

Excerpt from

Rowing to Canaan

A full-length play

By

Wayne Peter Liebman

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liebmanw@dogearplays.org

Cast of Characters

<u>Alex</u>	A laborer in his twenties. Orthodox.
<u>Deborah</u>	A cantor's daughter, twenties. Studies law.
<u>Beck</u>	A laborer in his twenties. An athlete.
<u>Gaby</u>	Daughter of a landowner. Twenties.
<u>Wolf</u>	A merchant's son. A musician. Twenties.
<u>Helen</u>	A journalist in her twenties.

Scene

A cabin in the Carpathian mountains, Galicia, Poland.

Time

July, 1934. A year after Hitler has come to power in Germany.

Notes

Language and appearance: All the characters are Poles. Except for Gaby they are Jews, and belong to Hashomer Hatsair (the Young Guard), a Zionist/Socialist youth organization. They speak without accent except for Gaby, whose subtle lilt indicates a more refined Polish. Gaby wears expensive, store-bought clothes; everyone else dresses in hand-me-downs.

Music: The actors sing folk songs; trained voices are unnecessary. Although the songs may be sung without accompaniment, ideally, one actor plays a musical instrument. The script designates Wolf but another character may substitute and the dialogue be modified accordingly.

Phylacteries (Hebrew-t'fillin): Used by Alex. A small leathern box containing four texts of Scripture, written in Hebrew letters on vellum and worn by orthodox Jews during morning prayer as a reminder of the obligation to keep the law. (Deut. xi. 18: "You shall bind them [my words] for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.")

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING: Poland. Summer, 1934. A slatted-wood cabin in a forest. The side walls taper to the floor as they join an invisible fourth wall half-way downstage, in front of which is a playing area with a fire pit and log bench. The cabin is spare and stark, an eerie premonition of a concentration camp dormitory. A window is broken; a mattress leans against the back wall. Three wood bunk-beds stand upstage center. As the audience take their seats, recorded songs from the Yiddish theater play. The recording is scratchy, as from an old gramophone.

AT RISE: SOUND: The pre-show music lingers in the darkness a moment after the house LIGHTS fade, then is drowned by a whistle and the sound of a train. Silence. Footsteps. A match is struck. ALEX, in phylacteries, skullcap and prayer shawl, lights a candle, his gestures graceful and stylized. HE reads from a prayer book, moving his lips silently, then begins to whisper in Hebrew, his voice slowly becoming more distinct. LIGHT fades up in the cabin until, when his monologue is done, it is day.

ALEX

(whispered)

L'ma-AN TEES-k'ru VA-AH-see-TEM et KOL meetz-vo-TAI.

(Full voiced. The kh sound is a soft guttural.)

V'hee-y'TEM k'doh-SHEEM l'low-KHAY-khem. Ah-NEE ado-NAI e'loh-KHAY-khem. Em-ET.

(HE removes his shawl, leaving the phylacteries on his arm. HE wears slacks and a white shirt with prayer fringes underneath.)

ALEX(cont'd)
 Not a saint or holy man, ALEX
 conducts his offices, as his
 life, with a serene
 stubbornness. HE rehearses the
 following:)

When God brought the children of Israel, after forty years
 wandering, to the land of Canaan, he gave Moses this prayer.
 Moses gave it to the sages, the sages gave it to the rabbis,
 and my rabbi gave it to me. That's good. I like that. The
 prayer commands me "to love God with all my might," and to
 keep this pledge "upon my heart." But because I'm human and I
 forget,

(HE holds up his arm with
 phylacteries.)

I must tie a reminder on my arm. Apparently God does not want
 me to lose sight of him for even a moment.

(HE considers.)

But this phrase "upon my heart" nags at me. Shouldn't I keep
 the prayer in my heart, where it will do the most good? Why
 does God ask me, merely, to keep it upon my heart?

(HE considers.)

This is what I think: Like finding the promised land, it's no
 easy thing to open your heart. Perhaps your heart hides a
 terrible secret--as mine does. No. That's too much. Perhaps
 your heart hides a secret and even God cannot force the
 latch. Yes. That's better. So the most I can manage is to
 surround myself with the thought of love, keep it pressed as
 close to my heart as possible. And hope that one day--who can
 say when?--my heart will split open, and then the prayer can
 enter.

