

THE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Blur, fuzziness, haze. Jacob squinted into the distance aware of the irony. A man who earned his livelihood fitting people with eyeglasses refused to wear them himself. *Ach Quatsch*. But his eyes were only bad early morning, he reasoned. As weak light slowly seeped into the room they adjusted, focused, and now alighted upon his target. There. The white China chamber pot. He pulled it toward him, relieved himself with a satisfied flourish and slid the pot under the bed. Its pungent ammonia infused the room. Frieda would dispose of its contents when she returned home from the factory. He slipped into his woolen shirt and pulled on pants that exposed his right knee -- knobby, pale, and hairy. More work for Frieda.

Bare feet padding across the floor to the kitchen registered cool to the touch. Cool. Not frigid. A most propitious sign. In less than two weeks perhaps he could board the first of three trains. Within six days of travel-- such modernity! -- he would reach the endless expanse of grass-covered plains shimmering with fields of wheat and corn.

It was past time. The cupboards at home were nearly bare and there wasn't even enough coffee to eke out a small cup. He would have to make do with tea and some plain bread for breakfast. He hoped Joseph and Rosie had eaten better. Outside he heard the clip clop of horses, squeaking of carriage wheels and loud cries in accented English. In Kansas one could traverse for tens of miles without hearing a sound except for the wind.

"Coffee boiler, linens, stove polish, hair vigor," a raspy voice yelled outside. "Coffee boiler, linens, stove polish, hair vigor."

To consider that was once him. He had no sooner left Germany and stepped foot onto American soil than he was lugging a 100-pound pack throughout these streets. Dodging horse dung, the contents of cleaning buckets and privy pots, the spittle of gentlemen. Inhaling dust and

gritting through rain, snow, and piercing sun. Enduring slammed doors, rude comments, children's pranks.

When he would be invited inside he presented his varied wares, praising their qualities as if they were his own two children. He swept his hands over bolts of cotton and held watches to dubious ears so they could hear the steady ticking. He counted the proffered money and doled out the change. And then he swept up all the remaining items back into the bag, picked it up and set out again. Ten, sometimes 12 hours day. Every day but Saturday. He was no religious man. But everyone needed a day off.

Now he was someone different. Out West he was known as Professor Kolb, the purveyor not of needles or hair tonic, but of sight. No matter that he hadn't been in school past age 14. The farmers and cattlemen in Abilene and Wichita were dazzled by a fancy title. And his successes were real enough. That old woman wept that she couldn't read her bible. He sold her a pair of Pince-nez and she found her Good News. He outfitted a small boy with blue-steeled frames so he could see the blackboard, thinking of how his Joseph was top of his class. He diagnosed a young mother with flaxen hair and big blue eyes that were red and itchy with Visoniatis, the term he used when in doubt. He sold her a "special tonic" which was water mixed with soap and instructed her to rub it gently under her eye. She dubbed him a miracle worker.

Each night he dropped coins and folded bills into his leather belt and treated himself to a fatty steak and beer, although now he'd have to make do with coffee or water as Kansas had, sadly, gone dry. The locals' talk was always the same: this year's crops and Jesse James. The outlaw, who hailed from neighboring Missouri, was a source of local pride verging on idolatry. Several men claimed to have seen James rob the safes on train and rain dollar bills upon passengers before fleeing. *Ach Quatsch*. No one dispensed with hard-earned riches so easily. Still

one had to admire the way James outwitted the Pinkertons again and again. There was a \$10,000 bounty on his head and still he eluded death.

When the cold front moved in and stagecoaches risked being tossed up on the windy roads like children's toys, Jacob retreated home to Manhattan. He ripped off the money belt and let the contents spill out onto the floor feeling like Jesse James himself. He bestowed upon Joseph and Rosie a penny apiece and smiled as they rushed out to buy liquorice and chocolate-covered cherries. Frieda claimed a share and headed for the grocer. Soon the kitchen smelled of fatty beef and sauerkraut.

His household bobbed in this sea of domestic bliss. Until the belt slowly flattened. There was no work in New York for Prof. Kolb. The optometry field was saturated, and he wouldn't demean himself by going back to peddling. So they subsisted on Frieda's earning and increasingly those of his 14-year-old son. This latter realization was like bile in his mouth.

When he returned home last year and learned that Joseph working part-time in a pharmacy he had spewed a deluge of German curse words to Frieda. Didn't she understand? All of Joseph's time needed to be studying. Every single precious hour. He should see no friends, sleep no more than five hours, and work no job. Joseph was going to attend medical school. At Columbia University most likely. He would stand side by side with other esteemed students and learn the mysteries of the human body. His son would be Dr. Kolb, a surgeon perhaps. Because what is a surgeon? A man who is second only to God as some said. No, a surgeon was better than God, because he was real. His son would never lack for coffee or meat or be looked down upon. He would be summoned by the richest of the rich for his special powers. Him. Dr. J. Kolb.

