

*Montreal 1923*

As her studies progress Mariasse finds solace, inspiration and challenges in the texts

Rabbi Dworkin has lent her. She also begins to initiate changes in her daily life.

Although she is technically still a Gentile, Rabbi Dworkin has encouraged her to try to live a Jewish life and suggests that, little by little, she take steps to shed her Gentile identity, which includes not hiring herself out as a *Shabbos Goy* to local Jewish merchants. Many express regret that she will not be available to them anymore, for she is regarded in the neighbourhood as very trustworthy, but she's heartened to find that they all understand. As Mr. Mendelbaum, who owns the butcher shop down the street, says: "*Azoy gait es. When the rabbi speaks you better listen. I'll see maybe the Robichaud kid wants to make a little gelt.*"

Not a Saturday passes that she isn't seen sitting next to Trude in the women's gallery at Temple Solomon. On *Purim* she bakes dozens of *hamentaschen* to give out as *shalach manos*, or gift baskets, and waves her *grager*, a noisemaker, to blot out the name of Haman when the *Megillah* (the book of Esther) is read out loud in shul. At *Pesach* she avoids *chametz*, leavened food, of all kinds: not just bread and cake but rice, corn and beans as well. During *Tisha B'Av* she not only fasts but also spends much of the day sitting on a low stool in her bedroom. The Kragers are duly impressed by her zeal and commitment. Jakob even gives Trude a little nudge, commenting, "She reminds me of you back in the day." Trude understands first hand how seriously the convert strives to follow the letter of the law. Even she has to admit she was never as fastidious as Mariasse and worries that the girl might even be overdoing it just a bit.

"Sounds like maybe somebody is a little jealous, yes?" teases Jakob.

“Don’t be such a *yutz*,” she says, making a face and swatting his shoulder with the back of her hand. “It’s not a competition. But I know how one can go overboard sometimes. After all, she’s been through a lot.”

As diligent a student as she’s become – and even Rabbi Dworkin, taskmaster that he is, can’t deny it – Mariasse carries one worry in the back of her mind: her parents, or more to the point her mother, since her father’s reaction is of no consequence as Mariasse no longer exists in his mind. How will she ever tell her mother what she’s doing? And when? Should she wait until the conversion is complete, or should she start preparing her mother in advance? It’s going to be a shock either way. Once or twice she starts to write a letter informing her mother of this serious step she is taking. Half a page is barely written before she crumples it in frustration. She tries to broach the subject with Trude.

“The problem, my dear...” answers her mother-in-law after a few moments of deep thought. It’s obvious she is searching for the right words and not succeeding. There’s nothing left to do except to speak plainly. “There is no getting around the fact that you’re rejecting your background, and by association your family. That’s how they’ll see it in some sense. And in some way you’re also rejecting a part of yourself. I know this from experience. It doesn’t matter how committed you are to your new life and adopted identity. That separation from the past creates a terrible kind of loneliness that never quite leaves you, no matter how far you push it down into yourself.”

The only thing left for Mariasse is to write Mrs. Blaustein with the hope that she might be able to somehow smooth the way, maybe have a talk with Mariasse’s mother. The news might not be so much of a shock if it comes from her, since they are friends. Mrs. Blaustein’s reply contains the usual kindness and support that Mariasse has come to

expect from her. There is also an unforeseen and disturbing note of chastisement near the end.

*As I said at the beginning, I took a long time before answering and read your letter over and over. No doubt one of the things you have learned or will learn at some point in your preparations is that you must declare your Jewish identity to all with courage and pride. All the books and studying in the world will mean nothing if you are not ready and willing to do this. In your letter you speak of how I have been like a second mother to you. In many ways you have been like the daughter I never had and I would do anything for you. But in this matter I cannot be of any help. You must find a way to tell your mother and father what it is you are doing. You owe it to them and to yourself. If you do not, there is no way in this world you can truly call yourself a Jew.*

With each letter she drafts, Mariasse tries to imagine her mother reading it and cannot rid her mind of the stricken expression crossing the poor woman's face as she sits at the kitchen table. What would she do: weep, rage, blame herself, disown her daughter? Maybe all of these, the same way a person shifts from one emotion to another when a loved one has died. Is that what would happen? Would poor Mrs. Knyszinski consider her only child dead to the world, the way her father has already done?

