

Sabbath in Portugal

WHEN ONE OF THE EDITORS in my American publishing house heard that I would stop in Lisbon on my way to France, she said to me, "I will give you the telephone number of Miguel de Albeira. If you need something he will be glad to help you." He was said to have something to do with a publishing house or printing business. But it never occurred to me that I might need help. I had everything necessary for a trip: passport, traveler's checks, a hotel reservation. Nevertheless, the editor wrote the name and number in my address book, which was already crammed with many which I could no longer identify.

On a Tuesday evening in early June my ship docked in Lisbon and a taxi took me to the Apollo Hotel. The lobby was filled with compatriots from New York and Brooklyn. Their wives, with dyed hair and heavily made-up faces, smoked cigarettes, dealt cards, laughed and chattered all at once. Their daughters in miniskirts formed their own circles. The men were studying the financial pages of the *International Herald Tribune*. Yes, these are my people, I said to myself. If the Messiah is to come, he will have to come to them because there are no others.

A small elevator brought me up to my top-floor room, which

was large, sparsely furnished, dimly lit, with a stone floor and an archaic bed with a high, ornately carved headboard. I opened the window and saw tiled roofs and a red moon. How strange—a rooster was crowing close by. I hadn't heard a rooster's crow in God knows how long. His cock-a-doodle-do reminded me that I was again in Europe, where the old and the new coexist. At the open window I was refreshed by a breeze whose aroma I had forgotten in my years in America. It had the freshness of the fields. It smelled of Warsaw, Bilgoray, and of something indefinable. The stillness seemed to emit a ringing sound, but it was hard to say whether it came from outside or from my own ears. I imagined that I heard the croaking of frogs and the chirping of crickets.

I wanted to read but there was not enough light for that. I bathed in a tub which was long and deep. I dried myself with a towel as large as a sheet. Even though the sign above the entrance claimed that the hotel was first-class, it did not provide its guests with soap. I extinguished the lamp and lay down on the bed. The pillow was high and overstuffed. Over the open window hovered the same stars which I had abandoned thirty-five years ago when I arrived in New York. I thought about the countless guests who had lived in this old hotel before me, the men and women who slept in this broad bed, many of them probably dead now. Who knows, perhaps their spirits or remnants of their being were lingering in this room. In the bathroom the pipes gurgled. The huge clothes closet cracked. A single mosquito buzzed and refused to stop until it could extract a droplet of my blood. I lay awake ready for the visitation of a dead lover.

About two o'clock I fell asleep and I was awakened in the morning by the crowing of the same rooster (I remembered his timbre) and shouting from a street market. Most probably they were selling vegetables, chickens, fruit. I recognized the

cries: this was the way they had haggled and fought at Yanash's bazaar and in the Halles on Mirowski Place. I thought that I smelled horse dung, new potatoes, unripe apples.

I was supposed to remain in the hotel until Sunday, but I now learned that my travel agent in New York had reserved the room for two days only. Many Americans were arriving. The room clerk informed me that I would have to move before noon on Friday.

I asked him to find me another hotel room, but he insisted that as far as he knew all the hotels of Lisbon were filled. He had already tried to find rooms for other guests without success. The lobby was cluttered with luggage and buzzed with Americans, Italians, Germans, each group clamoring in its own language. I could not get a table in the restaurant. No one needed me or my traveler's checks. The clerks looked at me with cold indifference; for all they cared, I could sleep in the street.

Now I remembered that my editor had put a name in my notebook. I searched for it for a good half hour but could not find it. Had it flown off the page by magic, or had my editor not actually written it down after all? Then I discovered it in the margin of the very first page. I went up to my room, lifted the receiver, and waited long minutes until the telephone operator answered. I got a connection, but it was the wrong number. Someone scolded me in Portuguese and I apologized in English. After a few wrong connections I finally got the right number. A woman tried hard to spell out something to me in Portuguese. Then in broken English she gave me a number where I might be able to find Senhor Miguel de Albeira. Again I got the wrong party. I felt rage against a Europe which neither kept the old ways nor understood the new. My American patriotism was aroused and I swore I would spend every penny I made within the United States of America. Meanwhile,

I had to get in touch with Miguel de Albeira. I prayed to God for success; as always when I am in trouble, I vowed I would give money to my favorite charities.

I got the number. Senhor de Albeira spoke an English which I could barely understand. He told me that my editor had written him, and he agreed to come over right away. I was overcome with gratitude to Providence, to my editor, and to the Portuguese Miguel de Albeira, who in the middle of the day was setting aside his business to come to see me only because he had received a letter of recommendation. This was possible only in Europe. No American, including myself, would do anything like that.

I did not have to wait long. There was a knock at the door. The man who entered seemed to be in his early forties, of slight build, lean, dark, with a high forehead and sunken cheeks. For a while I saw nothing characteristic about him. He could have been a Spaniard, an Italian, a Frenchman, or a Greek. He had crooked teeth requiring dental care. He wore a gray everyday suit and a tie one can see in the shop windows of a dozen cities. He offered me his hand in the European way with a minimum of pressure. When he heard about my hotel room he said, "Don't worry. There are plenty of empty rooms in Lisbon. If it's worse than I think, I'll take you to my home. Let's just go and have lunch together."

