed writer even though she had little sense of 'career.' She wanted to write to help change the world. Z wanted to write to help define it. (Later he too would write to change the world and that's when he found his problems became manifest.)

This story, however, isn't about them as individuals but a brief and fascinating encounter that changed their lives and their perspective on themselves, England and the world. The consequences of this adventure, which is soon to unfold, and the meaning of what eventually happened may not have been understood for some time to come – if ever. So this is a tale left for us to tell – for certainly it's a story worth telling. And it happened in eight weeks, during Jubilee Summer.

The Crime

June 27, 1887

BATTY STREET. The name had a touch of the peculiar, leading one to suspect there was something uniquely deranged about it. But that was far from the case. It was, in fact, one of many dreary little streets with an uncertain water supply that ran south off Commercial Road; a street of tired row houses facing a similar row of dark facades without the hint of a smile – in defiance, perhaps, of its slightly wacky name.

Number 16 had already been awake for a good five hours by the time Leah Lipski and her upstairs lodger, Mrs. Levy, came home after a quick shopping trip to Petticoat Lane. Outside, in the passageway, an elderly woman – Mrs. Rubenstein – was seated in her chair, making the most of the morning sun as she tended her little grandchild, the youngest of Leah Lipski's brood of five. So focused was she on her duties, looking out for the child, and, perhaps, dreaming of life back in the Polish shtetl, that she didn't notice her daughter approach with Mrs. Levy – the widow who shared the upstairs room with her. Besides, at that hour (nearly 11 AM) there was quite a bit of competition for her attention; the street life, even on a narrow road like this had all the appearances of an ongoing beggar's carnival with a constant stream of characters passing in review – from organ grinders, with their flea-bitten monkeys, prying another farthing out of the penniless neighbourhood, to the barrow

merchants pushing their little carts, selling anything from Lucifer matches to rancid meat thinly disguised as ‘cat food’.

Going inside the bleak entrance of the three story house, Leah Lipski walked through the narrow hallway, past the door on the left which led to the room in which most of her family squeezed together and continued along to the kitchen with its bare oak table and skinny larder and bunk beds tucked into a little cranny where two of her children slept. Stopping to put down her provisions she noticed the metal pot was still filled to the brim with the coffee she had fetched from a nearby shop earlier that morning when one of her lodgers – a young man named Israel – had asked her for his breakfast at around half past eight. She had thought it curious the coffee was still there since he had seemed so anxious when she saw him earlier that day. But he was in such a state – perhaps he had forgotten.

When she pictured this young man with lipid blue eyes, she recalled the time some eighteen months before when Katz, the umbrella maker, had sent the ‘greener’ around to her former house, just a few streets away, to ask for room and board. Standing awkwardly, pale and wane in his rumpled clothes, he had the same look of dream-like disorientation that she knew so well from others straight off the boat who had waited before her door. What made him different was his manner; boyishly shy, there was a sense of quiet dignity about him confirming her carefully nurtured instincts that this was someone she could trust to pay the rent on time, and, as importantly, to keep the delicate balance which was necessary in maintaining such a densely populated household. She quickly sized him up as one of those determined young men, without financial resources or physical prowess, who still had a naïve certainty that through sacrifice and hard work they could succeed where their fathers had failed, and carve out a

business from nothing but sweat and grizzle.

Her own husband, Philip, had once looked that way to her. Five children later he was still doing piece-work for a tailor. They survived like all the others, by pooling their resources and treating a penny like a pound. Subletting their Batty Street house from someone who had sublet it from someone else and he, again, from another, they paid the lease by taking in lodgers. In total there were fourteen people stuffed into three rooms. Fifteen into four if you counted the young man in the attic.

Even so, after all this time, what did she know about him? Not much, really. Israel Lobulsk from Warsaw. That was his name before he had changed it to Lipski – to Anglicise it, he had said. The landlady took it as a compliment; it made him part of the family and when they moved to Batty Street from Batty Gardens, Israel came along with them.

