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# THE PROMISE

by Chaim Potok

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

*THE PROMISE*

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OF THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER EDITION.

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TO
THE CHILDREN

*Rena, Naama, Akiva*

This is a work of fiction, one man's vision of things. No correspondence between the people, places, and events in this book and people, places, and events in the real world is intended. What correspondence might exist is the result of coincidence.

My deepest thanks to Professors Herbert Callen, David Halivni (Weiss), and Solomon Zeitlin, Drs. Israel Charny and Bernard Shuman, and Adena, my wife, for helping with the research.

C. P.

*If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.*

FRANZ KAFKA

*Master of the Universe, send us our Messiah, for we have no more strength to suffer. Show me a sign, O God. Otherwise . . . otherwise . . . I rebel against Thee. If Thou dost not keep Thy Covenant, then neither will I keep that Promise, and it is all over, we are through being Thy chosen people, Thy peculiar treasure.*

THE REBBE OF KOTZK

# THE PROMISE

All around us everything was changing in the order of things we had fashioned for ourselves.

The neighborhood changed. In the years before the Second World War, the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn had been inhabited by only a few Hasidic sects. By the fifth year after the war, the neighborhood seemed dark with their presence. They had come from the sulfurous chaos of the concentration camps, remnants, one from a hamlet, two from a village, three from a town, dark, somber figures in long black coats and black hats and long beards, earlocks hanging alongside gaunt faces, eyes brooding, like balls of black flame turned inward upon private visions of the demonic. Here, in Williamsburg, they set about rebuilding their burned-out world. Families had been destroyed; they remarried and created new families. Dynasties had been shattered; elders met and formed new dynasties. Children had been killed; their women now seemed forever pregnant. And by the fifth year after the war, Lee Avenue, the main street of the neighborhood, was filled with their bookstores and bookbinderies, butcher shops and restaurants, beeswax candle stores, dry-cleaning stores, grocery stores and vegetable stores, appliance stores and hardware stores—the signs in Yiddish and English, the storekeepers bearded and in skullcaps, the gentiles gone now from behind the counters, the Italians and Irish and Germans and the few Spanish

Civil War refugee families all gone now too from the neighborhood.

The street I lived on changed. It was a quiet sycamore-lined street directly off Lee Avenue, and I had lived on it all my life with my father and Manya, the Russian woman who had come in to care for me when my mother died suddenly soon after I was born. The row houses on the street were all three-story brownstones, with small grassy back yards and neatly kept areaways in front where hydrangeas flowered and shone in the sunlight like huge snowballs. Then the newcomers moved into the street. They lived in a dimension of reality that made trees and grass and flowers irrelevant to their needs. So the street began to sag with neglect. The grassy back yards went slowly bald, the hydrangeas were left to fade and die, and the brownstones became old and worn. Soon even the musky odor of the ailanthus trees in the back yards was gone from the street.

The school I attended changed. The Samson Raphael Hirsch Seminary and College stood on Bedford Avenue near Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. It had been a small Orthodox rabbinical school and secular college during the war, the only one of its kind in the United States. In the years after the war it had begun to expand. Adjoining homes and buildings were acquired, college departments were enlarged, additional faculty was hired, and in the final months of my senior year a graduate school was started. Sometime during the summer after my graduation from the college in the fifth year after the war, the name of the school was changed to Hirsch University. I continued to attend the rabbinical school for my ordination.

The winter came late that year. There was a long Indian summer and the sycamores on my block turned slowly in the gentle winds. The leaves remained on the trees until early November, and then began to fall. Soon the street was covered with them and I felt them beneath my feet, thin, brittle, papery things that had once been green with life. The sycamores stood bare against the sky

and seemed to be waiting for the winter. In late December the air turned suddenly cold and bitter. And on a day in early January I walked beneath the naked sycamores on my way home from school and saw the sky dull gray and heavy with clouds and felt the first flakes of snow against my face, and the winter was here.

All through that winter my father was writing his book on the Talmud. He wrote during those afternoons when he did not have to teach and every evening and night, except the nights of Shabbat and festivals. He left the apartment only to go to his school or occasionally to meet with a colleague or to do research in the rare-manuscript room at the Zechariah Frankel Seminary, the non-Orthodox rabbinical school and teachers institute on Eastern Parkway.

In the late spring of that year I met Rachel Gordon at a party. She was a junior at Brooklyn College and majored in English literature, and when I first met her I found myself intrigued by the fact that she was the niece of Professor Abraham Gordon, who taught Jewish philosophy at the Zechariah Frankel Seminary and whose books were scorned and despised by the rabbis in my very Orthodox school. I began to date her. Both of us were surprised and pleased when we discovered we would be together for part of the coming summer in a resort area near Peekskill, a small town about thirty miles from New York, where her parents had a lakeside home and where my father and I vacationed every August in a cottage we rented.

In the first week of June the spring weather ended abruptly with a stifling heat wave. On Lee Avenue the dark-clothed Hasidim sweated in the fierce heat, but the sycamores on my block shaded the street and there was a breeze in the nights and I could hear it in the leaves through the open window of my room.

Rachel and her parents left for their summer home in the last week of June. I went up to visit her on a Sunday morning in the middle of July and met her cousin Michael, who was with them that summer. He was a sad-faced, precocious fourteen-year-old boy and he spent the morn-

ing roaming along the shore collecting frogs and salamanders and the afternoon reading an astronomy book while Rachel and I swam and sailed on the lake. New York seemed dazed with heat when I returned that night.

In the first week of August my father and I packed some bags and left for the cottage on a day when the heat reached to just over one hundred degrees and even Lee Avenue surrendered to the summer and stood empty and deserted, a stagnant pool of shimmering asphalt burning in the sun.