

UNDER THE CROSS [*UNTERN TSEYLEM*])

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1923

Translation from Yiddish by Ellen Percman

Adaptation by Ellen Percman

## CHARACTERS

MOISE FEROPONTOV	A Jewish convert to Christianity who the Jews call Moshkele Khazer
AVDOTYE	His wife
YAKOV	Their son
TANYE	Yakov's wife
KIYRL KIRILITSH PYATAK	A former deacon
HAVRIYLO	Employee of Moshke
ROKH'L LEYEH	Young Jewish woman fleeing a pogrom
AKIM	A peasant gang leader

Place: A small village in White Russia (Belarus)

Time: Today (1923)

## ACT ONE

*Just before sundown on Yom Kippur eve.*

*MOSHKE's well-appointed home. A large bright room with windows that look out on an enclosed garden. A heating stove. An ornate, old-fashioned bookcase. A wall clock. A few soft cushioned gold-plated chairs, one of them throne-like. These objects all look as if they belong in the home of a land-owner and seem out of place here. On a shelf, an assortment of household items, and among them bundles of old newspapers. Russian photographs on the walls. In a corner, a shelf holding a small Christian icon and under it an extinguished Russian holy lamp. We have the impression of a firmly established household, part city, part village, well-to-do, overly neat.*

*AVDOTYE is spinning wool. There is a pot of water at her feet, which she uses to moisten her fingers. TANYE sits deep in thought. There is an open book in front of her. She is dressed like a city girl.*

- TANYE                    You were going to tell me about young lovers.
- AVDOTYE                Oh, what's there to tell? My dear, it would take me days to tell you that story. You know, when I first met him I was afraid of him!
- TANYE                    Afraid? Why?
- AVDOTYE                Because he's a ...
- TANYE                    But he converted!
- AVDOTYE                Converted, yes. The holy water purified him. But there's still evil deep inside him. May the good Lord not punish me on account of that... *(Crosses herself)* Believe me! My heart ached for him. It was like a rope was pulling me toward him.
- TANYE                    Sounds like you really loved him.
- AVDOTYE                I couldn't help it. I had never met anyone like him.
- TANYE                    I bet he was handsome.

AVDOTYE            Handsome, and smart. Just out of the army – and he sure was different!

TANYE                Still is. *(Pause)* Why did he convert?

AVDOTYE            I can't tell you for sure. Maybe those devils drove him away, or maybe he saw the true light ...

TANYE                Tell me how you met.

AVDOTYE            God brought him to me. You know, I may not come from an educated family, but we're good people. My father, may he rest in paradise, owned the largest butcher shop in town.

TANYE                And you?

AVDOTYE            Me? I was just a girl. Easy-going, fun, a typical country girl. And healthy, too. Not like those sickly Jewish girls...

TANYE                And once you were married, did things go well?

AVDOTYE            Oh, not well! Not well at all, dear! How could it, when the devil still hadn't been smoked out of him? He couldn't get along with them and he really didn't belong here.... And he sinned against God, too. Oh, he went to church every Sunday. But at home, when no one was watching, he mocked everything that's holy... At night, he didn't even cross himself before going to bed ...

TANYE                He was probably having doubts about converting.

AVDOTYE            No – he hated them more than he hated us. If a Jew ever got lost and stumbled into our yard, he'd go after him with a stick...

TANYE                I hear the Jews call him by a strange name: I think it's "Moshke *Khazzer*"...

AVDOTYE            Not so loud! He could walk in any minute... He hates that name more than anything. Once broke a Jewish boy's leg

for calling him that. Crippled him.... That's why we moved out here. He said he didn't want to see their "despicable faces" anymore...

TANYE Jews aren't allowed to eat pork. I hear it disgusts them.

AVDOTYE And you think it doesn't disgust him? At first he couldn't even look at it. My father, may he rest in paradise, made sausage for a living so we could get all the pork we wanted. But my husband wouldn't eat it. He said it stinks. So I went to the Jewish shoemaker in town and asked her to teach me how to cook some Jewish dishes.

TANYE Did she?

AVDOTYE Sure did. *Kugel, tshiyemes, taygekhtz.* May God not punish me... *(She crosses herself again)* But he didn't like the way I prepared them. So he had to get used to pork...

TANYE Well isn't that curious.

AVDOTYE You think that's curious?! *(Whispers)* Let me tell you something really curious: He didn't want to have children!

TANYE Why not?

AVDOTYE Who knows? People's souls are a mystery. His certainly is ...

TANYE But you did have a child.

AVDOTYE That was God's doing. But I sure suffered for it! When he found out I was pregnant, he left for three days!

TANYE Then what?

AVDOTYE He wouldn't speak to me. I just had to swallow my tears... That's why Yakov was born such a sad child...

TANYE So you're telling me he doesn't love Yakov...?

AVDOTYE I didn't say that. After the baby was born, he fussed over him whenever I wasn't looking... And you know how stingy he is with every penny? Well... When Yakov was sick once, he went to the city in the middle of the night, and brought the best doctor back here. Paid him twenty-five rubles for that one visit.

TANYE Such a strange man... He once told me that if Yakov wanted to get an education, he'd spend everything he had on that.

AVDOTYE That's the problem right there. He was fixated on the child getting educated. He'd torment him, drive him to distraction. He once nearly whipped him... But the child was stubborn too! He just didn't want to study! He wanted to be out playing like all the other kids he knew. So they were constantly at each other. As long as I can remember. I don't know why an education is so important to him.

TANYE Yakov would have been much better off if he'd had an education. He could have gotten a good job in the city...

AVDOTYE This village isn't good enough for you?

TANYE What kind of life is this? Sitting in the dark at night, afraid to turn on a lamp because somebody might see it and come in and rob you.

AVDOTYE Well at least we have enough to eat. In the city, people are starving. Dropping like flies! And there's shooting in the streets...

TANYE Did you know Yakov went to the city this morning?

AVDOTYE He went to buy a pair of boots.

TANYE That's not what I heard... (*Silence.*) I think he may be involved in the pogrom.

AVDOTYE What pogrom?

TANYE                   Against the Jews.

AVDOTYE               Where did you hear that?

TANYE                   Havrilo told me. He said some men were planning to go to Muravanka to make trouble. And that Yakov was involved in it...

AVDOTYE               All-merciful God! *(To TANYE)* Why did you let him go?

TANYE                   “Let him”? You think he’d listen to me? And besides I didn’t want to start a shouting match. Your husband was here.

AVDOTYE               Why didn’t you tell me?!

TANYE                   You think that would have helped?

*The door opens and PYATAK enters. He is in his 50’s. He is dressed in a tattered coat, very worn- out shoes and a faded red army cap on his head. He is drunk.*

PYATAK                 God help the proletariat!

AVDOTYE               Well, well! If it isn’t Father Kiril?

PYATAK                 It’s me, all right.

AVDOTYE               It’s been a long time!... I heard you’d been shot.

PYATAK                 Shot at, dear woman... But not killed! There wasn’t enough gunpowder left for me. *(Notices TANYE)* Ah! I see there’s a new face in your house. Your daughter-in-law, I presume?

AVDOTYE               Uh huh. A city girl.

PYATAK                 *(Stands at attention)* It’s my honor, Comrade! Kiril Kirilitsh Pyatak, former servant of God -- now commissar of the starving people...

AVDOTYE           Where did you disappear to?

PYATAK            I wandered from city to city, village to village. Observed people ruling the world, now that God has abandoned it...And here, I see, everything is as it was before: The whole world is crumbling -- and only Moshke remains stable! My oldest son, Israel, is not lost ... He sends his regards.

AVDOTYE           Were you at the mill?

PYATAK            I've been everywhere. I saw your husband early this morning on the road to Muravanka.

AVDOTYE           Muravanka? He never goes to Muravanka...

PYATAK            Why does that concern you?

AVDOTYE           Didn't you hear about the trouble there today?

PYATAK            Oh no! – it should be quiet, peaceful there today. Jews are getting ready for their holy day – watching them I began to miss all of you.

AVDOTYE           Did my husband speak to you?