As for his apprenticeship in the umbrella trade, he had been a keen and ready student, quickly becoming a skilled stick-finisher. Certainly, Katz had no complaints. In fact, it wasn't long before a match had been arranged between the young man and Katz's niece, Kate Lyons. It was one of those formal arrangements, quite business-like, and clearly a sign of faith in this young man's future prospects.

Yet who could have foretold the extraordinary weather conditions – those weeks upon weeks of blue sky and brilliant sun, the parched earth, the lack of rain that had thrown the umbrella trade into such a terrible state? What could a man like Katz have done but lay off his employees, at least till the weather got worse – or better, depending on one's perspective.

That was the problem, she had told him. To sell your labour for tuppence was one thing if you had a job and were learning a trade. To find yourself out of a job and your trade

suddenly worthless was quite another. For what good was an umbrella-stick finisher during a drought? What could he do? Make walking sticks, perhaps. Except for that, he'd have to go into business for himself.

She knew he would prefer to have waited till he saved up a nest egg, but now there was no alternative. He took what he had, which wasn't much, and pawned it, getting enough to rent the Batty Street attic and buy a few tools. He had got up the courage to ask Anna Lyons, Kate's mother, for a small loan – which he promised to repay promptly with a good rate of interest. She pawned her pearl-handled hairbrush and gave him the proceeds – one gold sovereign.

Katz, he told her, had given him a few business contacts. Israel tracked them down, showed them a few samples, mentioned a price. They told him what they would pay. It was a thoroughly ruthless amount, little more than the cost of the materials and wages. He did some quick sums in his head and agreed. He would be working for nothing. They knew that and so did he. But he would be working.

That was the week before. The last few days he had quickly set up shop with the help of the lad, Pitman, who had also worked for Katz, running back and forth, getting last minute supplies and seeing if he could drum up future business. Yet everything was more expensive and took more time. Wasn't it always like that?

Leah, the landlady, had been aware of his dilemma. A small artisan with no business experience had an infinite number of problems to solve before he could ever hope to turn a profit. She had seen him, stiff and anxious, struggling to get it all together by the time his new employees, two men he had found milling around the hardware shop, came to work – one to shellac the finished sticks, the other to fix on the metal tips. What could he tell them if there was nothing

to do? And worse, what would he tell his customers if he couldn't deliver?

Then, this morning, when she saw him in the kitchen, he had summoned up all his courage – or so it seemed to her – and finally asked for a small loan, just a few shillings extra to purchase another vice for the workshop. Unhappily, she turned him down. She had nothing that month, nothing at all. Especially since the new woman in the upper front room had asked her to wait a week on the rent, pleading that she and her husband had spent the last of their money on doctor bills as she was having such a difficult pregnancy.

His smile had been wafer thin and stoic, like someone who had managed to find a tiny bit of irony in a wave of bad luck. He had asked for his coffee and she left to fetch it for him. That was two and a half hours ago. Now it was still sitting there in the metal pot. She touched the side. It was as cold as a gravestone.

The landlady's thoughts were suddenly disrupted by Mrs. Levy who had just entered the kitchen followed by an elderly woman whom she, unfortunately, recognised. Dinah Angel was the mother of the front room tenant on the second floor – the one with the pregnant wife. When Leah Lipski considered this woman who boldly swept into her house as if it were her own, always making demands, always critical though pretending not to criticise, she thought how ridiculous it was that someone like her should be named after a messenger from God. Her own mother, Mrs. Rubenstein, who lived in the house, might have been stone deaf and might drift easily into a world of quiet fantasy, but she was a real angel compared to the one who just came in. That one, the mother of the peasant upstairs – there was nothing quiet about her. So even though her instincts had told her that the couple above were going to be trouble when she first rented

them the room, the landlady couldn't help but hold a touch of sympathy for that harassed young woman whose mother-in-law expected her punctually for breakfast every morning at 9:30 AM.

