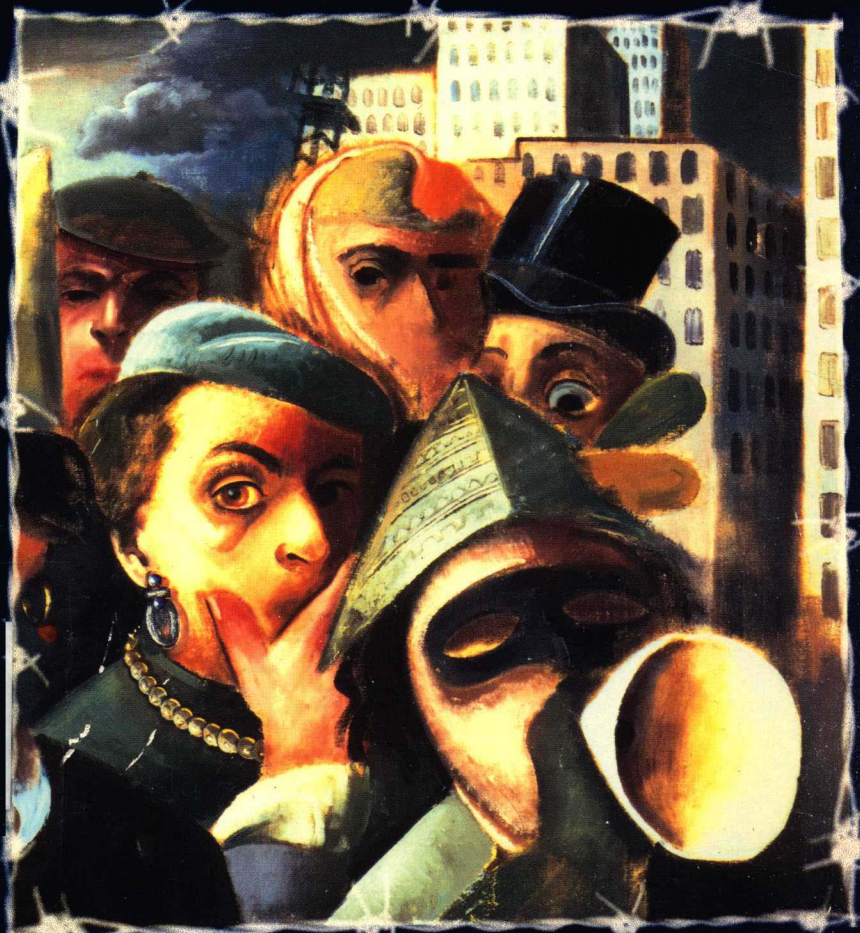


Jacob the Liar

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Jurek Becker

JACOB THE LIAR

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Translated from the German by Leila Vennewitz



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JUREK BECKER was one of Germany's most renowned postwar writers. A Holocaust survivor, he was also the author of the novels *Sleepless Days* and *Bronstein's Children*.

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JACOB THE LIAR

I can already hear everyone saying, A tree? So what's a tree — a trunk, leaves, roots, some beetles in the bark, and a shapely crown at best; so? I can hear them saying, Don't you have anything better to think about to give you that rapturous look like a hungry goat being shown a nice juicy bunch of grass? Or maybe you mean one tree in particular, a special one that for all I know gave its name to a battle, the Battle of the Black Pine, say, do you mean one like that? Or was someone special hanged from it? No, not even that? Oh, all right, it seems pretty inane, but if you get such a kick out of it, we can go on playing this silly game for a while, it's up to you. Maybe you mean that soft sound people call rustling, when the wind has found your tree and improvises a tune on it? Or do you mean the number of board feet your tree yields? Or the well-known shade it casts? It's a funny thing, but at the very mention of shade everyone thinks of trees, although buildings or blast furnaces cast much more shade. Do you mean the shade?

No, all wrong, I say then, you can stop guessing, you'll never get it. I don't mean any of that, although its heating potential is not to be sneezed at. Quite simply, I mean a tree. I have my reasons. First of all, trees have played a certain role in my life, a role I may be overestimating, but that's how it appears to me. When I was nine I fell out of a tree, an apple tree incidentally, and broke my left hand. It healed up fairly well, though there are a few intricate movements I can no longer perform with my left hand. I mention this merely because it had always been taken for granted that I would one day be a violinist, but that's really not important. First my mother had the idea, then my father wanted it too, and finally all three of us wanted it. So, not a violinist.