PYATAK            No, he wasn't in the mood to talk.

AVDOTYE           Do you know where he was going?

PYATAK            I'm sure he was going to the synagogue.

AVDOTYE           The synagogue?

PYATAK            The temple of ancient Jehovah, who still refuses to surrender...

AVDOTYE           What are you blabbering about, Father? ...Nobody can understand a word you're saying.

PYATAK                    You have to be educated to understand what I'm saying. Don't you know that tonight is the eve of the awesome *Yum Kipper*? It's no coincidence that there is a storm blowing outside. *Khepun*, the Jewish devil, is at this very moment roaming across the empty fields...

AVDOTYE                    (*Crosses herself again*) O Lord, be merciful and protect us!

PYATAK                    I should cross myself, too. (*Turns to face the icon*) I missed all of you. Jews scurrying to the synagogue... made me long for my village. (*Goes to cross himself but doesn't*) What's this? God's lamp has gone out!

AVDOTYE                    Forgive me, Father. Oil is hard to come by these days.

PYATAK                    But I've heard there are barrels of kerosene in the mill! Well, we can't hold this against Moshke. He knows what he's doing. (*To TANYE*) And you, my beauty – sitting there all alone. Where is your husband, the young Prince of Judah?

TANYE                    I don't know...

PYATAK                    He's off to Palestine, I imagine.

TANYE                    Palestine?

PYATAK                    That's where all the young Jews are going these days...

AVDOTYE                    Someone seems to have had one too many...

PYATAK                    I'm drunk, yes. But not from wine, as it is written in the Holy Scriptures. Whiskey! Plain old whiskey! (*Takes a bottle of whiskey out of his pocket*) It was a gift given to me by some fine people. Home-made whiskey... Dear woman... Do you happen to have a piece of bread you can give me? A pickle perhaps?

AVDOTYE                    Where would I get bread these days? And I certainly don't have a pickle!

PYATAK                    Permit me to take a sip... *(Takes a few sips)* Eh! Supplies are running low!

AVDOTYE                 So you're still sinning, Father. Still drowning your soul!

PYATAK                    I don't drink for the pleasure of it, dear woman. I drink because I'm lonely! We're now in an age of isolation! No more czar. God has been run out of town! Churches are empty... You wander freely and alone, just like an orphan, and... and you gradually become a drunk ... *(Takes another sip and puts away the bottle)*

AVDOTYE                 And where did you get that hat? Did you join up with those red devils?

PYATAK                    You ignorant woman. They're commissars! Rrrrevolutionaries – *(Takes off the hat)* I inherited this from a dead commissar I found on the road. *(To TANYE)* And you, *mademoiselle?* What's your opinion of the commissars?

TANYE                     The way I see it, Father... They're the only people maintaining some order in this country.

PYATAK                    Oh, their order is magnificent! None of the trains move and all the horses have died... it's so quiet! You can stagger about in the street drunk. No one runs you over! *(To TANYE)* Comrade! Have mercy on a wandering Christian soul! Give me a pickle!

AVDOTYE                 Why are you sidling up to her? This isn't her house!

PYATAK                    *(To TANYE)* At least give me a piece of paper from your book so I can roll a cigarette! Tear out a page...

TANYE                     I can't do that, Father. It's a valuable book.

PYATAK                    Who's the author?

TANYE                     Tolstoy.

PYATAK Oh! The Count?... You're right. To tear up a book of his would be a sin! He was a holy man. May he have a bright paradise. He spoke out on God's behalf, sermonizing soberly. But how did his book wind up here?

AVDOTYE Paid top dollar for it, that's how! Look! A whole bookcase full that used to belong to Count Kozlever!

PYATAK *(Goes to the bookcase)* Look at this! In my state I didn't even notice it... And a gilded chair? An honest to goodness royal throne! I admire my eldest son, Israel! What's this? An entire archive! Fascinating...

*PYATAK starts to get up on a stool to reach it. AVDOTYE stops him.*

AVDOTYE Don't climb up there with those dirty feet!

TANYE They're old newspapers. My father-in-law has been collecting them for years.

PYATAK Old newspapers! People all over the country are looking for these!... *(To AVDOTYE)* Allow me, dear woman, to make a requisition. One page for a cigarette... Please. *(Stands on a stool and pulls a page out of one of the bundles)*

AVDOTYE Don't touch! Don't you dare touch them when he's not home!

PYATAK *(Climbs down off the stool)* Alright! Then I won't touch them! I hold private property sacred. I'll only have a look. It's a long time since I read a newspaper...

AVDOTYE Put it back when you're done!

PYATAK I told you, private property is sacred to me...

*PYATAK sits at the table and spreads out the newspaper. AVDOTYE winks at TANYE to keep her eye on PYATAK and exits.*

PYATAK I see something's troubling you... May I ask what's wrong?

TANYA It's such a difficult time, Father. Someone told me Yakov went to Muravanka last night to make trouble for the Jews. He and his friends were bragging that they were going to beat them up, rob them. And that they were going to... kidnap Jewish girls...and well, you know....

PYATAK Oh, what a time, what a time! (*Extended pause.*) When I read this old newspaper, I feel like I'm dreaming... Once there was a world... Listen to this ... (*Reads*) Various merchandise... delicious herring, mixed roe... And further down: fashionable footwear...the best pair of shoes four rubles... And I, God's servant, tread barefoot with my aching feet. In the damp. In the cold ... (*Looks in the newspaper*) And what's this? Protopopov Brothers Bakery... Dear brothers Protopopov, where are you now? A slice of bread, a little white roll to refresh the faint Christian people!...

TANYA Hold on, Father. I'll be right back! (*She exits and returns with bread and a pickle*)

PYATAK A pickle!

TANYA Eat it quickly, before my mother-in-law gets back.

PYATAK My God! A sour pickle! It wasn't a dream, but real!... I can't bring myself to eat it. Better save it. My pickle, my little orphan! How did you survive this catastrophe?... (*Rolls it up in the newspaper and puts it inside his coat. Tanya begins to weep*) Why are you crying, child? Me, I cry because I have no strength left...

TANYA I've got so much on my mind, Father...

PYATAK Hard to live with Jews, isn't it?...

*TANYA gets up to leave. The door opens slowly and YAKOV appears. He is in his early 20's. His forehead is wrapped in a blood soaked rag.*

TANYA           Yakov!

YAKOV           Is my father home?

TANYA           He's not here... What happened to you?!

YAKOV           Where's my mother?

TANYA           She'll be right back. They shot you?...

*YAKOV turns around and tries to leave as AVDOTYA arrives.*

AVDOTYA        You're here! Thank God... What happened, darling?

YAKOV           Just get me some water and a clean rag!

AVDOTYA        All-merciful God!

*AVDOTYA and TANYA exit for a moment. AVDOTYE reenters carrying a bowl.*

AVDOTYA        Tell me what happened! Oh my God!

YAKOV           Stop shouting! Nothing happened. Just clean me up.

*YAKOV takes the bloodied rag off his head.*

AVDOTYA        Where's the cut? I can't believe this!

*TANYA reenters.*

TANYA           Here's a cloth.

YAKOV           What's she doing here?

AVDOTYA        There's a cut here on your forehead.

YAKOV           Is it deep?

AVDOTYA        No, I don't think so... But your face is covered with blood.

YAKOV                   Just clean it up! He could come back any minute...

AVDOTYA               Bend all the way over, dear. (*Washes him*) Who hit you, my angel?

YAKOV                   No one hit me. It was...a horse.

AVDOTYA               A horse?

YAKOV                   That's what I said – a horse! I helped shoe a horse – and it kicked me! And don't ask me again!

AVDOTYA               Oh, holy mother!... You're lucky it didn't break your skull!

PYATAK                 It must have been a very courteous horse to kick you all the way up there!

YAKOV                   Who's that? Who said that?

AVDOTYA               Don't worry, darling. It's only Father Kiril.

YAKOV                   What the hell's he doing here?

PYATAK                 I came to find out how the people of Israel are doing...

YAKOV                   Drunk, heh?

PYATAK                 Just tipsy...

