

RABBI

Marc J. Seifer

Chapter from *Doppelgänger*, © 2022
Book II from The Rudy Styne Quadrilogy
mseifer@verizon.net

AUSTRIA 1910. The cemetery had many headstones difficult to read. Some leaning this way and that. Having driven all the way from Bavaria in their brand new spiffy Daimler, the Maxwell clan wound their way past the familiar towering oak to their family plot. It had gravestones dating back to the 1700's. A new one said "Judah Baruch Maxwell, 1838-1910: Husband, Father, Cantor." He was dead less than a year.

"Is this Hebrew, papa?"

"Yes my son, it is." Elias knew that Abe was well aware that it was Hebrew.

"It's very pretty. What does it say?"

"The Lord is One," Debora said.

"One universe. It's all nonsense," Elias prattled. "Of course there is only one universe."

"One God, Abe," Elias's brother Simon corrected. "Judah is trying to tell you even in death, there is only one God."

"Don't fill him with poppycock, Simon," Elias shot back. "Some men feel the need out of a weakness to create a God as a way of escaping their own responsibilities."

Out of the blue, a small green falcon alighted on the grave. It cocked its head and looked Elias in the eye. The group was stunned by the delicate, miniaturized yet powerful majesty of the rare bird which took off as quickly as it had appeared.

Debora reached down to grab a few stones to place on grand uncle Judah's grave. "We do this to remember him," Debora said. The small boy placed a stone on Judah's grave.

On they drove in reflective silence past the many gravestones and that idyllic pond on their way to the cemetery's exit, on through the bustling town, past the synagogue where their father had been rabbi for over thirty years and then through the gated entranceway which led to the home the Maxwell boys had grown up in.

It was a three-story edifice with large columns with a sizeable foyer giving way to an impressive mahogany staircase set towards the rear. To the right was a sitting room/library converted into a bedroom. Now, Grandpa Hillel would not have to walk the stairs to get to bed.

Aunt Della came out to greet them. "He's very ill. The doctor said he suffered a series of strokes just two nights ago."

"How long?" Elias put it bluntly.

"Perhaps thirty days."

"My God," Debora gasped. "Will he see Abe?"

"He will see you and Abe and Simon."

"And Elias?"

"I'm sorry, Debora. He was firm."

"What did he say?" Elias inquired.

Aunt Della faced her nephew squarely. "He said the day you converted was the day you died. Debora, why don't you and Simon take the boy in. I'll stay here with Ellie."

"He's overdramatic, too Jewish," Elias shot back after Debora and Abe were out of earshot.

Grandfather's room smelled of stale air and unpleasant medicines. Abe held his nose, but Simon reached down gently and pulled the boy's hand away as they entered.

"You must be a man when you see grandpapa."

"Your face looks funny, grandpapa," the three-year old blurted out.

Formerly the rabbi's reading room, here was the place where many of the region's religious leaders had spent endless hours discussing the fate of their people. The couches had been removed and replaced with a bed, which was straightened rather than made. Stacks of medicine bottles stood along a window shelf.

Although his face sagged miserably on the left side, with regal presence, Hillel sat back in his large well-worn leather chair, his left arm hanging limply by his thigh.

"Come here my boy," grandpapa rasped "Let me see my grandson." With his good arm, the old rabbi swept the boy onto his knee. Debora gave grandpapa a kiss. Simon approached cautiously.

Even though excluded from the room, Elias had always been Hillel's favorite son. This had never been a secret.

"Let me see you, Simon." With little Abe fixed securely on his knee, Hillel reached over to give his second son a handshake. Grabbing the fingers, he crushed his son's knuckles with an iron grip.

Wincing, Simon spoke. "You look tired, papa."

"You have a kiss for me?"

Simon reluctantly gave his father a kiss.

"I've been told that this nephew of yours can multiply three-figure numbers in his head."

"It is true, grandpapa," little Abe chimed in.

"Good." Hillel said, releasing his grip and smiling sadistically. Simon kneaded his injured fingers with his other hand as his father continued. "Get me that paper over there." He motioned with his limp arm, which flopped in the direction of his desk.

Simon grabbed a sheet of calculations and brought it back.

"Holding the paper so that the boy could not see, he said, "Are you ready?"

"No, grandpapa," Abe startled the old man with such brazen assurance.