(ALEX listens. Footsteps
 outside the cabin. Female
 voices. HE panics and pulls
 off the phylacteries, conceals
 HIMSELF with his paraphernalia
 behind the mattress. Laughter
 offstage. HELEN appears
 outside the cabin wearing
 shorts and a blouse. SHE
 carries a bedroll and knapsack
 and radiates an infectious
 energy. A realist, her style
 is forward, direct, abrupt--
 even rude. Words, especially
 opinions, tumble out
 uncensored and therefore may
 seem cynical; underneath:
 great heart. SHE bangs on the
 door.

HELEN

Yuhoo! Hallo?

(No answer.)

HELEN(cont'd)
SHE calls behind HERSELF.)
I don't think they're here yet.
(SHE opens the door.)
At least this one has a door. Beck! Wolf! Alex!

(GABY appears in slacks and an expensive blouse. SHE'S out of breath. Idealistic, naive, and eager to please, she's more tentative and proper--and prettier--than HELEN. SHE struggles with her bedroll and knapsack.)

GABY
Helen, aren't they here?

HELEN
No. They're off someplace, as usual.

GABY
How far have we come?

HELEN
From the other cabin? I'd say half a mile. You can't be tired.

GABY
Perhaps we ought to wait. It smells moldy in there.

HELEN
I'm so used to it I can't tell.
(SHE goes in.)
You want to stay in the other cabin and have a bear climb in your bed in the middle of the night?
(GABY follows.)

GABY
You're teasing again.

HELEN
Gaby, did you see a bear or not?

GABY
It was a bear.

HELEN
Where's Deborah?

GABY
She went through the meadow.

HELEN

Gottenyu! I didn't think they had bears in these mountains. What a place to rehearse. Look at this dust. Pff!

GABY

It was black. A black bear.

(HELEN steps on broken window glass.)

HELEN

We have to clean up the glass.

GABY

This floorboard's loose.

HELEN

At least it's a floor. God, I'm tired. All day for this. We could have used the camp in Tarnopol. Dirt floors, but definitely no bears. Why does Beck always have to have a new camp? Is there even a telephone anywhere?

GABY

There were wires coming from the farmhouse we passed.

HELEN

That mattress. It's the only one?

GABY

I saw some outside in back. Helen, we're not really going to sleep in the cabin with the men--

HELEN

Nebekh, we'll do what we need. You know what I mean?

(THEY converse as THEY brush the glass up, haul the mattresses in and throw them on the bunks.)

GABY

You mean I'm the new kid.

HELEN

So how's the Hebrew? Show me.

GABY

(reciting)

Kometz aleph: aw.

(HELEN nods.)

Kometz bays: baw.

(HELEN nods.)

GABY(cont'd)

Kometz gimel: gaw.

(HELEN nods.)

HELEN

Not bad. Keep it up you'll give Deborah a run for her money.

GABY

The rebbe's not terribly encouraging.

HELEN

Oh, he'll stretch it out as long as he can. That son of a bitch probably wants in your pants. Tear off a piece of shiksa tukhes while he can!

(SHE pinches GABY.)

GABY

Helen, stop! You're appalling!

HELEN

Look at you, Gaby. I know men.

GABY

And you want to sleep in a cabin with them?

HELEN

These are boys.

GABY

Not Beck!

HELEN

What's Beck?

GABY

A lion.

HELEN

Ha! Always pawing!

GABY

No! Beck's wonderful! He's gentle and--

HELEN

(embarrassed)

I shouldn't speak about your future husband.

(a beat)

GABY

It's all right... I'm glad we're getting a chance to talk. It's so wonderful everyone decided to come. Everything is still new for me. Deborah seems so... serious. I never know what to say to her.

HELEN

Because she's quiet?

GABY

My background is so different.

HELEN

So your clothes come from a store. That's a nice blouse by the way.

GABY

I don't want to say the wrong things.

HELEN

Look. One thing about being a Jew. It gives you license to say what you want.

GABY

Beck says in the new land everyone will say what he feels.

HELEN

Beck says a lot of things. We have to get to the new land first.

GABY

You think I'm very frivolous don't you?

(a beat)

HELEN

I think you're very beautiful and intelligent. What you're walking into, I think you have no idea. Why anyone would want to become--no. I understand why. If it matters, I think you must love Beck very much.

(a beat)

A lot more than I did. And you're better for him.

GABY

Why do you say that?

HELEN

A home I need, not a boxing ring.

GABY

I don't under--

HELEN

It's a joke. You don't fight with Beck?

GABY

No. I suppose that's bad, isn't it? But what about Wolf? What's it like with him?