AVDOTYA               Don't turn away, darling... There. All cleaned up. (*Bandages his head.*) It'll be fine. Just fine. Don't worry so much. It'll heal.

PYATAK                 But there will be a permanent scar!

TANYA                   Yakov, why didn't you listen to me?

YAKOV                   (*To his mother*) Why is she still here? Get her out...

AVDOTYA               You heard him. Out. Don't upset him...

*TANYA exits.*

PYATAK            *(To YAKOV)* Why do you mistreat such an angelic girl? ...  
Ah, Yankl, Yankl!

YAKOV            You drunk pope! Say that cursed name again and I'll crush  
your face.

PYATAK            Take it easy. Easy! I'm just a weakling. One blow and  
you'll knock me out!

YAKOV            *(To his mother)* Did you hear what he called me? Yankl! He  
calls me Yankl!...

AVDOTYA          Really, Father. Did you come here just to run your mouth?  
You can go now! There's enough going on around here  
without you!...

YAKOV            *(To PYATAK)* I'm no Yankel, you hear? I'm a Russian  
peasant, an Orthodox Christian! I'll give my blood for the  
holy church!...

PYATAK            There's no need to get excited. Quietly. That's how you  
demonstrate your faith. With genuine kindness, just like our  
Savior the Lord....

YAKOV            You're all getting on my nerves! *(To his mother)* And why  
did he have to give me such a Jewish name? Was that some  
joke!?

AVDOTYA          You have a fine name. That's how Father Timofay  
christened you... One of our neighbors – a cooper, I think  
– was named Yakov. They used to call him Yakov the  
Fool... right, Father?

PYATAK            Two of our twelve holy apostles carried the name Yakov.  
And Israel, the father of the twelve Jewish tribes – he was  
called Yakov as well...

YAKOV            *(To his mother)* Hear that? A Jewish name!...

PYATAK            So you're angry with your father. Why take it out on your wife?

YAKOV             He gets me a wife he'd want to marry! A pale, pathetic woman everyone laughs at, and calls "The Jewess"...

PYATAK            You don't deserve such a cultivated wife.

YAKOV             I wasn't looking for a "cultivated" wife! I wanted to marry a healthy farm girl, not a bag of skin and bones who... does nothing but read! ... *(Grabs the book from the table and throws it)* Why did he have to drag me into this Kike stuff anyway? I'll get even with him! You'll see!

AVDOTYA          You shouldn't say things like that. He's your father!

YAKOV             Don't call him my father!...

PYATAK            Your father, young man, is a rare breed. True he's stingy, like all Jews. But he's also clean, honest, straight... And sober! I hold him in the highest regard. While we were gambling away our whole country, Moshke still has pickles in his store-room!... Moshke – the ancient, solid tree of Israel!

YAKOV             What about me? What am I? A Jew? Huh? Am I a Jew?

PYATAK            No. No one will ever call you a Jew.

YAKOV             Then what am I?

PYATAK            You ... You are an apple that's fallen from the tree and now lies rotting.

YAKOV             That so? Good. Well, I'm gonna show all of you!...

*YAKOV exits. AVDOTYA follows him out.*

PYATAK            *(Goes to the throne-like chair)* Well. Looks like there'll be no one to inherit Moshke's throne! *(Sits on the chair, takes out the bottle, takes a sip)* A rotten apple! *(Beat.)*

*HAVRILO enters, a former soldier in a ragged old fashioned soldier's uniform. He holds a rickety old rifle in his hand.*

- HAVRILO: Is the boss around?
- PYATAK: I'm the boss around here now! What do you say to that?  
*(HAVRILO laughs)* Why are you laughing? Go ahead. Spit it out!
- HAVRILO: It's none of your business!... I came to tell the boss that I'm exhausted. People are making trouble, and this gun just won't shoot anymore... *(Sees the bottle)* Eh! So you've got whiskey there, Pyatak? Gimme me a swig!
- PYATAK: *(Hides the bottle)* Why doesn't the gun shoot?
- HAVRILO: The devil knows why! It just won't!... Even during the war this stubborn mule wouldn't budge, no matter what you did!... Gimme me a swig!
- PYATAK: This whiskey is not for you. You have a great responsibility to protect Moshke's property, so you must be sober!
- HAVRILO: Only one swig... Give it to me! If you don't – I'll shoot!...  
*(Points the gun at him)*
- PYATAK: With my luck the gun will shoot now!... *(Takes out the bottle)* Here, here, take a swig! But, beware of God – don't gulp it all down!
- HAVRILO: *(Takes the bottle.)* I'll just drink it like this... *(Takes a big sip, sighs with satisfaction and starts to take another sip)*
- PYATAK: *(Pulls the bottle away from him)* That's enough for you, you ignorant fool! *(Puts it away.)* You say there's trouble brewing? What's going on?
- HAVRILO: What do I know?! It's all about kerosene... They say he took all the kerosene, that sheeny dog!... So they're gonna make trouble. They say they're gonna do to him what

they're doing to all the Jews!... A little while ago somebody told me he'd just come back from the city and that all the Jews there had already been killed...

PYATAK: What are you talking about?

HAVRILO: Yep, in the city, in Muravanke. He says some of them ran off into the woods. Like scared rabbits, he says...

PYATAK: You barbarian!...

*The door opens slowly and MOSHKE enters. He is about 50 years old, stout, hearty, his face stern, deeply wrinkled. His hair is beginning to gray. He is dressed like a small-town burgher, but clean and neat. From his appearance and posture you wouldn't know he was Jewish. The only Jewish trait he has is the weighty look in his dark eyes. As he enters the house, he goes straight to the table without looking at anyone and sits down in his chair. He is obviously exhausted, deeply troubled by something. AVDOTYE follows moments later, grabs the bowl of water that's been sitting there, hides it under her apron and exits momentarily. Then she returns.*

MOSHKE (To PYATAK) What are you doing here?

PYATAK Did you know there's trouble at the mill? (*Quietly getting off the gilded chair*) Maybe we should go see what's going on, Ferapontov.

MOSHKE Get out!

PYATAK I see you're very angry. And I know why... But you should listen to what I have to say.

MOSHKE Not now! Not now! Get out! Out of my sight, you son of a bitch! ...

PYATAK I'm going, I'm going...!

*PYATAK exits.*

MOSHKE Scum of the earth!... (*To AVDOTYE*) Where's Yakov?

AVDOTYE Yakov...

MOSHKE Well? (*TANYE enters*) Has Yakov come back?

TANYE He's back.

MOSHKE There's something you're not telling me.

AVDOTYE Of course, he came back!

MOSHKE When?

TANYE Early this afternoon. When he heard about the trouble in the city, he turned right around.

MOSHKE Ah! Where did he go then?

TANYE Maybe to the mill...I don't know...

MOSHKE (*Notices a piece of bread that PYATAK has left on a chair. Turns to his wife*) Why's there bread lying around, huh?

AVDOTYE How did that bread get there?

MOSHKE That's what I am asking you! Who were you giving that bread to?

TANYE Forgive me. I took a piece. Please don't be angry, sir. I was hungry...

MOSHKE (*Softer*) No sin to eat. But you must put the leftovers away so they don't spoil.

TANYE I just forgot.

MOSHKE People are dying because they have no bread to eat...

*TANYE picks up the piece of bread and exits.*

*Pause.*

AVDOTYE You won't get angry, now will you, dear?

MOSHKE            Go ahead.

AVDOTYE          It's about Yakov...

MOSHKE            What about him?

AVDOTYE          It's nothing really... He got a scratch on his forehead...

MOSHKE            What do you mean?

AVDOTYE          He was helping shoe a horse, and it... kicked him.

MOSHKE            Whose horse?

AVDOTYE          I don't know exactly. Someone asked him for help.

MOSHKE            What was he doing shoeing someone else's horse?

AVDOTYE          Don't be hard on him...

MOSHKE            Go find him! Now!

*AVDOTYE exits. TANYE enters.*

MOSHKE            Tell me, dear. What is this I hear about Yakov?

TANYE              About Yakov...? Oh, you mean the scratch on his forehead...? It's nothing. You know how Yakov loves horses.