A few years later, I must have been about seventeen, I lay for the first time in my life with a girl, under a tree. This time it was a beech tree, a good fifty feet tall. The girl's name was Esther — no, Moira, I think — at any rate it was a beech tree, and a wild boar disturbed us. Could have been more than one, we didn't have time to look back. Then a few years later my wife, Hannah, was executed under a tree. I can't say what kind of tree that one was, I wasn't there, I was just told about it, and I forgot to ask about the tree.

And now the second reason why I get that rapturous look when I think about that tree — probably or even certainly the more important reason of the two. It so happens that trees are not allowed in this ghetto (Ordinance 31: "It is strictly prohibited to maintain any kind of ornamental or edible plants within the confines of the ghetto. The same applies to *trees*. Should any wild plants have been overlooked during the establishment of the ghetto, these are to be removed immediately. Offenders will be . . .").

Hardtloff dreamed this up, God knows why, perhaps because of the birds. Countless other things are prohibited too, of course — rings and other valuable objects, keeping pets, being out on the street after eight at night — there's no sense in listing them all. I try to picture what would happen to a person who, wearing a ring, is found with a dog on the street after eight P.M. Actually no, I don't try to picture that at all. I don't even think about rings or dogs or the time of day. I think only of this tree, and my eyes get that rapturous look. I can see their point of view, I mean, theoretically I can understand it: You are Jews, you are less than dirt, why do you need rings, why do you have to hang about on the street after eight P.M.? We have such and such plans for you and intend to carry them out in such and such a way. I can see their point of view; I weep over it, I would kill them all if I could, I would wring Hardtloff's neck with this left hand of mine whose fingers can no longer perform intricate movements; still, I can see the logic of it. But why do they forbid us to have trees?

I've tried hundreds of times to unload this blasted story, without success. Either I tried it with the wrong people, or I made some

mistake or other. I mixed up a lot of things, I got names wrong, or, as I said, they were the wrong people. Every time I have a few drinks, it comes up again; I can't help myself. I mustn't drink so much. Every time I think these must be the right people, and I think I've got it all nicely together, nothing can go wrong when I tell it.

Yet Jacob, to look at him, isn't the least bit like a tree. There are men, after all, whom one might describe as "sturdy as an oak," tall, strong, a bit awe inspiring, men one would like to lean against every day for a few minutes. Jacob is much shorter; he'd hardly reach the shoulder of any sturdy oak of a fellow. He is scared like all the rest of us, he is really no different from Kirschbaum or Frankfurter or me or Kowalski. The only thing that distinguishes him from the rest of us is that without him, this whole damn story could never have happened. But even there one can be of two minds.

So it is evening. Don't ask the exact time, only the Germans know that; we have no clocks or watches. It's been dark for some time now, a few windows show light: that's all I can tell you. Jacob is hurrying, there's not much time left, it's been dark for quite a while. Then suddenly there's no time at all, not even half a second, for there he is, bathed in light. This happens right in the middle of the street, the Kurländischer Damm, close to the ghetto boundary where most of the tailors used to be located. There stands the sentry, fifteen feet above Jacob, on a wooden tower behind the barbed wire stretched clear across the street. At first the sentry says nothing, just holds Jacob in the beam of his searchlight, right there in the middle of the street, waiting. To the left, on the corner, is what used to be the store belonging to Mariutan, an immigrant Romanian who has meanwhile returned to Romania to safeguard the interests of his country at the front. And on the right is the business that used to belong to Tintenfass, a local Jew now living in Brooklyn, New York, who continues to make high-class ladies' dresses. And between them, standing on the cobblestones and alone with his fear, is Jacob Heym, really too old for such a test of nerves. He snatches off his cap, can't make out a thing in the light; all he knows is that somewhere behind this dazzle are

two soldier's eyes that have found him. Jacob mentally runs through all the obvious transgressions and can't think of any he has committed. He has his identity card on him, he hasn't been absent from work, the yellow star on his chest is on exactly the prescribed spot — he glances down at it again — and he sewed on the one for his back only two days ago. If the man doesn't shoot right away, Jacob can answer all his questions satisfactorily: just let him ask.

"Am I mistaken, or is it forbidden to be on the street after eight o'clock?" the soldier says at last. One of the easygoing kind, his voice doesn't even sound angry, quite mild in fact. One might feel like having a chat; a touch of humor might not be out of place.

"It is forbidden," says Jacob.

