

1901-1913 THE LEVYS.

FRANCE AND SWITZERLAND

Raymond Levy was born in Colmar, Alsace. His ancestors, a notorious Sephardic rabbinical family, after a friendly expulsion from their Iberian motherland continued to lead a traditional Jewish way of life – journeying. What does a journey need? Regular breaks.

In 1555, the Levy family stopped in Naples. This was a happy pause and a long one – it lasted three centuries, until 1860 - when the Levys decided to run away from the Pope's innocent but insistent curiosity for the internal affairs of their tiny Jewish community.

Jewish stops are temporary, Jewish journey is permanent. This tribe is led by a mysterious lady called Hope – the hope that one day the Messiah will bring them back to Jerusalem.

After some exhausting travel, the Levy family stopped in Colmar, a small and sleepy town with a nice Jewish community. The first ten years passed in calm and the family was happy.

Alas, their delight did not last for long, and soon, the Levys found themselves trapped between French and Germans, who were fighting tooth and nail over a narrow rich strip of land called Alsace. It was no surprise that the first victims of this friendly misunderstanding became local Jews.

After the war of 1870, Germany annexed Alsace (Napoleon's glorious days of France already being over) and local Jews had to learn the language of Nibelung and to get used to Prussian virtues.

Raymond Levy, a mighty self-effacing young fellow, could never have imagined that one day he would become important enough to be sought after by the great Prussian Army. What is better than an inborn modesty?

Nonetheless, this day came. The first time Raymond received call-up papers for the German military service, he tore them accurately into small rectangular pieces to use for hygienic purposes (toilet tissue not invented yet). When the call-up papers came again, he burnt them. The third and final time, the summons arrived with a threat of imprisonment, unless the candidate complied.

Raymond understood that this was serious and passed to action. He attempted to bribe *Herr Oberst von Der Werke*, the commander of the local Colmar garrison - but to no avail. Either the Prussian officer was an honest person, or Raymond was not generous enough. Or maybe both.

Imagining the consequences of a further delay in his response, Raymond packed the few belongings he had and moved with his young spouse to Switzerland, counting on the support of numerous relatives and friends who had already found refuge in this wild and beautiful heart of Europe, overloaded by mountains and lakes.

"Raymond left for America," his parents told the Prussian sergeant who was looking for the deserter.

"To America without speaking English?"

"Why English? Our Uncle Haim wrote to us that all New York speaks Yiddish."

"All New York? What a nation, a plague. And where exactly is he now improving his Yiddish?"

“How can we know, when he is so far away? America is a very big country, almost like Germany. We heard he had moved to a new ranch, not yet on the map.”

“*Ja, ja, ja*, but what about all those homesick letters he writes? What’s his postal address?”

Mr. Levy threw up his hands and stared disbelievingly into the eyes of the German sergeant:

“*Herr Leutnant*, you must be trying to make fun of us! You believe in homesick letters from that *shmuck*? He has betrayed his parents and his Kaiser. We are proud German patriots, and we feel humiliated ...

“*Danke schön*, but I’m not a Lieutenant yet.”

“You’ll be one, and quite soon, believe us! *Deutschland über alles, Herr Major.*”

Meanwhile, the young fugitive and his wife were crossing lovely Helvetic lands in a one-horse gig, looking for a place to settle down.

“Thank you for your kind advice to go elsewhere,” Raymond had to repeat to his relatives in Basle, Bern, Avenches and Lausanne. “So, you think that it would not be possible for us to settle down in your neighbourhood?”

“Certainly you are welcome to stay with us, but not today,” was the answer. “Why didn’t you come yesterday? Nowadays it is better to settle anywhere except for this damned place. There are too many Jews here; the authorities and the local population get crazy with us. We will not be surprised if it ends up with pogroms, like in Russia. How sad is it to let go of such a promising young Jewish family! But nothing can be done, we live in dark times, you know.”

“That’s right, and these dark times have been going on for the three thousand years already,” Raymond smiled starting to pack his bags.

On the way to Geneva, his last chance, Raymond decided to stop for a night and to complete the journey the following day. His Geneva cousin, aware of the couple’s ambitious life plans, took a train and hurried to meet them in a small lakeshore village between Lausanne and Geneva.

“So, you have left Colmar!” he greeted Raymond. “Better late than never. I cannot imagine our French Motherland under *Bosches*, with my family serving in the Kaiser’s army and killing French Israelites. *Vive la France! Egalité, Fraternité.* Sorry, I forgot the end... Oh yes, *Aux armes, citoyens!** How happy I am that you came to me. I’ll help you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Now, where were you planning to settle?”

“I thought that perhaps near your place.”

“In Geneva? *Mazelto*v, congratulations! There’s only one “if”...”

“Only one?”

“If only you could come a month ago!”

“But the Prussians called me up only now.”

“A Jew should always have a foreboding of misfortune. Yesterday your plan sounded fine, but today it is unfeasible. There are too many Jews in this corner. You cannot imagine how unhappy we are to let go...”

“To let go of such a promising young Jewish family?”

“How did you guess? Anyway, don’t be upset. And why wouldn’t you think of Rolle? This is a magical place, Paradise on Earth.”

“And in what white spot of the map is this paradise, in Siberia?”

**La Marseillaise* (French National Anthem).

“In Siberia? Haha. Right here, under your feet and before your eyes!”

The cousin laughed, pointing across the road at the *château* surrounded by small two-storied houses.

“And you can do well here as a cattle-dealer.”

“Why a cattle-dealer?”

“Because Swiss Jews are mostly in this business or in *schmattes* (clothes).

“Well,” Raymond sighed. “Let it be then. I guess taking care of cows in Rolle is no worse than dying on a battlefield for the German pride.”

Negotiations with the *syndic*, the town mayor, advanced smoothly.

“Levy? What a funny name! You are from Alsace, you say? Well, that of course explains a lot. Do you believe in God?”

“Y-yes”, Raymond admitted honestly.

“Protestant?”

“Well...”

“A Roman Catholic, I presume. No worry, we are not racists. Well, everything seems perfectly satisfactory. I’ve heard that you are a cattle-dealer?”

“Am I?”

“So, I was right! Then you will need a big house, with big stables. Why not take the one that I am selling now? This is not *Versailles*, but it is in the very centre of the town. It belongs to my wife’s parents. Between us, Christians, I’ll make you a good price.”

The price was exorbitant, but the new-born cattle-dealer had no choice. He took out all his savings but this was not enough. Raymond asked all of his relatives for a loan, but by coincidence, all of them were - at that very moment - short of means. The young man had to take a heavy credit from altruistic Swiss bankers.

Once the house was purchased, Raymond immediately dived into learning his new business. The man worked hard and several years later added a wing of cow-sheds. This was necessary to house the cattle that he was buying from *Vaudois* peasants in order to resell them to the slaughterhouses of Geneva and Lausanne.

One thing puzzled him in this profession: ritual (kosher) slaughtering had been forbidden in Switzerland since 1893, and this when many cattle merchants in this country were Jews. As a result, kosher meat was brought mainly from France, thus giving a good profit to French butchers and ruining Swiss Jews, due to the import tax.

“This is as it is,” Raymond decided once and forever.

His parents in Colmar were proud of him.

“May we have success in business, good health and a peaceful life. And may the Prussian Army forget about us, now and forever more!” the Levy family prayed at the beginning of the new century – on the eve of World War I.

Conditio sine qua non.