MOSHKE            Other peoples' horses...

TANYE              He had nothing better to do.

MOSHKE            But he shouldn't be getting mixed up with those peasants. He's not a peasant ...

TANYE              It's not my fault, sir...

MOSHKE            You're his wife, it's your responsibility to control him.

TANYE I understand that you're very upset today, sir...

MOSHKE I suppose I am. Sit down, Tanye. Please. You're the only one I can talk to around here... *(TANYE sits down at the table. Pause.)* I've just come from the city and... And I saw things that would make your skin crawl! I'm sure you know that I have nothing to do with Jews. For some time now. And... And... I simply don't care for them ... They once treated me very badly. I'll spare you the details. But they are human beings, after all! God's creatures! Well – some peasants—drunken hoodlums, really --went after them—women and small children, too!... Philistines! You can't even imagine. *(Pause)* And you know what else? They did this on the holiest day of the year for Jews! ...

*PYATAK enters with ROKH'L LEYEH*

PYATAK *(Calls offstage)* Come in! Come in. Here we are!

*ROKH'L LEYEH has a delicate face. Her hair is a mess. Her coat is torn. Her eyes are lost. She is holding her father's tallis bag.*

MOSHKE What's going on?? Who is this woman?

PYATAK Your own kind, Ferapontov. The exiled of Judah. You need to hide her from the mob...

MOSHKE Absolutely not! This is no place for her. Get her out of here! *(Shows her out.)*

PYATAK What are you doing? This is your kin, bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh... Moses, Moses! Deliver your stranded brothers from Egypt! ...

ROKH'L LEYEH *(To PYATAK)* I thought you said he was a Jew?

MOSHKE Well, I'm not a Jew!

PYATAK His name is Moshke. A name from the Holy Scriptures...!

ROKH'L LEYEH *(To MOSHKE)* Are you... Moshkele Khazer?

MOSHKE So you've heard of me. Well, now that we've established that, you can leave.

PYATAK You know each other?

ROKH'L LEYEH We're from the same town. *(Pause.)* I shouldn't be here...

MOSHKE Wait! You're from Mikhaleshik? Who are you?

ROKH'L LEYEH *Vos iy di nafke miyne? Mayn tateh eez geven der kbazen...*

MOSHKE *Vos? Du beest...?* What's your father's name?

ROKH'L LEYEH *Vos iy di nafke miyne? (Pause) Er bayst Shmuel Mikhl.*

MOSHKE I remember him.

PYATAK Don't tell me you're old friends? And Joseph recognized his brothers...!

MOSHKE Tanye, give her a chair. She looks exhausted.... *(Points to the white talis bag ROKH'L LEYEH is clutching)* What's that?

ROKH'L LEYEH *Siz mayn tates talis.*

MOSHKE Oh! So they came for you in the synagogue...

ROKH'L LEYEH *Iye.*

*YAKOV enters.*

ROKH'L LEYEH *(Frightened. Seems to recognize YAKOV.) Kbmuz avek! Kbmuz avek!*

MOSHKE What's the matter? There's nothing to be afraid of. *(Pulls Yakov to him and slaps him on the back with great pride.)* This is my son!

## ACT TWO

*The next morning, the morning of Yom Kippur. The same set as in the first act. A sunny Fall day.*

TANYE                   *(Leading Rokhl-Leye into the room.)* You don't have to worry. There's no one here right now. You can't stay in that dark cellar all day... I think it's a fast day for you, so maybe I shouldn't be offering you anything to eat... but are you hungry?

ROKH'L LEYEH No.

*Silence.*

TANYE                   Do you want to pray?

ROKH'L LEYEH I have no one to pray to.

*Silence.*

TANYE                   What's your name?

ROKH'L LEYEH Does it matter?

*Silence.*

TANYE                   I was just trying to make conversation.

ROKH'L LEYEH Why?

*Silence.*

TANYE                   Not everyone is evil.

ROKH'L LEYEH That makes it even harder...

TANYE                   *(Pause)* Do you mind if I ask you something? *(ROKH'L LEYEH doesn't answer)* .... Why were you so frightened when you saw my husband last night?

ROKH'L-LEYEH Your husband?

TANYE The man who came in with a bandaged head.

ROKH'L-LEYEH Oh.

TANYE Have you ever seen him before?

ROKH'L-LEYEH I don't think so.

*Beat.*

TANYE Did they -- harm you?

ROKH'L-LEYEH Who?

TANYE The thugs... Even I can see that you've got scratches all over your...

ROKH'L-LEYEH You're quite the nosy one.

TANYE No!... You know, this hasn't been easy for us either!

ROKH'L-LEYEH You're not very thick-skinned, are you?

TANYE What about you?

ROKH'L-LEYEH I'm ready to die.

TANYE But you were so frightened yesterday.

ROKH'L-LEYEH Yesterday feels like years ago.

TANYE You say the strangest things. And your face....

*AVDOTYE enters.*

AVDOTYE I've been with those cows all morning. Tanye, you go take care of them for an hour. I left them by the mill. (*TANYE does not move*) Tanya, did you hear me?

TANYE                    Later.

AVDODYA                What do mean “later”? And why did you let her sit right in front of the window where people can see her!? The cellar is good enough for her!

TANYE                    That’s enough!

AVDOTYE                Who do you think you’re talking to?

TANYE                    Shut up.

*YAKOV enters, sees ROKH’L-LEYEH and becomes visibly uncomfortable.*

TANYE                    *(This is all the confirmation she needs)* My God! Oh, my God!

YAKOV                    *(To his mother)* What’s going on? What’s the Jew doing here? I thought you’d stashed her in the cellar!

TANYE                    She is holy!

AVDOTYE                Holy???

YAKOV                    *(To AVDOTYE)* Well, in that case why don’t you join her in the cellar! Where you both belong!

TANYE                    And you? You... You...

YAKOV                    What?

TANYE                    What did you do to her?! You and those thugs! What did you do?

YAKOV                    What makes you think I touched her?

TANYE                    The least you can do is deny it! *(Pause.)* Say something!

YAKOV                    *(To AVDOTYE)* Tell her to lay off me.

AVDOTYE                Really, Tanye! What kind of crazy talk is that? .....

*TANYE exits.*

- YAKOV            I bet she's gone to tell Papa...
- AVDOTYE        No, she wouldn't do that. She's actually been covering for you. Very cleverly, I might add! You're too critical of her.
- YAKOV            She can go to hell! I'm hungry. Gimme something to eat.
- AVDOTYE        I don't have anything.
- YAKOV            You're kidding, right?
- AVDOTYE        He told me not to –
- YAKOV            What's this all of a sudden? Has this become a Jewish house???
- AVDOTYE        Now, dear...
- YAKOV            Isn't it enough that he hides his leper here?... Mama, we have to put a stop to this! Why are you always giving in to him? You're so loyal. You're like his dog. We are not Jews! Now, give me a piece of bread and I'll get outta here. God, you disgust me!
- AVDOTYE        Come on now, darling. *(Starts toward the door and turns around)* But, listen... You don't really mean any of that. And don't start with your father. He is your father after all and he's angry today. He's worried about you...
- YAKOV            Did he say something?
- AVDOTYE        No. But he didn't sleep a wink all night. Just wandered through the house, kept asking Tanya where you were.
- YAKOV            Like I could give a damn about either of them! Gimme a piece of bread! This family's been cursed...!

*AVDOTYE does. YAKOV stuffs the food into his pockets and goes toward the door.*

AVDOTYE Listen to me... If he asks you any questions, don't pick a fight. Just tell him about the horse and that you didn't go to the city --

YAKOV You don't have to tell me what to say! I'm not a child!

*HAVRILLO pokes his head in.*

HAVRILO: You giving out food, ma'am?

AVDOTYA: You idiot! You think I'd give you food? Get out of here before I get the poker!... (*HAVRILO disappears*)

YAKOV: Why are you kicking him out? (*Opens the door*) Come on in, Havrillo, don't worry! (*To his mother*) What are you doing kicking the Christians out of the house?...

*HAVRILLO comes in, bows.*

AVDOTYA: That's a Christian? He's an animal! He sucks cows' milk straight from the udder!