"And what time is it now?"

"I don't know."

"But you ought to know," the soldier says.

Jacob might now say, That's true, or he could ask, How could I? or, What time is it, then? Or he could say nothing and wait, which is what he does, as that seems the most advisable course.

"Do you at least know what that building is over there?" asks the soldier, having realized, no doubt, that this partner is not the kind of person to keep a conversation going. Jacob knows. He hasn't seen in which direction the soldier has nodded or pointed; he sees only the blinding searchlight, and beyond it are quite a few buildings, but, the way things are at the moment, only one can be meant.

"The military office," Jacob says.

"What you do now is go in there and report to the duty officer. You tell him that you were out on the street after eight o'clock, and you ask him for a well-deserved punishment."

The military office. Jacob doesn't know much about this building; he knows that it houses some sort of German administration — at least that's what people say. As to what is being administered there, nobody knows. He knows that the tax department used to be there; he knows there are two exits, one in the front and one leading out of the ghetto. But above all he knows that the chances of

a Jew leaving this building alive are very poor. To this day, no such case has ever been heard of.

"Anything the matter?" asks the soldier.

"No."

Jacob turns and walks away. The searchlight follows him, draws his attention to uneven spots in the paving, makes his shadow grow longer and longer, makes his shadow climb up the heavy steel door with its round peephole when Jacob still has many steps to go.

"And what do you ask for?" says the soldier.

Jacob stops, turns around patiently, and replies, "For a well-deserved punishment."

He does not shout — only people lacking in self-control or respect shout — but neither does he say it too softly, so as to be sure the man in the light can hear him clearly across the distance. He takes pains to find exactly the right tone; it should indicate that he knows what he is to ask for, all he needs is to be asked.

Jacob opens the door, quickly shuts it again between himself and the searchlight, and looks down the long empty corridor. He has been here often; there used to be a small table just inside the entrance on the left, with a minor official seated behind it. As long as Jacob can remember, it was always Mr. Kominek who used to ask each visitor, "What can we do for you?" "I've come to pay my semiannual taxes, Mr. Kominek," Jacob would reply. But Kominek would behave as if he had never seen Jacob before, although from October to the end of April he had been in Jacob's little shop almost every week and eaten potato pancakes there. "Occupation?" Kominek would ask. "Tradesman," Jacob would answer. He never showed his annoyance, not even a trace; Kominek invariably managed four pancakes, and sometimes he would bring his wife along too. "Name?" Kominek would ask next. "Heym, Jacob Heym." "Letters *F* to *K*, room 16." Yet whenever Kominek came to his shop he had never bothered to order pancakes; he would simply say, "The usual." For he was a regular.

Where the table once stood there is now no longer a table, but

the floor still shows the four marks where its legs used to be, whereas the chair has left no trace, probably because it never stood as consistently on the self-same spot as the table had. Jacob leans against the door to catch his breath. The last few minutes have not been easy, but what does that matter now? The smell in this building has changed, somehow for the better. The acrid odor of ammonia that at one time pervaded the corridor has gone; instead there is, inexplicably, a more civilian smell. There is a hint of leather in the air, female sweat, coffee, and a trace of perfume. At the far end of the corridor a door opens, a woman in a green dress comes out, walks a few steps; she has nice straight legs, she goes into another room, two doors are left open, he hears her laugh, she comes out of the room again, walks back, the doors are closed again, the corridor is empty once more. Jacob is still leaning against the steel door. He wants to go outside again, maybe the searchlight is no longer waiting for him, maybe it has sought out something new, but maybe it is still waiting; it seems rather unlikely that it is not waiting; the soldier's last question had sounded so final.

Jacob walks along the corridor. There is nothing on the doors to indicate who is behind them, only numbers. Perhaps the duty officer has the room formerly occupied by the bureau chief, but one can't be sure and it is not advisable to knock at the wrong door. What do you want, some information? Did you hear that? He wants information! We have such and such plans for him, and he comes wandering in here and wants information!