It is early autumn when Rabbi Dworkin finally tells her she is ready for the *Beit Din* (the Jewish Court). More than a year has passed since she first approached him. On a Wednesday morning she is inside a spacious office in Temple Solomon standing before the panel of rabbis consisting of Rabbi Dworkin and two others, all sitting behind a massive oak table. Outside it is bright and crisp and through a high window Mariasse can see the colouring leaves of a maple tree. The sun glares through the dusty pane. A single

ray streaks the length of the table, illuminating the wood's smoothed knots and serpentine grain. She fully expected to be nervous, with knees trembling and her stomach knotting itself into various configurations. Instead she answers their questions calmly and confidently and defends her assertion that she will be a good upstanding Jew. To the three rabbis or any other observer it looks as if all her attention is on the matter at hand, but only Mariasse knows that in another part of her mind she is composing what she knows will be the final draft of the letter to her mother. In some way she understands that splitting her mind's focus, having something else to occupy her thoughts while she answers the rabbis' questions, is the reason for her calm demeanour.

After the three rabbis deliberate among themselves with much whispering and nodding, they unanimously agree that Mariasse has proven herself worthy to be a Jew. She thanks the rabbis and immediately runs home, shutting herself in her room to write the dreaded letter while it is still fresh in her mind. She fills five pages with dispassionate prose, as if taking dictation from a disembodied voice, and explains everything. It takes her almost an hour, after which she folds the letter, slips it in an envelope and walks to the post office on the Main and mails it off. Then she stops in a nearby park, sits on a far-off bench by herself and weeps tears of joy and sadness.

When it comes time to choose her Jewish name, Mariasse searches the Bible and other texts with the same determination she put in her studies. Trude suggests the name Malka and Jakob is fond of Miriam. Because her middle name is Elizaveta, Mariasse chooses the name Elisheva, who, in the Bible, was Aaron's wife (sister-in-law to Moses) and also means *God is my oath*.

Although the *Beit Din* has agreed that she should be allowed to call herself a Jew,

Mariasse's actual conversion to Judaism is not complete until *tevillah* or immersion in a *mikvah*. Though she has known all along this day would come, that it would be her gateway to a new identity and existence, she has so far managed to tamp the knowledge down into her subconscious with endless hours of study. And now that immersion is a mere three days away she is gripped by an unnameable dread gnawing at her insides.

Aaron suggests the obvious: a fear of water. But, growing up in Kraków, Mariasse had always loved to swim, whether at her favourite indoor pool on Buszka Street or in the sun-glittered lake whenever she and her parents spent a Saturday at the always-crowded Kryspinow Beach. Trude confesses that she too was afraid when her time of immersion came. In retrospect, she says that what she suffered was merely a case of cold feet, knowing that this was the point of no return.

“I stood frozen like an idiot before the pool, unable to dunk even a toe in the water. Finally, my mother-in-law, who was overseeing the immersion, gave me a little nudge and I just walked in. One minute I was like a wind-up toy whose spring had stalled, and the next I was marching without a thought in my head, while the water grew deeper and deeper. All I can remember is swallowing water and coming up for air, coughing my fool head off. I could barely say the blessing and then I had to go in again. Later my mother-in-law said to me: *Hopefully you will make a better Jew than a fish.*”

In her heart, Mariasse feels as committed as ever to the choice she's making. It isn't second thoughts that plague her. She recalls once asking Mrs. Blaustein if she could accompany her to a *mikvah* and being told that it would be improper for a Gentile girl to enter one, the same way it would be inappropriate for Mrs. Blaustein to enter a church confessional. Both would be signs of disrespect for another faith. Maybe some part of

her doubts whether she is worthy of becoming a Jew. The only person to consult for such a dilemma would be Rabbi Dworkin. As usual, his words offer a glimmer of insight into Mariasse's trepidation. The water, he explains, is supposed to cleanse the convert of past deeds so that he or she will emerge like a newly born child. "It is a symbol of death and rebirth, after which, you will be able to confront God and your new life with spiritual rejuvenation."