HAVRILLO: May God strike me dead, ma'am! Not me – other people but not me! Everyone is upset at the boss, ma'am, because of his kerosene – so they're getting back at him by sucking the milk outta his cows... (*He walks around the house and into another room as if he were looking for something.*)

AVDOTYA: What do you think you're doing?

HAVRILLO: I'm looking for the Jews... they said you have a house full of Jews...

YAKOV: Who said that?

HAVRILLO: Akim did. He said a whole group of Jews came here in the middle of the night, with guns, and, he said, even cannon...

YAKOV: Did you hear that, mama?

AVDOTYA: Oh, he can just drop dead!...

HAVRILLO: *(Laughs)* Everybody's afraid to come near your house.

YAKOV: Well, there are no Jews here! Why would we have anything to do with Jews! We are devout Christians!

HAVRILLO: If you want I can go into the village and tell them.

YAKOV: Go! Tell everyone!

HAVRILLO: *(To YAKOV quietly)* You promised me some cheese, sir...

YAKOV: Here. *(Gives his a piece of cheese from his pocket.)*

HAVRILLO: *(Looks at the cheese dissatisfied)* You promised me a whole one... If the boss was here, he'd give me two!...  
*(HAVRILLO exits. YAKOV starts to exit and bumps into his father.)*

MOSHKE *(To Yakov)* There you are. I've been looking for you...

YAKOV I'm on my way out.

MOSHKE You're staying right here! *(To AVDOTYE)* And you! Go see to the cows.

AVDOTYE But Tanye's taking care of them.

MOSHKE Did you hear what I said?

*AVDOTYE exits.*

MOSHKE Sit down. *(YAKOV doesn't move)* Sit down! I want to talk to you.

YAKOV *(Mumbling)* Talk about what? All you ever want to do is talk.

MOSHKE Don't mumble. How many times have I told you that? Did you sleep at the mill last night?

YAKOV                   Where else would I sleep.

MOSHKE                 At home. We have someone to guard the mill... Why didn't you sleep here?

YAKOV                   Because you let that... that Jew stay here.

MOSHKE                 What, there isn't enough room here for both of you?... What's this? (*Points to the bandage*)

YAKOV                   Why am I getting the third degree? You think I'm still your little boy?! Well, I'm not.

MOSHKE                 What is this? Answer me when I talk to you!

YAKOV                   I got kicked by a horse.

MOSHKE                 Whose?

YAKOV                   What's the difference? It was a horse... I was passing a smith, and someone needed help.

MOSHKE                 Which smith?

YAKOV                   The... the one from Novodvorts.

MOSHKE                 You're always getting into trouble. Were you in Muravanka yesterday?

YAKOV                   Muravaka? Why would anyone go and get caught up in all that? When I heard what was going on, I turned right around... I'll buy myself a pair of boots some other time.

MOSHKE                 You did the right thing.

YAKOV                   I know. I'm an adult now, remember?.

MOSHKE                 Then I want to talk to you like an adult. (*Pause.*) Why do you always look away when I talk to you?

YAKOV                   Where am I supposed to look?

MOSHKE Directly at me. Like a normal human being. Not some buffoon. You are not a peasant. *(Pause.)* I want to ask you something. *(Long pause.)* How would you feel about leaving the village?

YAKOV Leaving the village?

MOSHKE Leaving here for good...

YAKOV To go where?

MOSHKE That's what we have to discuss. Certainly somewhere far away from here. Change our way of life completely... *(Silence.)* Say something!

YAKOV Do I have to go?

MOSHKE That's what we're talking about.

YAKOV Why should I leave the village?

MOSHKE Because I don't want you to be a peasant.... And this has never felt like home to me. ... I've never felt at home anywhere. You are my son. You should come with me... And we should go now.

YAKOV Are you talking about going back to live with...Jews?

MOSHKE I don't know... We have to consider all our options.

YAKOV And you want to take me with you?

MOSHKE I won't force you. It's up to you. That's why we're having this talk. *(Pause)* Think it over...there's still time...

YAKOV Ok. I'll think about it. Now can I go?

MOSHKE You can. But remember what we talked about. And... don't spend so much time with those good-for- nothings

you hang around with! Those fools think I'm hiding a whole platoon of armed Jews in our house.

*YAKOV exits.*

MOSHKE *(Calls offstage)* You can come in now. *Koom arayn!* Nothing to worry about in here. *(ROKH'L LEYEH appears in the doorway. Her eyes take some time to adjust to the light. She notices the icon)* What's the matter? *(MOSHKE realizes she is looking at the icon.)* Oh –that!? I forgot about that. *(Climbs on a chair and takes down the icon and the holy lamp)* Don't worry. He doesn't hear anything. It's just a piece of wood! *(Carries icon away and returns.)* You'll have more light if you sit here. *(Beat.)* You know, I remember a few things from my childhood... Whenever the men in synagogue bowed down, we'd pinch their behinds. We were such rascals! *(Pause)* I went to a Jewish school for a while. But I wasn't much of a student. *(Pause)* What do you do? Are you a teacher?

ROKH'L LEYEH No.

*Pause.*

MOSHKE I had two teachers years ago. One had black hair, and the other was a redhead. I hated them both. They tormented me. Made my life miserable... You know, my father was also a troublemaker as a boy. His father kicked him out, too. He died a long time ago. I bet you've heard of my father.

ROKH'L LEYEH Of course!

MOSHKE And I remember your father. Quiet man. *(Beat)* So, what do you think? Did I make the right choice to convert?

ROKH'L LEYEH You're the only one who can answer that.

MOSHKE Well, all those sons of bitches are to blame ... Lousy bastards! I was just a kid. I didn't want to study, didn't want to pray. I didn't want to end up with those bent

shoulders... sour faces. I was a kid. So what if I wanted to have a good time... Did they have to beat me? Call me “Moshkele *Khazer?*” Ship me off to the army? Aaah, to hell with them! I’ll show them what kind of person “Moshkele Khazer” is!

ROKH’L LEYEH You’ve already shown me...

MOSHKE Well, you’re the ones who are swine, not me. (*Points to his heart*) None of you can understand what I’ve been feeling in here.... It’s been twenty-five years I’ve been living here with these peasants. Imbeciles. .... I’ve been an apostate for twenty-five years now, I was... I was ...

ROKH’L LEYEH (*Pause*) If that’s how you feel... you can still change your mind. Everybody’s free to change their mind now. You can go back to being Jewish and become a punching bag like the rest of us...

MOSHKE That doesn’t scare me. I don’t scare easily. There are worse things than a pogrom. But where would I go? Back to Michaleshik? Never. They wouldn’t let me hear the end of it. They’d say: “Oh, look Moshkele Khazer’s swapped religions again.” I hate all of them!

ROKH’L LEYEH You really do sound like an apostate...

MOSHKE Well, it’s the truth! (*Beat.*) You know where I would go? (*Gets a newspaper from his bookcase*) Look at this. It’s a picture of Jewish farmers in Palestine.

ROKH’L LEYEH Where did you get this?

MOSHKE That’s where I would go! They say the British are going to give it to the Jews. Is that true?

ROKH’L LEYEH So they say... but how did you know that?

MOSHKE I know a lot of things! Did you think I was a boor? Illiterate?... See all these books? All these newspapers? I bought them all! I didn’t just find them! At forty, I taught

myself to read Russian (*Points to the article in the newspaper.*)  
That's where I'd go! I'm not going to study Talmud  
and develop a hunchback. They have good machinery  
there.... I'd buy a farm, work, keep to myself. I'd have  
nothing to do with anyone. What do you think?

ROKH'L LEYEH Maybe it's not such a crazy idea...

MOSHKE So you agree? Well then, what do I have to do?

ROKH'L LEYEH Do?

MOSHKE I'm asking: is there something I have to do?

ROKH'L LEYEH You mean to become a Jew again?

MOSHKE Yes.

ROKH'L LEYEH Nothing. You never stopped being a Jew.

MOSHKE There's nothing more to it?

ROKH'L LEYEH You can go see a rabbi if you want to...