He rubbed his eyes. Yes, Joseph must quit that pharmacy. True, they needed his wages. But they would have to make do without it. That was all there was to it. Jacob took his cup of tea

and bread to the small wooden table in the main room. Here was where the family consumed their meals, the children completed homework under his watchful eye, and Frieda sewed to earn extra money.

In a corner stood the small upright piano where Rosie, his little one, practiced. Ah, Rosie. She, with her fair curls and big smile, would become a concert pianist, he had decided. He envisioned her performing Chopin, Mozart, and Brahms while he sat in a velvet dinner jacket imbibing all the applause. She would perform to bigger and bigger crowds or attract the attention of a wealthy suitor. Her playing was, admittedly, rough. She must overcome her laziness and practice more. Until then, he would continue tying her to the piano seat for two hours, a most ingenious idea. She had squirmed and cried at first, but then her hands slid over the keys. He hoped that Frieda also forced her to practice when he was away. But he suspected she didn't.

Frieda. There were many reasons why Jacob left Germany. One was the law which required any Jewish man who sought to marry to prove that he was employed in an "respectable" trade or profession and to pay an astronomical fee. This would have ensured he remained a bachelor for many years, if not permanently. And that was no kind of life. A few months after arriving in America, he had met and married Frieda, also an immigrant from Germany. She kept a decent home and had the skill of making any worn item of clothing look new. But like many women she had limited imagination or sense of the future. All she focused on was the present.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Someone was knocking on the front door. Should he open it? Last night, Frieda said that Mrs. Piaggi complained that they were once again late with the rent. That stupid Italian landlady with her bad breath, six children and talk of Jesus this and Jesus. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* The knocking continued sharper and faster.

"Hello, anyone home?" The voice was male, American-accented.

Jacob pried open the door a crack. In the darkness of the stairwell stood a tall and reedy young man in an ill-fitting brown suit. His face was red and sweating despite the cold. By his foot were several weighty satchels which he had carried up these four flights of stairs. He was clearly a peddler of sorts. But there was something odd about the heft of those satchels. They were not the usual mish mash of items that protruded into the fabric at different angles. No, they were uniformly stacked as if they contained bricks. But he wasn't dressed like that kind of salesman.

"Good afternoon, Sir. It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Almost Spring, yes?" The man spoke fast.

"What do you want?" Jacob demanded.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Edward Smith. May I present my business card?"

He proffered a small card printed with such small letters that Jacob didn't even attempt to read it.

"*Ja, Ja.* What is your business?"

"My business is to enlighten minds and offer the secrets of the world."

A sales pitch, but different from the ones he made. You didn't convince women to buy cloth or cutlery by appealing to their mind. He opened the door wider. Why not. He had little to do today before the children returned home. He might show a little empathy, even tender a tactical suggestion to the peddler.

Smith entered the apartment and nudged along the bags as if they were a pack of small dogs. They stood in the living room. Jacob awkwardly motioned to a chair.

"Yes, thank you very much," Smith said. "And to whom do I have the pleasure of meeting."

“Prof Kolb.”

“Ah Prof. Kolb, what an honor to meet a learned man. Learning of your esteemed title, I feel now our meeting was fated. Because what I have to offer you will be most prized by someone of your high caliber.”

He opened the top of the bag with an exaggerated flourish. Jacob saw that the contents were oversized books. On the front was written “Chalmers Encyclopedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People.”

He had heard here and there of men who sold these book collections, although he didn’t know anyone who owned a set. They were known to be prohibitively expensive and hence not the usual merchandise popular in this neighborhood.

“Would you like to see closer?” Smith asked.

Smith didn’t wait for an answer but extended to Jacob the top book on the stack. Its weight demanded one’s attention and respect. The pages were thin like onion skins and smelled like fresh laundry. Each page was filled with hundreds and hundreds of words. He couldn’t read any of it. The print was too small and his reading in English too limited. But he could enjoy the many beautiful illustrations: A coursing river, dark-skinned men naked except for small pieces of fabric tied around their private areas; oversized, hairy unidentifiable animals. It felt like holding a small chunk of the world.

“Do you Professor?” Smith asked.

“Do I?” He had been so engrossed in those pages he had failed to realize Smith had asked him a question.

“I was asking whether you were blessed with children?”

“Yes, two children. A boy and a girl.”

“How perfect. And I am sure their education means everything to you.”

“*Ja*, I supervise them myself.”

“Of course. Education comes from the father and to have a professor as your father. What a gift. Imagine then how these encyclopedias could further your children’s education.”