"I invite you to lunch."

"You invite me? In Lisbon I'm the host. You will invite me in New York."

In front of the hotel we got into one of those small and shabby autos which provide transportation for most Europeans. On the back seat, between cardboard boxes and fading newspapers, there was a can of paint. I sat next to my host and Senhor Miguel de Albeira showed skill in maneuvering his

little car in disorderly traffic aggravated by the absence of signal lights on the narrow and hilly streets, among houses which might have been built before the earthquake of 1755. Other cars refused to make way for us. Pedestrians were in no hurry to get out of our path. Here and there a cat or a dog was having its siesta on the road. Senhor de Albeira seldom blew the horn, never expressed anger. As he drove he asked me about my trip and plans, when and why I became a vegetarian, and if I ate eggs or milk. He pointed out monuments, old buildings, and churches of the Alfama quarter. We drove into an alley hardly wide enough for a single car. Disheveled women and old men sat before open doors; neglected children played in the gutters. Pigeons pecked at a dirty bread crust.

Senhor de Albeira pulled into a courtyard. I followed him into what seemed to be a third-rate lunchroom, but we walked on into a large dining room with a skylight and tables set with elegance. Shelves were lined with straw-covered wine flasks in grotesque shapes. Senhor de Albeira showed a concern for my diet which I felt was exaggerated. Did I like cheese, mushrooms, cauliflower, tomatoes, and what kind of a salad, and what wine, white or red? I kept insisting that he not make a fuss about me or my food. In New York I sit on a high stool and eat my lunch in ten minutes. But Senhor de Albeira persisted. He had ordered a banquet, and when I tried to pay I learned that it had already been taken care of.

Friday at eleven in the morning Senhor de Albeira came in his little car to my hotel, helped me load my luggage, and took me to a smaller hotel whose windows faced a park. My room had a balcony and cost me less than half of the one I had at the Apollo. I lay awake a good part of the night trying to figure out why a stranger in Lisbon was showing so much kindness to a Yiddish writer from New York.

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No, Senhor de Albeira could gain nothing from my visit to Lisbon. It is true that he was connected with a publishing company, but my works in the Portuguese language were to appear in Rio de Janeiro and not in Lisbon. My editor had met him accidentally and had no business with him. From asking questions and from what I could understand of his conversation, I decided he was far from rich. He had two jobs, publishing not being sufficient to provide his livelihood. He lived in an old house, had three children, and his wife taught in a high school. He had read a book of mine in an English translation but this could not be the reason for his generosity. He remarked that he often dealt with authors and did not have a particularly high opinion of them.

On Saturday I intended to take a guided tour by bus. But Senhor de Albeira insisted on being my guide. He came to my hotel in the morning and drove me around for many hours. He showed me ruined castles, ancient churches, parks with old trees. He recited the names of exotic flowers and birds. He displayed erudition in discussing the history of Portugal and Spain. From time to time he asked me questions: What is the difference between Yiddish and Hebrew? Why hadn't I settled in Israel? He seemed to be intrigued by my Jewishness. Did I belong to a synagogue? Was my vegetarianism connected with religion? It was not easy to define my Jewishness for Senhor de Albeira. The moment I answered one of his questions he came out with another. To have conversation with him was difficult because I hardly understood his English, despite his rich vocabulary. He had told me in advance I would have dinner at his home and in that way become acquainted with his family. When I wanted to stop to buy a present for them,

Senhor de Albeira made it difficult. In Sintra I managed to buy two bronze roosters despite his protests and with those gifts we arrived at his home at seven.

We climbed narrow winding steps in a building which might once have been a palace but was crumbling now. A heavy sculptured door opened to reveal an olive-skinned woman dressed in black whose hair was swept in a knot. She must have been a beauty in her youth, but only traces of it remained. Her hands were worn from housework, she was without makeup, and she smelled of garlic and onions. Her dress fell far below the knees, and had long sleeves and a high collar. When I offered the gift, she flushed as women did when I was still a boy. Her black eyes expressed an embarrassment and a modesty which I did not know still existed. She resembled my first love, Esther, whom I had never dared to kiss, and who had been shot by the Nazis in 1943.

Senhor de Albeira introduced me to the rest of his family, a girl of eighteen, a boy a year younger, and another boy of thirteen, all of them olive-skinned and with dark eyes. After a while a blond girl entered the living room. Senhor de Albeira told me that she was not his daughter. Each year his wife took into the house a poor girl from the provinces who came to Lisbon to study, as in my time they took in poor boys who came to study in the yeshiva. God in heaven, time had truly stopped in this place. The youngsters kept unbelievably quiet and showed the kind of respect to adults with which I myself had been brought up. Senhor de Albeira seemed to be the absolute ruler in this household. The children ran to execute his slightest command. The daughter brought me a copper basin so I could wash my hands.