MOSHKE No – I don't like priests, and I don't like rabbis. Besides, a  
rabbi would probably disapprove of it...

ROKH'L LEYEH I don't think so. Quite the opposite. He'll probably just tell  
you to repent.

MOSHKE To what?

ROKH'L LEYEH Repent.

MOSHKE What's that?

ROKH'L LEYEH Well, he might tell you fast...

MOSHKE Fast? That's nothing! I can do that. What else?

ROKH'L LEYEH He'll probably tell you give charity...

MOSHKE Give charity? To whom?

ROKH'L LEYEH To the poor.

MOSHKE The poor? What did they do to deserve charity? They want charity, they can get a job!

ROKH'L LEYEH What about sick people and orphans?

MOSHKE Sick people are different. I would give charity to a sick person. *(Pause.)* Is that all I have to do?

ROKH'L LEYEH You were born to Jewish parents... According to Jewish law, you've been a Jew all along. The Talmud says that no matter what a Jew does, he'll always be a Jew.

MOSHKE I never knew that. *(Pause.)* So many years wasted. Twenty-five years. I was a fool, such a fool...

ROKH'L LEYEH Do you mind if I ask what you intend to do about your wife?

MOSHKE My wife? A wife is like a baby calf. Tie a rope around her neck and she'll follow you anywhere. *(Pause.)* I lived as a Christian for 25 years because of her—that's long enough. At this point, she can do as she pleases. If she wants to, she can come with me. If she doesn't--. But it's my son that complicates the situation...

ROKH'L LEYEH What does he do?

MOSHKE Nothing. That's just it. He doesn't do anything. *(Pause.)* And then there's my poor daughter-in-law, a fine, educated young woman stuck with a good-for-nothing husband. I've got enough here to worry about for a long time! *(Pause.)* It wasn't easy becoming an apostate, and it's not going to be easy becoming Jew...

*AVDOTYE, PYATAK and TANYE enter.*

PYATAK Can we come in, sir? It's really important! It's not good news. *(To ROKH'L LEYEH)* God will help you, holy one!

MOSHKE What happened?

PYATAK There's a mob on its way here!

AVDOTYE Look what you've done now!

MOSHKE What for?

PYATAK For her.

MOSHKE How did they know--? Who told them?

PYATAK A little bird ...

MOSHKE And I suppose you're the bird?

PYATAK Moshke, you insult me! May God forgive you!...

MOSHKE Then who told them?

TANYE There's no time to worry about that now!

AVDOTYE Yeah! We've got to get her out of here.

ROKH'L LEYEH Yes. I should go.

MOSHKE *(To ROKH'L LEYEH)* Absolutely not. She can leave if she wants to. You're staying right here. *(To AVDOTYE)* Not another word from you! ... *(To ROKH'L LEYEH)* You'll have to go back down to the cellar.

TANYE I'll hide her in my room, Sir. I won't let them touch her...

MOSHKE Where is Havrilo? *(To PYATAK)* Don't let anyone in! And don't let her leave!

*MOSHKE exits. PYATAK locks the door after him.*

AVDOTYE            God is punishing us!

PYATAK            Stop that! Don't frighten her! You'd better go keep an eye on the bird...

AVDOTYE            What bird?

PYATAK            Your bird, actually. I just hope the old man doesn't find him first.

AVDOTYE            You're right, Father!

*AVDOTYE exits.*

PYATAK            *(Follows her out to lock the door behind her and then comes back and says under his breath)* A bird of prey!... *(To ROKH'L-LEYEH)* Be strong, my little Jewess. Be strong! I am right here with you... I -- a former spiritual figure! Your holiday clothes are magnificent! You only see such clothing in holy paintings... What do they call you, holy one? Miriam?

ROKH'L LEYEH    Excuse me?

PYATAK            What is your name?

ROKH'L LEYEH    Rokh'l Leyeh.

PYATAK            Sit down, Mademoiselle Rokhl Leyeh. You'll feel alot better if you sit ... *(ROKH'L LEYEH obeys him mechanically. PYATAK sits opposite her)* Rokhl Leyeh ... What a wonderful sounding name. A musical name! Rubinstein, Rokowsky, Rokh'l Leyeh – all Jews. And I, dear lady, cannot pride myself with my name. It's such a measly name. It's my honor to introduce myself – Kiyrl Kirilitsh Pyatak ! *(Bows and sits down again)* A puny name. All in all, only worth about ten groshn...of the old currency! It's worth a million now, but it's still not enough to buy a shot of good whiskey... All in one lifetime! *(Pause)* Do you really think the Jews will take over the world? *(Pause.)* I do. I look at it this way. The fact that everyone hates you makes you superior. Suffering, my dear, elevates a person... *(Pause)*

Rokh'l Leyeh... I once read about her in a book... When I was young, I sang in the municipal church, and I was drawn to famous stars of the stage. I almost became an actor. I felt, my dear, that I had so many different talents. And look how it all turned out! *(Takes out his bottle and takes a sip)* Here. Have a sip. Fortify yourself... *(Puts the bottle in front of her)* Jesus, our Lord, your brother, also drank wine during the Last Supper, before they came to take him away... *(ROKHL LEYEH tries to reach the door but PYATAK blocks her way)* What are you doing? Are you crazy?

*MOSHKE enters followed by HAVRILO, who is carrying his gun.*

HAVRILO           Where should I stand – right here?

MOSHKE           Not here – outside! At the gate. And don't let anyone in!

HAVRILO           Anything you say, boss! Is that her?

MOSHKE           Go. This isn't any of your business!

HAVRILO           Anything you say, boss. What should I tell them?

MOSHKE           Say: "I was ordered not to let you in!"

HAVRILO           And if they start forcing their way in?

MOSHKE           Do anything you have to, to chase them away! Shoot! Shoot in the air!

HAVRILO           It's easy for you to say "shoot," boss... This nasty thing doesn't always fire.

MOSHKE           Just go!

HAVRILO           Anything you say boss. But you know, it's not worth making such a fuss over a Jew.

MOSHKE           Idiot! *(To ROKHL LEYEH)* You really should go down to the cellar....

*HAVRILO enters.*

HAVRILO           Boss! They're already...

MOSHKE           Huh? *(We hear voices)* To the gate! Get to the gate, imbecile!  
*(HAVRILO exits. To PYATAK)* And what are you looking  
at?

*MOSHKE pushes ROKHL LEYEH into the other room and grabs an ax.*

PYATAK           As God is my witness! You'll only provoke them ...

*PYATAK takes the ax from MOSHKE and puts it back in its place. The noise in the yard grows. A board of peasants approaches the window, men and women, pushing each other. You can now make out what they are saying: "Is she here?" "Yes, she's here!" "We'll get her now!" "What a tight-wad!" "He's hiding three barrels of kerosene!" "Kerosene? He's hiding a Jew!" "Once a Jew always a Jew!" "Cursed antichrist!" "They bring trouble wherever they go!" "The people are hungry." "They shot all the priests!" "Not just priests? They tortured the tsar!" "No they didn't, the commissars did!" "Oh, leave him alone!" "He's not a Jew, he's a Christian!" Then the voices go suddenly silent as AKIM enters.*

AKIM               There you are, Ferapontov? Are you a Christian?  
*(MOSHKE does not answer. AKIM raises his voice and repeats)*  
Are you a Christian?

PYATAK           Of course he's a Christian, sir. And a good Christian too!  
Baptized and everything!

AKIM               *(To PYATAK)* And who are you?

PYATAK           God's servant, sir. It's my honor. Kiril Kirilich... *(Bows)*

AKIM               What's that hat you're wearing?

PYATAK           The only hat left in holy Russia. All the others are...

AKIM               I heard you had a screw loose! *(To MOSHKE)* Where's the  
Jew?

MOSHKE           What Jew?

*AKIM stares him down.*

MOSHKE            You animal! Who do you think you are? How dare you enter my house without an invitation? *(To PYATEK)* And you, take your hat off!