*Death and rebirth.* The words bob aimlessly on the murky waters of her mind as she lies in bed the night before the immersion. Aaron lies beside her, his slightly curved back pressing against her arm. His steady, shallow breathing confirms the existence of carefree oblivion. If she wasn't so preoccupied by her own thoughts, she might envy his contentment. Would the water really cleanse her of past deeds? Is that not what she really wants from all this, to be cleansed and to forget the sins she committed as a Catholic – the very same sins the Church forgives at confession, but she could never bring herself to renounce? To start her life over as a Jew means those sins would be scattered to the wind like ashes. And the child that struggled to emerge from the *mikvah* of her womb, would it finally be as dead to her as she probably is to her own parents?

The immersion is presided over by Rabbi Dworkin's wife, Batia, at the *mikvah* next to Temple Solomon. Mariasse is surprised by the smallness of the room with its plain concrete walls. Batia questions her thoroughly on her ablutions that morning and looks her over to make sure there is no make-up on her face or polish on her nails. Mariasse is naked but surprisingly does not feel self-conscious in front of this woman. All her nervousness from the past three days has not entirely disappeared, but seems to be lying in stasis in some hidden compartment of her heart. The strangeness of the situation

consumes her in such a way as to make her feel disconnected from herself. It's like the stories she has heard of people who float out of their bodies and watch themselves from the ceiling. Batia instructs her on the niceties of *tevillah*: how she is to enter the water, how the immersion must be total (not in succession), making sure every strand of hair is under before she comes up for air.

The water is surprisingly warm and Mariasse moves swiftly as it rises up her naked skin. "Okay, now," instructs Batia with a sharp clap of her hands. Mariasse automatically bends her knees, takes a deep breath and then her head is under the water. Her fingers rake through her hair, pulling the long strands close to her neck to make sure each one is submerged. Her eyes are closed at first, but after a moment she opens them to a blue world where time seems to be not so much frozen as totally nonexistent. There is a space in her chest cavity, giving her the illusion that she can hold her breath indefinitely. She is waiting to feel something, a change or a sign that she is moving from one state to another – from Catholic to Jew, from sinner to innocent.

She feels weightless, shapeless. All around she detects waves of light, serpentine movements of blue.

There is something in the distance, formless at first, but soon it shows recognisable signs of a round head, tiny arms and legs. The space in her chest is filling with something: a hardness. Her heart begins pounding in her ears. A distant voice struggles to make itself heard. It seems to be coming from the round little head. Tiny arms are swimming away from her, tiny feet kicking. It is beckoning her to follow. She swears the voice is reverberating inside her, struggling to emerge from the tightness in her chest. Her eyes are open wide. She looks up and sees the wriggling form of Batia

standing at the edge of the pool, waving her arms. The voice is coming from up there. Mariasse pushes her legs and springs to the water's surface.

“Are you okay?” Batia asks with a hint of panic in her voice. “You didn't have to stay in so long.”

Mariasse wipes the water from her eyes and gulps in air, razor-edged as it expands in her lungs.

“Now,” says Batia. “Repeat the blessing after me. *Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the immersion.*”

After Mariasse repeats the blessing, Batia orders her to immerse herself again. “But this time not so long. Count to three then come up.” Mariasse looks into the water. All she sees is blueness, as if looking into a reflection of infinite sky. There is no form, no head or arms or legs anywhere to be seen. She nods to Batia and takes a deep breath, filling her lungs and immerses herself a second time.

A week later Mariasse and Aaron have a second wedding, this one under a *chuppah* at Temple Solomon. Aaron's heel crushes the cloth-covered wine glass and the loud crack signals the guests to cheer. Trude and Jakob's faces beam with pride. Mariasse is overcome by a sense of something slipping away, like an invisible skin being shed to reveal a new persona. After the ceremony she and Aaron are carried on chairs, borne high in the air by the arms of their closest friends and family into the banquet hall. A trio of *klezmerim* play a joyous melody that intertwines around shouts of *mazel tov!* and *kinahora!*

A month after the wedding two letters arrive from Kraków. One is from Mariasse's mother and the other from Mrs. Blaustein. In her letter Mariasse's mother expresses sorrow and confusion about her daughter's decision to abandon her Catholic upbringing. As Mariasse expected, her father had long declared that he lost his daughter at sea. This is the official story in the household and her mother has had to abide by it as she does all of her husband's decisions.