On the other hand, knowing she was a *kvetch*, a complainer of the worst sort, the landlady was still willing to admit that life for Dinah Angel was hard. She was a woman alone and that in itself was difficult. Some people, she thought, could be in Heaven, itself, and find things to complain about. So what if she were in a strange country where she didn't ask to be taken? God sent people on journeys that only He understood. And unlike some, Dinah Angel had her children, her sons, and that was more than enough to be thankful for, she thought.

In the end, the landlady did have a touch of sympathy for the old hag. For she understood that even with all her *kvetching*, what motivated Dinah Angel was fear. She was afraid as they all were afraid. She was afraid of the bleakness, the foulness, the drunks on the stinking streets who found a moment of raw pleasure in throwing stones at Jews. She was afraid of the endless void of poverty and hunger which always threatened to swallow them up – for even if they had enough to eat today who could be sure about tomorrow? And her defence – and everyone had their defence, didn't they? – her defence was to lash out at everything, especially those that she loved. So when she spoke about her daughter-in-law so disparagingly – 'She sleeps – that she is good at! She eats and sleeps! What will she do when the child comes?' – what she really meant was, 'How will she cope? How will they survive?' That she couldn't say, not in those words. What she said instead was: 'So where is she now? Almost noon and where is she? You see if I'm right! I'll tell you where she is, that lazy good for nothing! She's in bed!'

When Dinah Angel had finished relieving herself of her bile which, it seemed, helped lighten her chest, she shuffled her arthritic body back down the hallway toward the short flight of stairs which led toward her daughter-in-law's room. Mrs. Levy, who had busied herself unpacking the supplies from their shopping trip – salt, some onions, black tea, fresh bread – placing them on their appropriate shelves, now turned toward the landlady, pursed her lips and shook her head as if to say she wouldn't want to be in that poor young woman's shoes, not for anything. It was bad enough to be pregnant and penniless. And then they both looked up at the cracked plaster ceiling, imagining the scene above.

What they heard was the clumping of Dinah Angel's heavy feet going up the stairway: thump, thump – and then a pause to catch her breath. Thump, thump - pause. Thump, thump – pause. The cycle repeated itself nine times over. Then the shuffling of feet on the plank floor, the rattle of a door and her grotesque voice entreating Miriam to open up. A minute of silence. The door rattled and in a firmer tone, she called out to her daughter-in-law again.

Mrs. Levy glanced at the landlady who returned her questioning look with one of her own. Miriam Angel, like her mother-in-law, was a creature of habit. Besides, it wasn't like her not to answer the door. Mrs. Levy was about to say that the poor woman must be ill, but she hadn't time to speak the words. They heard a sound – a very terrible sound. They didn't know what it was, but they understood it was bad. And as they rushed up the stairs, not really knowing what to expect, they were certain that whatever it was, Mrs. Angel left to her own devices would only make it worse so they had better get there fast.

They saw her in the half-light of the upstairs hall, bent at the waist, as if trying to peer in through the keyhole. She

straightened up as the two women came toward her. The look on her face was one of profound confusion, as if she could hardly make sense of what she saw. Mrs. Levy leaned down and looked through the gap in the door where a replacement lock had been clumsily fitted. It was a difficult perspective with which to get a proper view, but she thought she could see Miriam lying on the bed.

While Mrs. Levy began pounding on the door, calling out the young woman's name, the landlady walked over to the stairway which led to the attic. Half way up there was a small window that looked into Miriam Angel's room. The glass was clouded and covered on the inside with a thin gauze curtain. Putting her face to the glass, the landlady could see the ghostly shape of Miriam Angel on her bed, her chemise drawn up to her thighs. Her legs were bare. Her body was completely motionless.

'The future Jewish historian will have to describe the Victorian Age as the most marvellous era in Anglo-Jewish annals. For it is impossible to imagine another space of fifty years working a revolution equally vast in the condition of the Jews of this country, and more truly causing a people that walked in darkness to see a great light.'