"Why not?"

"I must be standing if I am to calculate."

"All right, you can jump down."

Debora rushed forward to help the boy to the floor.

"You ready now?"

The little boy inspected the tough old rabbi. He hadn't shaved in days. His expression contorted from facial paralysis, his robe reeking of pungent medicinal smells. But at the same time, there was something vibrant about his grandfather. "Can we start with an easy one, rabbi?"

Abe's use of the word in place of grandpapa took Hillel by surprise. He gave Debora a look which said he knew now that he did not need to test this boy, but they had come this far. "How much is 3 times 27?"

"81."

"32 times 54?"

“One thousand seven hundred and twenty eight,” As Abe spoke, he paced the floor like a small man on a mission.”

“675 times 4,240?”

Abe walked to his grandfather’s desk, as Hillel furiously wrote these numbers on his pad. Rolling his eyes, Abe spoke. “Two, eight, six, two, oh, oh, oh, he said emphatically. “May I have this?” Abe had picked up a small magnifying glass.

“Of course, Abe, of course. But I want you to do something. Can you describe this entire room to me?”

Abe circled the room. He described the many books in the bookcase, the large casement window with the southern exposure with the sun streaming through, the Oriental rug worn more from use near the door, the big leather chair where the rabbi sat and hospital bed. When he had finished, Hillel spoke again. “I want you to do me another favor, Abe.”

“And what is that, grandpapa?” Abe stood with legs spread apart, his arms folded in front of his chest.

“I want you to describe me and remember this day for the rest of your life.”

“I could only do such a thing if papa were in the room with me.”

Hillel looked down at the small boy. They traded expressions. The look of pride he had for his grandson vanished. “Leave!” Hillel commanded.

Simon interrupted. “Debora, take Abe with you to the car and wait for me.” He spoke with such fortitude, she hushed the little boy away.

When they had left, Simon turned to face his father. “Papa, you have been a rabbi for over half a century, and yet, here you are, a month from your maker, and you have learned nothing!”

“You will not speak to me like that!”

“All I ever wanted from you was one tiny ounce of the love you showered onto Elias. Instead, you crush my hand like I’m eight years old so that it still hurts.”

“You always were a little *fagalah*.”

“So that is what this is about. You are so unsure of your manhood, even now you have to dominate and sour your relationship with your only grandson.”

“His father is dead to me. How could he, how could any Jew abandon their Judaism?”

“Charity begins at home,” Simon said.

Hillel placed his almost dead hand on the arm-rest and used his good arm, struggling to get up. The dutiful son rushed to his side.

“Take me to the window. Open it.”

Simon tried to raise it but couldn't. Having propped his body against the wall, the old man with his good arm, pushed it open with a mighty shove.

Elias, with his wife and son beside him, looked up as Hillel looked down. Their eyes locked.

“Brecht zich a ring, tsefalt di gantseh kait,” Hillel shouted down. Stumbling for a moment, he moved back towards his seat, Tante Della appeared and helped him. “Send him up,” he said collapsing into the chair.

Simon motioned with his arm. But Elias stood fast.

“It's all right, papa,” The little boy said, pulling his father towards the house. “Grandpapa wants us to come up.”

“One link snaps and the whole chain falls apart,” Elias repeated his father's utterance in a low voice. “Honey, I don't know what to do.”

“You will never forgive yourself if you stay down here. It was your son who made this happen.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I would remember this day always if grandpapa saw you, papa.”

Elias grabbed his son's hand and entered the house with Debora holding the boy's other hand. Taking a deep breath, he entered his father's room.

Hillel looked into his son's eyes.

“Debora, bring the boy here.” Hillel said, “You are at three years old, already a wise man. Promise me one thing.”

“What is that, grandpapa?”

“That you will grow up to be a good Jew.”

“I promise.”

“Do you hear that Ellie? Do you hear that!” Hillel proclaimed. “Say it once more and then give me a kiss.”

“I will be a good Jew, grandpapa.”

“And you will remember this day always.”

“I will remember always.”

Hillel scooped the boy up once again and gave him a long kiss as he hugged him close.

Little Abe felt he could sense the very presence and vibrations of his ancestors going back centuries, so strong was the force that his grandfather emanated. “God is inside us, my grandson,” Hillel whispered. “Inside us all, including your papa.”