The Albeiras had prepared a vegetarian meal for me. They had apparently gotten the idea that my vegetarianism had something to do with the dietary laws of my religion. On the

table I saw a loaf of braided bread, a carafe of wine, and a goblet of the kind my father used for a blessing. The Sabbath I had desecrated for years had caught up with me in a Gentile home in Lisbon.

During the time we spent at the table, the children never spoke. They sat straight and silent, and though they understood no English they listened with reverence to our talk. I remembered my mother's admonition: Children should be silent when the elders speak. The girls helped Senhora de Albeira serve. Miguel de Albeira continued to query me about my Jewishness. In what way is the Ashkenazi different from the Sephardi? Are Jews excommunicated if they return to Germany? Are there Israeli Christians? I had the notion that Senhor de Albeira was attempting to atone for the wrongs of the Inquisition, the sins of Torquemada, and the zealots of Portugal through me. He translated my replies into Portuguese for his wife. I began to feel uncomfortable, as if I were exploiting or cheating these gentle people by pretending I was a pious Jew. Suddenly Senhor de Albeira put his fist on the table and announced solemnly: "I am Jew."

"Oh."

"Please wait moment."

He got up and left the room. After a while he returned with a miniature cabinet made of dark wood, an antique with two doors in relief. He opened them and removed a book with wooden covers which he placed before me. It was a Hebrew manuscript written in Rashi characters. He said, "One of my ancestors wrote this. Six hundred years ago."

The company became even quieter than before. I began to turn the pages carefully and, though they were faded, I could still make out the text. After a while Senhor de Albeira brought me a magnifying glass. It was a book of *responsa*. I read about a deserted wife whose husband was found in a river with his

nose eaten away and about a man who schemed to marry a servant girl with a small coin, but before he managed to recite, "Be thou sanctified to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel," she threw the coin away defiantly. Each word, each sentence in that old parchment was familiar to me with all its implications. I've studied the same laws in other volumes. Here and there I even noticed an error made by the unknown scribe.

The family watched me and waited for my verdict as if I had been reading hieroglyphs or clay tablets. Senhor de Albeira asked, "Do you understand this?"

"I'm afraid I understand nothing else."

"Written by one of my forefathers. What does it say?"

I tried to explain it to him. He listened, nodded, explained my words to his family. Long after its disappearance Senhor de Albeira was carrying on the tradition of Marranos, those Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had accepted Christianity nominally while practicing Judaism clandestinely. He had a personal association with the Jewish God. Now he had invited a Jew to his home who still knew the holy tongue and could decipher the writings of his ancestors. He had prepared a Sabbath repast for him. I knew that in former times to keep such a book in the house was highly dangerous; a single line in Hebrew found in the house of a man would have led him to the stake. Nevertheless, this token of the past had been preserved for centuries.

"We are not pure Jews. We come from generations of Catholics. But the Jewish spark remains in us. When I married I told my wife about my origins, and when the children grew up I revealed the genealogy to them. My daughter wants to visit Israel. I myself would like to settle there, but what would I do? I'm too old to enter—how do you call it—a kibbutz. But my daughter could marry a Jew."

"The Jews in Israel are not all religious."

“Why not? Well, I understand.”

“Modern men are skeptical.”

“Of course. But I wouldn’t give away this book for anything. How is it that so many nations vanished and Jews still lived to return to their land? Doesn’t it prove the Bible is true?”

“For me, yes.”

“The War of the Six Days was a miracle, absolutely a miracle. My company printed a book about it and it sold well. We have a few Jews in Lisbon, refugees from Hitler and others. A delegate from Israel was here.”

An old clock with a huge pendulum struck nine. The girls got up and quietly cleared the dishes from the table. One boy offered me his hand and then left. Senhor de Albeira replaced the old book in the cabinet. It was becoming dark, but they had not turned on the electric light. I realized that it was because of me. The man and his wife had probably read somewhere that one shouldn’t kindle a light on the Sabbath until three stars appear. The room became full of shadows. The yearning of old Sabbath dusks overcame me and I was reminded of my mother’s prayer, “*God of Abraham.*”

We remained silent for a long while. In the half light the woman became younger and more like Esther. Her black eyes stared straight into mine, inquiringly and with perplexity, as if she, too, had recognized in me someone from the past. My God, it was Esther, the same figure, hair, forehead, nose, throat. I was seized by trembling. My old love awakened. Esther had returned! Only now did I grasp why I had decided to stop in Portugal, and why Senhor de Albeira had accepted me with such fervor. Through this couple Esther had arranged a rendezvous with me.

I sat there awe-stricken, with the humility of those on whom Providence bestows special favors. I could barely restrain myself from running to her, falling to my knees, covering her

with kisses. It occurred to me that I had scarcely heard the sound of her voice. In that moment she spoke and it was Esther's voice. She asked me a question in Portuguese, but it had the tone and tremor of Esther's Yiddish. I thought I understood her words even before they were translated for me.

“Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?”

I heard myself reply, “They never died.”

Translated by the author and Herbert R. Lottman