The Jewish Chronicle on the Queen's Jubilee

PART I

Weeks 1-4: The Inquiry

CHAPTER 1

THE OFFICE OF the Jewish Record was small and cramped. A large Georgian window would have overlooked the road below had not the view been hampered by years of accumulated grime. As well as the stale light, a lingering odour of rancid grease from the workers café below wafted through the floorboards. However, neither the dankness nor the sour smell fazed Z in the least as he sat upright at his desk, hidden behind a wall of inky papers heaped in disordered piles – each stack belonging to one of a number of scribes who came to this cloistered room on occasion with the intention of completing an article or picking up a new assignment, while coveting a few square inches of precious desk space for his own.

Mordecai, the managing editor (who was also the publisher of the Record) was puffing on his pipe stuffed with tobacco fresh from one of those newfangled air-tight tins which had just been introduced earlier that year, letting the billows of acrid smoke overcome the smell from downstairs while perusing a copy of the Pall Mall Gazette. Z who was hard at work, scribbling out the completion of his weekly column, couldn't help but note that the portly proprietor, though reading silently, would on occasion send forth signals

through his pipe that he had come across something which either disturbed, amused or angered him. One could learn to read those signs, Z suspected, like smoke puffs used to telegraph messages of great or (in Mordecai's case) minor importance. Dipping his stylus into the adjacent inkwell, he let that notion percolate even as he scratched out another series of well-crafted phrases which seemed to roll effortlessly from the nib of his pen. As the idea began to take shape in his head, he found himself staring at Mordecai's pipe, which up till then had been quietly issuing gentle curls of pale blue and had suddenly started to blaze with sparks of incandescent red.

This growing obsession with Mordecai's smoke signals caused Z to feel some annoyance because he knew that his carefully nurtured train of thought was about to be decisively broken. At the same time, it pleased him that another interesting character trait had been effectively made part of his literary palette for use in dressing up a minor figure in one of his vignettes sometime later. But what had made Mordecai's pipe so fiery hot? Could it have really been the paper that he gripped in his thick, stubby fingers (the tips of which were stained indelibly black from too many years of fondling smudgy newsprint). It piqued Z's curiosity. The Pall Mall Gazette was written to outrage, he thought, but someone like Mordecai had been inured to its strident tone, the bull-horn of its drum-beating crusader, W. T. Stead – a man with wild eyes and biblical beard who had fascinated him for so long. How different these two newsmen were! Stead thumped and shouted whereas Mordecai held his hat in his flabby hand and did nothing more than whisper. How Z wished he, too, were able to shout and thump and thrust his verbal sword so finely honed. Oh, well – that would come later. But still he wondered what there possibly was in the

Gazette that could merit such a visceral eruption.

Suddenly Mordecai stood up from his chair and turned, so that his short, rounded body with its undulating folds of untrammelled flab directed itself forward toward Z's desk. It was not a pleasing sight – so unappealing, in fact, that even though Z could feel his editor's presence in the small of his back, he steadfastly refused to look at him. But, in the end, there was nothing to be done. The man was upon him. Z could pretend not to notice for only so long before it became impossible. How could he not notice a pipe-smoking ape wearing a ridiculous toupee whose ponderous bulk waggled audaciously beside him?

Had he read the afternoon paper? Mordecai hovered over him waiting for a response. Z sighed. No, he hadn't. Mordecai shook the broadsheet directly in Z's face. Page 3, that's where it was. Page 3, that's where he should read. And Mordecai pointed out the article with the stem of his pipe. Z must read it, he said. With a sigh, Z reached out his hand. But Mordecai pulled it back. Having changed his mind, he decided to read it aloud, himself:

Mysterious Occurrence in the East End

Two Persons Poisoned

A mysterious affair has occurred in Batty Street, Commercial Road, Whitechapel, resulting in the death of a Polish Jewess and such injuries to a young man as are expected to result in death. At No 16, Batty Street, leading out of the Commercial Road, resided several Polish Jews. Among them was a man named Isaac Angel, a boot riveter, who, with his wife, Rachael, occupied the two rooms of the first floor. On the top floor were also two rooms, one of which was rented by a single young man named Israel Lipski, aged twenty-two, and a walking-stick maker. About half-past six o'clock yesterday morning, Angel got up and left home, as

usual, to go to his employment, leaving his wife in bed. At that time, Mrs Angel, who was only twenty-two years of age, appeared to be fast asleep. About half past eleven Mrs Levy, another lodger, not seeing or hearing anything of Mrs Angel, became alarmed, went up to the bedroom, and burst open the door. A shocking sight presented itself. Mrs Angel was lying on the bed, apparently dead. She was terribly burned, evidently with some acid, about the head, face, neck and breast. Dr J. Kay, of Commercial Road, was sent for. The medical man found that Mrs Angel was dead, the cause of death being in his opinion, poisoning by nitric acid. Dr. Kay then noticed a man lying under the bed on his back, apparently dying. This proved to be Lipski, and his clothing was much burned by the acid. Dr Kay ordered the man's removal to London Hospital. Today it is reported that Lipski is progressing favourably. He vehemently denies having murdered Mrs Angel.

Mordecai stopped reading and gazed at Z to ferret his reaction. Z looked back at him, blandly, without emotion – which caused his editor to wrinkle his narrow brow in wonder at Z's apparent equanimity. And then, asking him what he made of it, Z replied that it wasn't a particularly good piece of journalism – at least by the standards of the Pall Mall Gazette because, first of all, they had the poor woman's name wrong – it was Miriam Angel, not Rachael – and, secondly, at the beginning they made it sound as if the man, Lipski, found poisoned with her was about to die, whereas four or five sentences on he's progressing favourably. He wasn't sure what to make of that.

There was little left in life to surprise the cholesterol-charged editor of the Record, but somehow Z always did. How did he know about the name? He had been to Petticoat Lane that morning, Z responded. There was nothing but chatter regarding the murder that took place the day before.

Even the beggars were talking about it.

A low moan seemed to emanate from Mordecai's belly bringing with it the distinct smell of pickled herring as it emerged from the dark reaches of his intestines. It was a moan that Z had often heard before and it seemed to turn the hapless creature standing before him into a more sympathetic being, one of his brethren, for it was not really his own moan that emerged – not one of personal pain – but rather a lingering, ghostly collective moan that spoke of miseries over thousands of years.

It was never good for a Jew to be accused of murder, Mordecai told him, but to be accused of killing an Angel is very bad, indeed. To which Z pointed out that in this case the Angel was, herself, a Jew. But Mordecai shook his head, accidentally scattering burning ash from his pipe onto one of Z's stacks of paper and watched in despair as if that itself was a message from God while Z quickly brushed aside the smouldering ember. To Z it might have been yet another act of editorial clumsiness but to Mordecai it was a visual metaphor writ large having to do with sparks upon dry tinder.

Only last week he had written of the need to quell the massive wave of immigrants from the villages and towns of Russia and Poland before the East End was totally inundated with those who only brought with them more poverty and disease. Yes, they were his brethren. Yes, it was the community's duty to protect them. But wasn't their first obligation to those who were here already? And weren't enough mischief-makers writing about the East End as if it were nothing but a breeding ground for crime and pestilence – escalating their call on Parliament to act? So it was up to them, he had argued, to show that their people were moral, clean, upright, hardworking and loyal – a great bounty to the country in this glorious Jubilee Year. It was up to them to do

this before the horrors of Europe were upon them and that dreaded word they dared not speak fall deadly from their lips yet again. *Judenhass!* Yes, they need only look at Prussia and the remnants of the Austrian Empire. It happened there and it could happen here!

Z listened with patience to Mordecai's tirade and then when smoke had started to abate and the chimney had cooled down, he asked whether Mordecai would like him to follow this story of the Whitechapel murder. An article, he said, from the Jewish perspective might be appropriate.