Behind number 15, formerly TRADESMEN A-E, Jacob can hear sounds. He puts his ear to the door, tries to listen, can't understand anything, only single words that make no sense; but even if the wood were thinner, it wouldn't help much, for no one is likely to address another person as "Duty Officer." Suddenly the door opens — what else but number 15! — but fortunately the doors here open outward so that the person coming out doesn't see Jacob, who is hidden by the door. Fortunately, too, the person leaves the door open; he'll be back in a moment — when people think there's no one else around they

leave doors open — and Jacob is concealed. Inside the room a radio is turned on; it crackles a bit, one of their “people’s radios” no doubt, but there is no music. Since being in the ghetto Jacob has never heard any music, none of us has, except when someone happened to be singing. An announcer is reporting trivialities from some headquarters, someone has been posthumously promoted to lieutenant colonel, next comes a bit about ensured supplies for the population, and then the announcer reads a bulletin that has just come in: “In a fierce defensive battle our heroically fighting troops succeeded in halting the Bolshevik attack twelve miles from Bezanika. In the course of the action our side . . .”

Then the fellow is back in his room; he closes the door, and the wood is too thick. Jacob doesn’t move. He has heard a great deal: Bezanika is not that far away, more than a stone’s throw but certainly not an enormous distance. He has never been there, but he has heard of Bezanika, a very small town; if you travel southeast by train via Mieloworno and the district town of Pry, where his maternal grandfather once had a pharmacy, and you then change trains for Kostawka, you eventually arrive in Bezanika. It may be all of two hundred and fifty miles, maybe even three hundred, not more, he hopes, and that’s where they are now. A dead man has heard some good news and he is happy, he would like to go on being happy, but in his situation — the duty officer is waiting for him and Jacob must move on.

The next step is the hardest; Jacob tries to take it but is stymied. His sleeve is caught in the door. The fellow who came back to the room has pinned him there without the slightest malicious aforethought; he simply closed the door behind him, and Jacob was caught. He gives a cautious tug. The door is well made, it fits perfectly, no superfluous gaps; you couldn’t slip a sheet of paper through. Jacob would like to cut off that piece of sleeve, but his knife is at home, and using his teeth, of which half are missing, would be a waste of time.

It occurs to him to take off his jacket, simply take it off and leave it stuck in the door — what does he need a jacket for now anyway?

He has already slipped out of one sleeve when he remembers that he does still need the jacket. Not for the approaching winter — when you're in the ghetto the oncoming cold doesn't scare you — but for the duty officer, if Jacob ever finds him. The duty officer doubtless could stand the sight of a Jew without a jacket — Jacob's shirt is clean and only slightly mended — but hardly the sight of a Jew without a yellow star on his chest and back (Ordinance 1). Last summer the stars were on the shirt, you can still see the stitch marks, but not anymore; the stars are now on the jacket. So he puts it on again, sticks with his stars, tugs more firmly, gains a few millimeters, but not enough. The situation is, one might say, desperate; he tugs with all his might, something rips, making a sound, and the door opens. Jacob falls into the corridor, a man in civilian clothes stands over him, looking very surprised; the man laughs, then turns serious again. What does Jacob think he is doing here? Jacob gets up and chooses his words very carefully. Not that he's been out on the street after eight. No, the sentry who stopped him had told him it was eight o'clock and he was to report here to the duty officer.

"And then you decided to eavesdrop at this door?"

"I wasn't eavesdropping. I've never been here before and didn't know what room to go to. So I was just about to knock here."

The man asks no more questions and nods his head toward the end of the corridor. Jacob walks ahead of him until the man says, "Right here"; it is not the bureau chief's room. Jacob looks at the man, then knocks. The man walks away, but there is no answer from inside.

"Go in," the man tells him, and disappears behind his own door after Jacob has pressed down the latch.

Jacob in the duty officer's room: he stays by the door, he hasn't put his cap back on since he got caught in the searchlight. The duty officer is quite a young man, thirty at most. His hair is dark brown, almost black, slightly wavy. His rank is not apparent as he is in shirtsleeves; his jacket is hanging from a hook on the wall in such a way that the shoulder boards cannot be seen. Hanging over the jacket

is his leather belt with his revolver. Somehow this seems illogical; it should really be hanging under the jacket. Surely a man first takes off his belt and then the jacket, but the belt is hanging over the jacket.

The duty officer is lying on a black leather sofa, asleep. Jacob believes he is fast asleep; Jacob has heard many people sleeping, he has an ear for it. The man isn't snoring, but he is breathing deeply and regularly; somehow Jacob must make his presence known. Normally he would clear his throat, but that won't do here, that's something you do when visiting good friends. Although actually, when visiting a very good friend you don't clear your throat; you say, Wake up, Salomon, I'm here, or you simply tap him on the shoulder. But, even so, throat clearing won't do, that's somewhere between here and Salomon. Jacob is about to knock on the inside of the door but drops his hand when he sees a clock on the desk, its back to him. He has to know what time it is; there is nothing he has to know more urgently right now than this. The clock says 7:36. Jacob walks softly back to the door. They've been having you on, or not *they*, just that one fellow behind the searchlight, he's been having you on, and you fell for it.