HELEN

Wolf listens. Such a novelty.

(DEBORAH enters, bedroll under an arm. SHE wears a skirt and sweater, her hair pinned up with combs. Her usually reserved nature hides a deep well of spirit and intellect. At the moment, SHE'S flushed, nearly giddy. SHE holds flowers.)

HELEN

Deborah! I was beginning to worry. You're picking flowers now?

DEBORAH

Oh, Helen. It's so beautiful here! Yes, look how pretty. I don't know what they are.

HELEN

You should leave your father's library more often. I worry about you shut in all day.

GABY

May I?

(SHE sniffs.)

Mmm. Strong.

HELEN

Better than mold.

DEBORAH

Should we put them in water? ... I'm so glad to be out of the city! Summer's so hot and oppressive, such a weight. I had a dream last night. A hundred men and women were building a synagogue in the desert. What do you think of that?

HELEN

I hope it had indoor plumbing.

(off DEBORAH'S look:)

And steam heat. That would be good.

DEBORAH

You laugh--

HELEN

Deborah, what's got in to you? Gaby and I were just talking about your being a sphinx. Now you've turned into a magpie.

GABY

It's a sublime dream. "Dawn on dove's wings sets the world ablaze, poppy red."

DEBORAH

(to HELEN)

There, you see? This one

(meaning GABY)

has a soul. She reads. I don't care what you say. It's been so long since we've all been together like this. I feel young again, like a child. I want poetry. Take a breath, Helen. What a place to get ready for Gruenwald! The air's so clear you can almost see Palestine.

(HELEN puts her hand to DEBORAH'S forehead, pretending to take her temperature.)

HELEN

(to GABY)

No fever. She's flushed, though. Make a note. The cantor's daughter is flushed.

DEBORAH

(SHE sings.)

THE SUN ON THE HILLTOPS NO LONGER IS SEEN.

(SHE dances, tries to entice HELEN, who resists. THEY laugh.)

COME GATHER TO WELCOME THE SABBATH, OUR QUEEN.

(ALEX, entranced, peeks from behind the mattress, unseen.)

BEHOLD HER DESCENDING, THE HOLY, THE BLEST.

AND WITH HER THE ANGELS OF PEACE AND REST.

GABY

What's that?

DEBORAH

(to HELEN)

Why don't you sing? You know you loved this song. Why are you pretending not to?

HELEN

It's for another time.

GABY

Beautiful.

DEBORAH

(to GABY)

It was from a camp in Lublin. Seven years ago when we all joined the Hashomer. Wolf had a crush on her.

HELEN

Leave Wolf out of it. It's sentimental. All sentimentality--

DEBORAH

Is repressed brutality.

(to GABY)

Freud. Her favorite saying. Especially when she's feeling nostalgic.

HELEN

(to GABY)

There must be a man behind this.

(ALEX hides again.)

DEBORAH

What if there is?

HELEN

I wonder who.

DEBORAH

Weren't you and Gaby talking about men when I came in?

HELEN

Let's gossip later, all right? We have work. We should unpack.

(SHE begins to lift the
mattress concealing ALEX.)

DEBORAH

Unpack? Isn't this the men's cabin?

HELEN

Not you too. Look, they're only men. You've seen one, you've seen--

(SHE sees ALEX and screams.)

Aaiiee! Gevalt!

ALEX

(getting up)

Sorry! A thousand pardons!

GABY

DEBORAH

My God!

Alex! What are
you--

HELEN

Klutz! Dumkop! Vilde mensch! What are you doing there?

ALEX

I-- I--

HELEN

What! Say something!

ALEX

(terrified)

I thought it was the men's cabin.

HELEN

It is the men's cabin! Why are you sneaking about?

ALEX

A monologue. I was working on--

HELEN

Why didn't you say something? You scared us to death.

ALEX

I thought I'd come to the women's cabin.

HELEN

Ah Ha! So you--

ALEX

By mistake! By mistake!

HELEN

Then why hide? Wait--what's that you've got? A prayer book?
T'fillin?

ALEX

I was just--

HELEN

I know what you do with them.

(realizing)

You didn't want anyone to see! That's why you hid.

ALEX

I am familiar with your opinions about--

HELEN

My God. How long has this been going on?

(beat)

It was crazy to come.

DEBORAH

If we can't get along now what's going to happen in
Palestine?

HELEN

So you hide behind the bed? Are you a pervert?