And what would an article from the Jewish perspective entail? Why should they publicise a story of a Jew who killed an Angel – even if the Angel was another Jew? What could they gain besides trouble?

But the story was already out, Z reminded him, and it was bound to get bigger as gruesome murders always do even without the added interest of the Angel killing Jew. Mordecai, he argued, owed it to his readership to present a calm and factual analysis to counter the scandal sheets that would dig up any gory detail and print it if they felt it would sell more papers. They didn't have the same obligation to set the record straight as he did. After all, this was his community and his people.

Mordecai bit down on the stem of his highly coveted Meerschaum pipe and contemplated Z as he often would when he felt it difficult to respond – either because he didn't know what to say or did, but hadn't found the words to say it. Silence in Mordecai's case did not always mean consent. This Z knew from experience. But in the past, when Mordecai listened mutely to Z's proposals, it usually meant that the decision to publish would be made after Z had written it. So writing it or not, was up to Z. Whether the words he eventually wrote would find a home on the pages of the

Jewish Record, however, was up to Mordecai and if he was feeling overly bilious that day.

CHAPTER 2

LIKE DICKENS, WHOM he both feared and admired, Z had a great suspicion of facts. Even though *Hard Times* had been published some thirty years before, the ideas in the book still rang true for him as did the metaphor of Coketown where fact, fact, fact, was everywhere in the material aspect of the place and fact, fact, fact, was everywhere in the immaterial. This, after all, was the heyday of the statistician – those grey, robotic men who sat at neat and tidy desks in bleakly lit offices transforming all life into numbers at a stroke of their pen. He hated them, not for who they were but for what they had done – squeezing out all emotion and history from ideas and events so they could more easily be quantified – which had the effect for him of turning people into unthinking machines (probably what the statisticians were after, he suspected).

Of course he did understand there was a functional purpose to gaining certain information – if only for a preliminary understanding of what had happened and when it had occurred (leaving aside for a moment the very important ‘why and wherefore’). Except there were no simple questions, not for someone like Z, at least. For as life itself was complex, existing on many different levels and myriads of planes, so were questions. And answers – well, they were even more complicated. Answers depended on who was giving them and where the respondents were in their head at the time they were asked. In fact, if pressed, Z would have probably admitted what for any journalist (or their editors, at

least) is absolute anathema – that there were no real answers which could bring forth such a state of blessed assuredness craved by the many who needed certainty as their bromide so they could sleep easily at night.

And yet like all men whose career lay before them, Z had a practical side which fortunately allowed him to dispense with those notions set out above – at least long enough to accomplish certain journalistic tasks necessary to construct a coherent story. So journeying to several sites and speaking to some key people, he was quickly able to gather important information regarding the events that happened after the body of Miriam Angel was discovered and the young man, Lipski, was taken away to hospital. Z made extensive notes based on questions he asked of those he chose to interview, some of whom were more forthcoming than others – which is often the case when people are confronted by a member of the press but even more so with Z who didn't look or act like a typical reporter.

Toward evening, Z finds himself walking through the passages of some of his old haunts, places he knew long ago before he left the East End. Even as night falls, the pavement of Wentworth Street is teeming with children. The road is dark and gloomy, but life abounds. Like a greedy voyeur, nothing escapes his eye. The contrast between the West End and the East, thought Z, was denoted by the brightness of one and the obscurity of the other. There was a push among reformers to illuminate the ghetto streets and just the other day he had read in one of the papers a commentary that stated in its usual authoritarian tones, 'Homes would become more cheerful and attractive; life would become healthier and the plague of crime would die out like toadstools under the sun, if the dire streets of the East End were finally electrified.'

Was it any wonder that the people of the area, which the press had termed ‘The Wicked Quarter Mile’, were attracted to the brightly lit world of the public houses? Back on the great highway, with its cheapjacks and shooting galleries, its roar and rattle, its hawkers and quacks expounding the miracle of some new patent medicine, it was all lit up in blazing naphtha. At the newsstand posters shouted out the gruesome headlines in huge black text. But the images described therein were flat, like paper cutouts. When Z walked those same mean streets he viewed them with more dimension. The houses all had people and the people all had lives. He knew something about the lives they led because he had once lived there himself; so he could see them sympathetically, not just as representatives of the grotesque.