*PYATAK takes his hat off.*

AKIM                I don't think you're in a position to tell anyone what to do right now. *(To PYATAK)* Put your hat back on! *(PYATAK obeys him.)*

MOSHKE            *(To AKIM)* You should be ashamed of yourself, Akim. After all the favors I've done for you.

AKIM                I'm just following orders. And besides, I was curious.

MOSHKE            Curious?

AKIM                Now hand over the Jew!

MOSHKE            There are no Jews here! I am one of the elders of this village! I will not permit any misconduct in my home!

AKIM                We'll see about that.

*AKIM goes to search the house.*

MOSHKE            Don't take another step!

AKIM                Are you going to stop me?

PYATAK            *(To AKIM)* Sir -- in the name of Christ! Don't go in there! Don't go into hell!

*AKIM drags ROKHL LEYEH from the other room. TANYE follows.*

AKIM                *(To MOSHKE)* So? No Jews here, huh?

PYATAK            She's not a Jew! She's holy! Look at her! Holy!

AKIM                    We've seen enough of these holy people! You, old man --  
you sold your soul to the devil, didn't you? You'll get yours.

*MOSHKE grabs the ax.*

MOSHKE                Let her go! I'm warning you!

ROKHL LEYEH        You don't have to. Let them...

*MOSHKE lowers the ax. AKIM takes it from him.*

AKIM                    Let's go.

MOSHKE                Wait! Wait! *(To AKIM)* How much do you want for her?

AKIM                    You want to pay a ransom for her? You'll be paying  
anyway!

HAVRILO                *(To AKIM)* Commander, let me say a few words. I think  
that...if he wants to pay you, well... Maybe he can give  
you the kerosene he's got stored at his mill. And his three  
dairy cows. And the gold watches he has buried in his  
stable, as everyone knows...

MOSHKE                Eh, you ...!...

HAVRILO                I'm making a point. I tried to warn you. But you wouldn't  
listen! Well, it serves you right...

MOSHKE                Animals! Serves me right? For twenty-five years I've lived  
side by side with you. With ignorant thugs. Lousy, mangy  
animals! All this time I've been suffocating! Smelling your  
stench! Choking in your filth – and this is how you repay  
me? You drag my guest from my home! An innocent  
woman. You don't even deserve to wash her feet! Is that  
how you repay me? Then take me too! Kill me too!

AKIM                    Don't think I won't, you worthless convert!

HAVRILO            No, don't touch him! He has a Christian family. We'll deal with him among ourselves, neighborly like... *(Pulls MOSKHE aside and speaks to him quietly)* Get back, Sir. You're making a mistake.

*MOSHKE is exhausted. He sits down on the first chair he sees.*

AKIM                Come on!

PYATAK            No, I will not let you do this! I will not! We are Christians! *(PYATAK gets down on his knees in front of the door. TANYE does the same. They both clasp their hands in prayer.)* Brother Christians! What are you doing? Have mercy! Have mercy! Brother Christians, I beg you upon this holy cross... *(Pulls off his shirt and searches for his cross)* It's not here! My cross is gone! I drank it away! Moshke! Get the icon! Bring it outside so they can see it! *(Notices that it's been removed from its spot)* Where is it, Moshke?! Where is it?

### ACT THREE

*Same day, evening.*

*Same set as in the first two acts. The sun is setting and we see a reddish light through the window. MOSHKE is sitting at the table with the talis bag ROKHL LEYE has left behind. He opens it, takes out a corner of the talis and strokes it. In the last few hours he has become old. AVDOTYE enters talking to herself.*

AVDOTYE            The cows are nowhere to be found. And neither is that damn Havrillo. All gone... Thank God this day is finally over... What's the matter? Should I make you something to eat? You haven't had any food since breakfast yesterday. You must be starving. *Pause*) You've been sitting in the same spot all day. Why should you be grieving? She's not your daughter. She's nothing to you... Used to be you wouldn't let a Jew within ten feet of our house. ... *(Beat.)* Do you think I've had an easy time of it? Well, I haven't! *(Pause)* I've devoted my life to you. Even sinned before God because of you! And I've always been faithful to you, like a loyal dog, protecting you, defending you. ... And

now? Well, actually, for some time now, you've made me feel uncomfortable in my own home. I hope you'll forgive me for saying all this, but I can't help it after the way you treated me yesterday, in front of everyone. And Yakov, too. Why, dear? What did we do to deserve this?

MOSHKE           Get out of here...

AVDOTYE          You're not well! You must have a fever!

MOSHKE           Get out of my sight...

*AVDOTYE exits. Short pause. Then the door opens slowly and PYATAK enters.*

PYATAK           I see you're still here. Because I died! Died. I'm exhausted! There's nothing left! (*TANYE comes out of the other room, crying*) So you're here too, child.

TANYE            (*To PYATAK*) Tell me what happened, Father.

PYATAK           On that little hill ...by the woods...Twelve holy martyrs. Exactly twelve...

TANYE            Did you watch?

PYATAK           No, my child... How could I? My legs were too weak to support me... I was hiding not far away. I wanted to calm myself... and I... fell asleep.... Now I'm just waiting for a miracle....we need a miracle! **Moshke!** We're living in extraordinary times! History is repeating itself right before our eyes. Not long ago I was thinking: Nineteen hundred years ago this was also happening... On the streets of the holy city of Jerusalem, a small man, a homeless Kiril Kirilitch, wandered about... And while Jesus, our Lord, was being crucified and the very foundation of the world trembled, Kiril Kirilich lay in a ditch somewhere, not far away, drunk, asleep. **Moshke,** I know you're deep in grief. If I could, I'd grieve with you. But I'm not good at it... How can I feel sorrow when I am sorrow itself? A dry autumn leaf carried every which way by the wind. But you

– you are different. You are a deeply rooted tree! You are all like old oak trees. When storm-winds blow in your direction, you announce yourselves to heaven. And how expertly you die! I’ll die behind a fence somewhere with an empty flask in my pocket. Shrunken like a worm, and that’ll be it... And you! They lead you to your death as if to your wedding, with great respect, with pageantry! An entire village of pagans follows behind you shouting: Judah’s been captured! Judah’s been captured!” ... Why did you have to convert, Moshke?... That’s what I don’t understand... What did you think you would find here among us? Why did you trade in your divine origin for this? Listen to me, go back to them! The British are asking you to return to your holy land – go! *(Pause.)* It’s just a shame you had to drag this child into all of this... What did you have against her? ... Such a delicate Christian soul. *(A long silence. Then talking to himself.)* The sun is setting in flames! Jehovah’s wrath is burning! They slaughtered his children and now there’s no one left to sing to him on this sacred night.

*MOSHKE exits. PYATAK follows him to the door.*

PYATAK           What’s wrong? Where are you going?

*AVDOTYE enters.*

AVDOTYE           Where is he going?

PYATAK           He’s gone!

AVDOTYE           Where?

PYATAK           I don’t know. I must’ve said something to upset him...

AVDOTYE           You old geezer! You’re lucky I’m not carrying a pot of boiling water. It would be all over you right now!

PYATAK           Why, dear woman?

AVDOTYE           Why??? What are you doing sending him back to them? Back to what?

PYATAK            Maybe you're right...But you don't have to be angry...

AVDOTYE          What, am I supposed to say thank you?! You devil, you!

PYATAK            Don't mention the devil, you ignorant woman! He could come flying in here any minute! And the holy icon isn't even where it's supposed to be. Did you know that?

AVDOTYE          Holy mother! Where is it?

PYATAK            Gone... Maybe because of your foul mouth! You be careful, my dear. You can still do more harm. Go sit down, calm yourself. We'll be safer if you keep quiet. Only in silence can you feel God! *(Takes the talis out of the bag and tries to put it on, but can't figure out how.)* I'm having a hard time making sense of this... Maybe it goes the other way? Oh, I don't know. *(To TANYE)* I learned how to read Hebrew in the seminary, but by my second year they threw me out... For free-thinking! How embarrassing!

TANYE              *(To PYATAK)* Where do you think he went? I'm worried...

PYATAK            The ghosts of his fallen brothers and sisters are chasing him.