Jacob still has twenty-four minutes left; if they are fair, he actually has twenty-four minutes plus the time his stay here has already cost him. He still doesn't knock. He recognizes the black leather sofa the duty officer is lying on; he has sat on it himself. It used to belong to Rettig, Rettig the broker, one of the richest men in the town. In the fall of 1935 Jacob borrowed some money from him, at 20 percent interest. The whole summer had been so cool that he could hardly sell any ice cream at all. Business had never been so slow; not even his famous raspberry ice cream had sold well. Jacob had needed to start selling potato pancakes as early as August but hadn't yet made enough money for the potatoes, so he had to borrow. And he had sat on the sofa in February 1936 when he returned the money to Rettig. It had stood in the outer office; Jacob had sat on it for an hour, waiting for Rettig. He remembered how surprised he was at the extravagance; there was easily enough leather for two overcoats or three jackets — and in the outer office!

The duty officer turns on his side, sighs, smacks his lips a few times; a cigarette lighter slips out of his trouser pocket and drops on the floor. Jacob simply must wake him up now; it would be a bad thing for him to wake up without Jacob rousing him. He knocks on the inside of the door, the duty officer says, "Yes?" moves, and goes on sleeping. Jacob knocks again — how can anyone be that fast asleep? — he knocks louder, the duty officer sits up before being properly awake, rubs his eyes, and asks, "What time is it?"

"Just past seven-thirty," says Jacob.

The duty officer has stopped rubbing his eyes, sees Jacob, rubs his eyes again, doesn't know whether to be angry or to laugh: it's quite incredible, no one's going to believe him. He stands up, takes his belt from the hook, then the jacket, puts them on, buckles his belt. He sits down behind the desk, leans back, stretches both arms wide apart.

"To what do I owe this honor?"

Jacob tries to answer, but he can't, his mouth is too dry: so that's what the duty officer looks like.

"No false modesty, now," says the duty officer. "Out with it! What's the problem?"

A bit of saliva has collected in his mouth. This seems to be a friendly fellow; maybe he's new here, maybe he isn't even aware of this building's terrible reputation. For a moment it occurs to Jacob that possibly he miscalculated the distance, maybe Bezanika isn't that far, maybe barely two hundred miles, or even a good deal less; maybe the man facing him is scared, and the smart thing is to be prepared; there must be a natural explanation for everything. But then he remembers that the report has only just reached the announcer; the duty officer has been asleep and can't have heard it yet. Then again it might be just as well if he hasn't heard it. The report mentioned that the Russians had been halted, you Germans have succeeded in stopping the advance, you've had a success, but maybe this fellow thinks that the Russians are still advancing. Jacob has

been speculating too long; that's not smart, the duty officer is getting impatient; he's beginning to frown.

"Don't you speak to Germans?"

Of course Jacob speaks to Germans, why wouldn't he speak to Germans, that's the last impression he wants to give, for God's sake, we're all sensible people after all, of course we can speak to each other.

"The sentry on the tower on the Kurländischer Damm told me to report to you. He said I was out on the street after eight o'clock."

The duty officer looks at the clock in front of him on the desk, then pushes back his sleeve and looks at his watch.

"And that's all he said?"

"He also told me I was to ask for a well-deserved punishment."

That answer can't do any harm, Jacob thinks; it sounds obedient, disarmingly honest. Someone who carries his frankness to such an extreme might be entitled to fair treatment, especially when the offense of which he is accused was never committed: any clock can bear witness to that.

"What's your name?"

"Heym, Jacob Heym."

The duty officer takes paper and pencil, writes down something, not only the name, goes on writing; he looks at the clock again, it's getting later and later, he goes on writing, almost half a page, then puts the paper aside. He opens a little box, takes out a cigarette, and gropes in his trouser pocket. Jacob walks to the black leather sofa, bends down, picks up the lighter from the floor, and puts it on the table in front of the duty officer.

"Thanks."

Jacob goes and stands by the door again; a glance at the clock on the desk has shown him that it's already past 7:45. The duty officer lights his cigarette, takes a puff; his fingers fiddle with the lighter. He flicks it on a few times, then snaps it shut again; the flame is already quite small.