It was easy to imagine Joseph reading the entire set and becoming expert in the many facts that would elevate him above most men. He had seen his father engrossed in religious texts, but what had such study accomplished? It had not prevented the rules preventing Jews from professions and marriage. In America, the wisdom from books translated into power and prestige. He surveyed the profusion of the bags.

“How many books are there?”

“An excellent question. There are ten volumes, a total of 8,320 pages, and over 27,000 articles from over 100 authors. There are also 10,000 illustrations, multiple fold-out maps, and tables. Here is information about all the world’s countries, the entirety of the animal and floral kingdoms and the planets above us, to name but a few.”

The number of men and years it must have taken to produce such an undertaking.

“You are an immigrant, is that correct Sir?” Smith asked.

“Yes.”

“From which country do you hail, if I may be so bold to ask?”

“Germany.”

“I thought so. Then you would certainly be interested to know that these encyclopedias are partly based on a translation into English of the 10th edition of the *Konversations-Lexikon*, excuse my pronunciation. You hail from a most cultured nation.”

He was being flattered, but the salesman was not wrong. Germany was not a nation for Jews seeking opportunity, but certainly a cultured nation.

“How much for all these... en..cyc..lo..pedias?” Jacob enunciated the last word slowly to avoid mispronunciation.

“Ah. I have a special price for you because you are an educated man and lover of books. A price that I only offer to those who will appreciate these treasuries and use them as they were intended. Here is the price. It’s extraordinarily little, don’t you think, for being offered the world?”

The salesman handed Jacob a slip of paper. It was an amount equivalent to what they spent every two months on food, rent and clothing. The rent was due and they needed money for groceries. But these encyclopedias. They were also sustenance that would make these children grow stronger.

“May I see another?” Jacob pointed to the open bag.

“Please, Sir.”

He picked up the next volume. It felt solid and heavy in his hand. He turned the pages to find illustrations of bats, the map of a country, musical scales – which would be of interest to Rosie. He thought of the farmers and cattleman out West whom he had helped see. Aside from the bible they would never read anything because they never desired to know more than their small world. They invested little in their future generations, pulling their children out of school when they were less than ten. What was the point of striving for something if you didn’t enable your children to do better than you had?

“For this low price you would be almost stealing this from me,” Smith said. “But I will be content in the knowledge that I have aided such an esteemed professor in cultivating the passions of the mind.”

He rubbed his eyes. He had the money. That was the maddening part. He had earned all the bills and coins which were carefully folded in the almost flattened leather satchel kept hidden under the mattress. They were his to determine how to use. His.

“Bear grease,” a peddler shouted outside. “Get your hair back with this magical product.”

He had once sold this product himself to men who feared going bald. It was an easy sell because of its cheap price and appeal to vanity. But how could such a frivolous product compare with these encyclopedias? He felt Smith prying the volume out of his hands and replacing it in the bag.

“My good Sir it has been an honor but seeing as you do not wish this special offer I will take my leave --.”

“No. One moment. I give you the money.”

He went to the bedroom and lifted the mattress. The smell of the chamber pot made him gag as he reached for the leather belt. The belt had come with him to America. Then it had been empty, except for the address of the pub his sister and brother-in-law owned. After alighting from the ship, he had gone there and they had drawn him a beer but made him move some heavy boxes to pay for it.

“In America, there is opportunity, but you must work for it,” his sister said.

He opened the money belt and shook out the remaining coins.

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“Did you know, papa, that the Amanita, a genus of Fungi, can be found in woods, especially of fir and beech, in Britain and one of the world’s most dangerous fungi? Or that the Aborigines were the earliest inhabitants of Australia? The Roman and Greek historians, however, apply the name to a special people who, according to tradition, had their original seats in the mountains about Reate, now Rieti, but, being driven out by the Sabines, descended into Latium.”

Joseph sat at the table with the “A” volume from the encyclopedia propped on his laps dispensing forth like a proper professor. Rosie banged out a discordant tune.

“No I didn’t know that Joseph,” he exclaimed. “That is most interesting.”

It had started. That first day after Mr. Smith left with his empty bags, Joseph came home from school and headed straight for the first volume. Rosie was also eager to read them. And Jacob hadn’t told anyone, but he even planned himself to try to read them. He would equip himself with a pair of Pince-nez and work his way throughout the entire set, as much as he could.

The books were stacked on a bolt of cloth laid in a corner of the living room, because there was no other place else to put them. Jacob dusted them himself daily and picked them up one by one when Frieda washed the floor and laid them back down when she was finished, first ensuring the surface was completely dry. When he returned from his next trip out West, he would purchase the supplies for a proper shelf. Eventually, the apartment would be filled with books and he would be a retired man of leisure who spent all his days reading.