*The sun goes down and the room becomes illuminated with the light of an autumn dusk.*

TANYE              I think I'm going mad, Father... I see her everywhere I look.... I still can't help thinking that someone under this roof is responsible for what happened...

PYATAK            We are all guilty. They died for our sins...

TANYE              I see her standing right in front of me... I tried to sleep, to forget, but I couldn't... I was lying there – and she tiptoed into my room! She stood there looking at me so strangely. With a sad smile on her...

PYATAK I know... I see her sitting here at the table in those sacred clothes. A halo shimmering right above his head...

TANYE Such delicate shoulders, like a bird. And yet she was so strong! So stoic. She was proud...

PYATAK I blabber on and she says nothing. I ask her name and she says quietly: "Rubenshtayn". I can still hear her voice, like sacred music... "Rubenshtayn"!

TANYE She gave herself up with such dignity! She walked out of here on her own, they didn't have to force her! Father! Why do people say that Jews are cowards, that they're afraid to die?

PYATAK Because they cling to life so tightly. They are the only ones who comprehend the deep meaning of life... They were the first and they want to be the last on earth...

TANYE Yes – she went to her death so peacefully!

PYATAK I wouldn't say peacefully, child. It's just that life had become unbearable for her...

TANYE Did you notice that her hair turned gray over night. Father, I wish my hair would turn gray!

PYATAK Only those who keep everything inside gray prematurely. And also those who drink too much ... But you, my child, you wear your heart on your sleeve. You cry at the drop of a hat. You're too sensitive, my dear.

TANYE She said the same thing.

*HAVRILLO enters.*

HAVRILLO Ma'am, ma'am! Are you here?

*AVDOTYE enters.*

AVDOTYE What do you want?

HAVRILLO I came to tell you something, ma'am, ...

AVDOTYE Where did you disappear to?

HAVRILLO I didn't disappear – I'm here! Others, ma'am, have disappeared...

AVDOTYE What are you yacking about? What others? You mean Yakov?

HAVRILLO No, not Yakov – the cows!

AVDOTYE What about the cows? Where are the cows?

HAVRILLO I'm telling you – they've disappeared!

AVDOTYE If this is a joke, it's not funny.

HAVRILLO May God strike me down, if it is! There's not one cow left! Akim took them all!

AVDOTYE Akim?

HAVRILLO Yup. He came to the pasture with a whole bunch of boys and drove your cows right off to his barn...

AVDOTYE What's he going to do with my cows?

HAVRILLO He'll milk 'em, ma'am. Milk 'em! He says the cows belong to him now. Today, he says, he saved the master's life. If not for him, he says, the master would now be a goner!

AVDOTYE My cows! (*To PYATAK*) Father, we've been robbed!

PYATAK Not robbed... Requisitioned. That's what it's called!

AVDOTYE I'll break every bone in his body!

HAVRILO But that's not all.

AVDOTYE           What do you mean?

HAVRILO           The boss told me to guard the mill so I guarded the mill.  
And then he just barged inside with the whole village...

AVDOTYE           You mean Akim?

HAVRILO           Not Akim – your young master!

AVDOTYE           ...Yakov?

HAVRILO           Dragged out the kerosene barrels, opened the sacks of  
bread. Here, he says, take it, Christian people!

AVDOTYE           My son?!...

HAVRILO           Just kept saying “take it, Christian people!” Well, they made  
off with everything. Then he started digging up the ground,  
looking for the watches. Slugged me in the mouth! Broke  
the gun...

PYATAK           Does your boss know?

HAVRILO           You bet he does!

PYATAK           Where is he?

HAVRILO           At the mill.

PYATAK           Well... What did he say?

HAVRILO           Nothing. He just stood there watching!

PYATAK           Just stood there?

HAVRILO           Just stood there.

PYATAK           That’s not like Moshke at all!

TANYE           *(To AVDOTYE)* We’d better get over there!

HAVRILO I just wish he hadn't broken my gun.

*TANYE and AVDOTYE exit, followed by PYATAK and HAVRILO. For a moment the stage is empty. The light gets deeper and deeper red like sky at sunset. MOSHKE enters with YAKOV, and TANYE enters but stays at a distance. MOSHKE pushes YAKOV down into a chair.*

TANYE What are you going to do?

MOSHKE You should go. This is just between the two of us.

TANYE Don't hurt him! I'll punish him! Yakov – are you pleased with yourself now? Look what you've done. What were you thinking? Get down on your knees in front of your father! My sweet Yakov! Show me some tenderness! Just this once! *(Gets down on her knees and hugs his legs)* Do what's right, Yakov. Apologize to your father! Let's both apologize to him and promise him things will be different now!

YAKOV Get away from me you... kike!

MOSHKE *(Giving TANYE a weak smile)* You heard him. Go, you foolish little girl.

*TANYE exits. MOSHKE locks the door behind her.*

YAKOV What are you doing? Let me outta here!

MOSHKE So she's a Jew. What does that make you?

YAKOV A Christian!

MOSHKE And who am I - the one who brought you into this world?

YAKOV I didn't ask you to do that. Leave me alone!

MOSHKE Oh, really. And whose inheritance did you just give away?

YAKOV You've sucked the blood out of these people... Your Jews destroyed our country...so you should pay!

MOSHKE                   That so? Who told you to say that? Akim? You smell of whiskey, little peasant boy! Guess you drank to work up the courage, huh?

YAKOV                    Let me go. What do you want from me? You're only going to make things worse! The whole village is behind me!

MOSHKE                   Sit down! *(Pause.)* The whole village is behind you! *(Pause.)* And just this morning I thought... there was still a chance you'd make something of yourself.

YAKOV                    Make what? A Jew? *(Laughs)*

MOSHKE                   No. It's too late for that. I just wanted you to be a decent human being! Not some pig wallowing in mud, not a rabid dog – a decent, honest human being! ...

YAKOV                    What's all this about anyway? You took our faith – but you hate us! You had me christened in our church – and then gave me a Jewish name! Raised me in this village – but didn't let me near the other kids...always criticizing me, beating me...tormenting me! You've all been tormenting me! Ever since I was a child – *Jew, Jew!* The kids always laughing at me! Forcing me to strip naked so they could look at it... Now I'm paying you back for everything, everything... I wish you'd have dropped dead there, among your Jews, before you even came here!

MOSHKE                   That's enough, little peasant ... Now tell me! It was you who sent Akim here today, wasn't it!

YAKOV                    And if I did – so what?

MOSHKE                   And you *were* in Moravanka yesterday?

YAKOV                    So what if I was?

MOSHKE                   And you were on the rampage with all the other animals. Beating up Jews, raping Jewish women. And you got this when a horse kicked you?

*MOSHKE pulls off his bandage. We see a scar from which blood is still dripping. YAKOV puts his hand over his forehead. MOSHKE pulls YAKOV's hand away.*

MOSHKE           *(Whispering)* Who did this? The kikes? The Sheenies? They left a mark on you? ...*(Pause.)* No, a human being didn't do that!... God did! ...Now I understand!... And you think you can go on living with that mark on your forehead? ...No! *(Grabs YAKOV)*

YAKOV             Let me go! Papa! Let me go! Let go! What are you doing?

MOSHKE           You're going into the cellar! Like the Jew! I have to remove all traces of you with my very own hands! *(Drags YAKOV offstage)*

YAKOV             *(From offstage)* Papa, let go! Let go! What are you doing?

*We hear a body fall and the rattling of keys. We hear YAKOV shouting. MOSHKE re-enters.*

MOSHKE           Remove all traces... with my own hands. All traces of your divine origin *(We hear banging)* So you gave away our kerosene. Well, there is still a little left. *(Goes to where he has hidden it and drags out a container of kerosene.)* Still a little left. Enough for both of us. For the father and the son. *(Goes to the door, pouring from the bottle as he walks)* For the father and the son. *(In a while we see flames)* I have to remove all traces. All traces of divine origin! *(Paces and then suddenly stops, as if he sees someone)* You may sit there. No one will disturb you. *(Approaches the table mischeiveously. Grabs the talis and hides it beind his back as he sits down.)* Yes, this is mine. It still belongs to me. *(We see flames and thick smoke.)*

CURTAIN