For Z, as a writer, the streets of Whitechapel were peopled with actors in the horrifically grand, magnificently ironic carnival of life. And his job, like a Jewish Balzac, was to record a chapter in the universal human comedy – but one that related to his people. As he walked, he observed and tried to capture the visual rhythms and melodies:

Two young men, one with a bundle of papers and the other a bootblack, share half a cigar that has been dropped, smouldering on the pavement by a gentleman who has hurriedly jumped into a Hansom cab. Nearby a boy without legs sits upon his ragged jacket before an empty metal cup. Next to him a blind man ekes out a tune on a homemade dulcimer. But they are merely backdrops to the ongoing drama of the street – a crowd surrounds a buggy which has been loaded with the body of a woman, drunk and very nearly dead, while, simultaneously, another throng is drawn, compellingly, to a street hawker whose mesmerizing patter casts a spell over his bedazzled audience.

All these characters – the newsy and the bootblack,

the legless boy, the blind man, the drunken woman, the charismatic hawker – will later be fleshed out and bestowed with humanity to become more than objects of pity or scorn; they will come to possess hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, tragedy and humour. For now, however, they will remain quick sketches.

Z pockets his notebook and then looks around for someplace to quench his thirst. He enters a pub called the White Hart set on the northern side of the High Street before which the kaleidoscopic music of an organ grinder is bringing some much needed cheer to the road. There he sees a man sitting at the bar and recognises him as someone he knows, someone who worked as a stringer for the East London Observer. Z joins him for a drink. Almost at once the name of Lipski comes up. Everyone on the paper, the stringer tells him, is vying to get some kind of handle on the story. And winking – the man clearly had a few before Z came in – he says, in confidence, of course, that he has just been to London Hospital and, in fact, has seen Lipski, himself. Later Z tries to record what the man in the pub had narrated to him:

He entered the long corridor leading to the open ward where the ordinary patients were treated. Normally, Lipski would have been placed in the separate Jewish ward, but it was full at the moment. At the nurse's bay he found a sister who was preparing some fresh bandages for her patients. He asked her how Lipski was doing. She said he was doing as well as could be expected and that he'd been visited by two doctors who had both agreed that the injuries were not very serious. The membrane of the throat was all that had been injured by the nitric acid – which, it appeared he had administered to himself.

How could she be sure?

That was the doctor's opinion.

How was he feeling now?

He has not passed a comfortable night, poor fellow, she responded – he's been tossing and turning with only an occasional fitful doze. She said that with sympathy, without displaying any sign of repugnance for the man.

Where was he now?

She pointed to a bed half way down the long ward, on the right hand side. Walking toward it, he saw the patient lying there with his eyes fully open. He appeared to be staring vacantly at the ceiling while his hand clutched convulsively at the coverlet. His throat was bound up with bandages. His dark hair was tangled and unkempt. His face was pale and sallow – beardless with just the hint of side-whiskers.

Sitting opposite him was an interpreter who was also serving as a police guard. He was there, he said, to take down any statement Lipski needed to make. Only one visitor had called on the patient so far, he claimed – a young Jewess who came and sat by his bed for over an hour on Tuesday night. The greeting between her and the patient was most affectionate and the girl expressed her firm belief in his innocence and in the truth of the rambling story he told her about two men coming into the house at Batty Street asking him for work and subsequently pouring some liquid down his throat and that of the woman Angel – a story which the facts of the woman's door being locked on the inside and his being found beneath the bed almost entirely disprove.

But we shall see, for tomorrow is the inquest.

*Eight Weeks
in the Summer of
Victoria's Jubilee*
The Queen, the Jews and a
Murder

Bob Biderman

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