It is obvious he knows nothing of this letter. The handwriting looks strained, the brittle letters sharp and angular like autumn twigs. A few of the sentences are punctuated by small blots of ink, as if the pen had convulsed into a momentary sob before continuing. The letter concludes with a small act of defiance. Even though Mariasse is dead within the household, she will always live in her mother's thoughts and feelings. Her father still has no dominion over them. In both of these realms she will always pray for understanding as to why her daughter would do such a thing. And through her prayers she will leave a candle burning in hope that one day Mariasse will return to the one true faith of her birth.

The letter from Mrs. Blaustein conveys disturbing news of a different sort. It starts hopefully enough with the salutation *Mein Tochter* (My Daughter) and congratulates her warmly on her successful conversion and happy wedding. But this is followed by the details of a *pogrom* in the Kazimierz district that had resulted in the destruction of some shops, including Mrs. Blaustein's, which burnt to the ground, and five deaths, including a small boy. Mrs. Blaustein herself was overcome by smoke while trying to save some of her inventory. If not for two men – a father and son who owned a nearby fruit stall (*smashed to bits by those hoodlums*) – who braved the flames to run into

the shop and drag her out, she would have perished too. *All of my livelihood and everything I worked so hard for, all of it gone. I'm only grateful that you were not here to see this abomination.*

As terrible as this news is, the worst is yet to come. *I don't know how to tell you this. I argued with myself whether it was the right thing, or whether you would be better off living in blissful ignorance. But in light of the dramatic change you have made to your life, now that you are a Jew, one of us, and have always been like mishpokkeh to me, I decided I had no choice but to tell you.* She went on to relate that after the father and son dragged her out of her burning shop, there was mayhem everywhere with men brandishing torches and clubs, while others were running around with buckets of water. Amidst the crowd she spotted a face all too familiar to her: Mr. Knyszinski was holding a torch in his hand. *I would never tell you such a thing if I was not sure. After that meeting in the shop when you were hiding in the back room, I knew I would never forget his face. He walked right past me with the torch held high in the air. For a moment our eyes met. I am sure he recognised me, but said nothing and merely walked on.*

Mariasse folds the letter and slips it back into the envelope, then puts it away, along with the letter from her mother, under some petticoats in a bottom drawer in her bureau.

The next afternoon Trude comes home, laden with bags from the shops. She unpacks the groceries in the kitchen, thinking she is alone in the flat, when she becomes aware of a soft noise that seems to be coming from the bathroom, where the door is ajar. "Hello?" she calls and gently pushes the door open only to find Mariasse standing in front of the

mirror with a scissors in her hand. The soft noise Trude heard is the scissors' metallic whisper as Mariasse cuts another hank of her long hair. The tresses float down onto a pile of blonde hair about her feet. What little is left on her head sticks out in spiky tufts.

“Oh my dear Lord,” cries Trude. “What are you doing? Look at your hair, your beautiful hair.”

Mariasse puts the scissors down. Something that looks like a hatbox sits nearby on the floor. Mariasse bends down and lifts the box's lid then removes a frumpy brown-haired wig. She sets the wig carefully on her head and adjusts it slightly. She looks at herself for a second, an expression of self-satisfaction curling the corners of her mouth. Then she turns to her mother-in-law.

“So?” She folds her hands in front of her skirt. “What do you think?”

Trude stares open-mouthed, trying to give voice to the jumbled thoughts swimming through her head. “But why?” she finally utters.

“I am a Jewish wife now,” Mariasse answers simply. “A wife doesn't offer temptation to men who are not her husband.”

“But you could have put your hair up and still worn the wig. You didn't have to do this.” Trude gestures helplessly at the yellow hair strewn on the bathroom floor.

“I'll clean it up,” says Mariasse and edges past her mother-in-law to fetch a broom and dustpan from the kitchen.

Trude stares at the hair. Her eyes burn slightly with the threat of tears. What is going on in this poor girl's head? Something in the back of her mind (like the low murmur of gossiping women) suggests to Trude that this is not merely the act of an

overzealous convert. There is a panicky flutter in her breast. If she didn't know better she would swear this is a display of penitence.