“God, here? Where, grandpapa?”

“All around. Isn’t that so, Della?”

“Of course, rabbi. God is everywhere.”

“Now, take them down and send Simon in to stand beside his brother.”

“You are smart for a businessman, Ellie. But on the inside, you are bankrupt. You think you can run your little empire without God?”

“How many times must I go over this with you. Jews cannot own land in greater Germany. They cannot hold office. They live on the periphery of society.”

“Simon,” Hillel said, “tell him.”

“Tell me what?”

“Papa thinks we should move.”

“Move, are you mad? My whole life, over fifteen years of building up my business, is back there in southern Bavaria. That is my home. And where do you expect me to move? To here, Austria? which is a little better than Germany!”

“The Danes welcome the Jews, and they have many of the best manufacturing plants in all of Europe. Or go to Belgium, or London. There is a deep ugliness in the Kaiser and his anti Jewish rhetoric. It can come to no good, Elias.”

“You just don’t understand. I am not like you,” Elias countered, a haughtiness entering his argument.

“How can you so lightly dismiss 3,000 years of tradition? We are a blessed people. I want you to pray with me. Stay for Shabbis. God will forgive you if only you ask him back into your heart.”

“It wasn’t God who gave me the loan to start my business, papa.”

“Twist it any way you want, Elias. You trade your soul for a pot of kopeks. But are you any happier? NO! You are miserable. A miserable small man. I grieve for you.” Something switched in Hillel’s brain. “Now be off.” He dismissed Elias with the flick of his wrist. “Simon, you stay.”

“But papa,” Elias reached out.

“I told your aunt I would try, but you are dead to me. I will never lay my eyes on you again.”

Dramatically, Hillel shielded his eyes with the back of his hand. Elias dropped his head and walked out.

“I can’t be in the middle of this, papa. He is my brother and my business partner.”

“Business partner, my *tuchis*,” Hillel said disdainfully to the younger son. “You have such an agreement in writing?”

“No, but....”

“No, but what? My eldest son turns his back on God, and worse, turns his back on blood. You get a contract in writing giving you a piece of his new plant. Do you hear me, Simon?” Hillel paused for a response.

“Yes, papa.”

“In writing. Any man who denies God will sacrifice his brother. Now give me a kiss and return with a signed document so I can see with my own eyes that this old man can be wrong. You do that, and I’ll stop saying Kaddish for my other son.”

Hillel lumbered over to the window. Struggling with his good arm, he raised it even higher and surveyed his property. Eying his older son, shielding the sun from his eyes with his good arm, he shouted down to the car, his words bellowing out the driveway and out along the street. “*Yisgadal, va yisga dash, mei rabon*,” the prayer for the dead. Staring dumbfounded up at the window, Elias put his hands on his ears to block out the verse that every Jew, even those that had converted, knew by heart. And so, the

Yisgadal continued to ring in his ears until he donned a yarmulke and verbalized the prayer two months later at his father's funeral.

The Rabbi is a short story, part of a two-book saga entitled *Doppelgänger* and its sequel, *Crystal Night*. Both books have a modern story following ace reporter Rudy Styne, who on the trail of a computer hacker runs into his look-alike while in Germany. This will tie Rudy to the back-story covered in part herein. Elias Maxwell owns a small elite airline in southern Bavaria and his brother, Simon is their ace mechanic. In *Doppelgänger*, we follow Simon as he joins the Luftwaffe to fly and fight with the Red Baron during WWI and in *Crystal Night*, we see how the Maxwell family struggles to keep their airline and stay alive with the rise of the Nazis during WWII. And in both stories, as Rudy tries to uncover a powerful master computer hacker seeking to take over the Internet, he also tries to discover his link to this Maxwell family.

A retired Psychology teacher from Roger Williams University, Dr. Seifer has been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Scientific American*. With lectures at West Point Military Academy, LucasFilms and the United Nations, he has appeared on NPR All Things Considered, Coast to Coast Radio, the BBC and American Experience and in the 5-part miniseries *The Tesla Files*. Author of The Rudy Styne Quadrilogy, he is also the author of *Wizard: The Life & Times of Nikola Tesla* and its sequel, *Tesla: Wizard at War*. Translated into 9 languages *Wizard* is "Highly Recommended" by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. For more info go to MarcSeifer.com.