Frieda didn’t speak to him much these days or even look at him. If only her English was good enough to read the encyclopedias. That would make her change her mind. But all she could talk about was how much they owed at the grocer or that Rosie had outgrown her shoes. He rubbed his eyes.

“It’s starting to warm up,” he said to her. “I can feel it.”

The next day, they awoke to several feet of snow blanketing the city which brought down power lines and paralyzed all movement. Some of Joseph’s friends, several of whom had quit school to work, arrived and tried to lure him out for a snowball fight. Joseph had been eager to go, but Jacob had shut the door on them and told his son not to let the snow interrupt his studies and reading.

It was still cold a week later when Jacob finally left. He could no longer look at Frieda’s downcast face and those bare cupboards. He could no longer eat the watery and tasteless soups. He would take his chances out West.

The prairie wind howled, snorted, ripped, and tore up the ground. It penetrated past his woolen long underwear and down the length of his gloved fingers so he could barely move them. The stage coachmen demanded extra because of the inclement weather, as did the inn keeper for displaying his poster announcing where he was available for fittings and treatment. He trudged on, toting his valises heavy with frames, lens, screwdrivers, and vials through towns that hadn’t even existed ten years ago: Bavaria, Ellsworth, Bunker Hill, and Ellis. He spoke German with some of the newcomers and tried to convince young women that wearing glasses wouldn’t diminish their marriage prospects. He walked through fields pungent with manure to farmhands milking cows with reddened bare hands, one of whose eyes were as red as his hands and oozing puss.

The weather grew warmer and the money belt slowly fattened. But business was still slower than previous years. A disease rippled through the cattle herds resulting in widespread financial losses. And one day the stagecoach in which he was riding was surrounded by a herd of stampeding buffalo. Fortunately, the driver had a shotgun handy.

In April, when the sun's heat felt like a mother's warm touch, all anyone could talk about was the news of Jesse James's death. The outlaw, who had always seemed invincible, had finally been shot and killed in his home as he turned his back to clean a picture over the mantelpiece. The assailants were two brothers who were new recruits to the gang who had betrayed him for money. The newspapers were jubilant, but locals cried, as if James were an upstanding citizen rather than a wanted outlaw. *Ach Quatsch*.

Spring was replaced by summer with intense heat that was just as brutal as the cold. He sweated through his suits and was kept up nights scratching the red welts from mosquito bites. He missed his children. His constant movement made receiving mail impossible, although he wrote them in his simple English to remind them to study hard and to make sure to dust the encyclopedias. He worried that no sooner had he left than Frieda sold them so she could buy a chicken for dinner or new shoes for Rosie. Would she dare? He imagined her gleefully plucking them from their resting place and stuffing them into a bag, which he felt she often wished to do to him.

In September, the temperature dipped but was replaced by dust storms, a flying dervish of muck that made roads difficult to traverse and turned his face and clothes sooty. He was forever wiping clean the lens. Then the trees slowly shed their leaves and the winds once again rippled, whistled, and howled. It was time to return home.

On the first leg of the Kansas Pacific Line, he overheard a farmer clad in overalls and stinking of manure talking with a young boy, likely his young son, about Jesse James.

“Don't you worry, son, he's still alive somewhere out there,” the farmer said. “It was all a fake shooting so he could get out of the life of crime. Mark my words, he's living safe somewhere with his wife and children.”

Ach Quatsch. He was relieved that his own son was exposed to hard facts and not fairy tales. He changed trains in Kansas City and then again in Chicago, arriving the next day at midday in Manhattan. The hum and noise of the city felt refreshing after the quiet of the prairie. The apartment was quiet, but he immediately smelled eggs and butter which both delighted and terrified him. He rubbed his eyes as he sought out the familiar furnishings: Rosie's piano, Frieda's sewing machine, and then there they were: The encyclopedias lined up like obedient children in school, their covers glistening. He was flooded by relief. How he had misjudged his Frieda.

He left his packed bag and walked the few blocks to Joseph's school, delighting in the crowded streets of the nation's most important city. He was eager to catch up with his son, to hear about the test on which he had surely received an A and of the latest wisdom gleaned about faraway countries.

The schoolyard was filled with teenage boys and girls, lugging bags of books, and laughing or talking as they left for home. He didn't recognize any of them. Then he saw Mr. Miller, the principal, a serious-looking young man with an egg-shaped head and pronounced Adam's Apple. The principal approached him.

"Ah Mr. Kolb, it's good to see you. Please give my best to Joseph, we so miss him here. He was one of our most promising students."

"Joseph is not here?"

The principal touched his Adam's apple nervously.

"Surely you know. Joseph dropped out of school several weeks out."

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The anger pumped through his veins giving him energy. It was a long walk but Jacob took the steps quickly, pushing aside anyone who came into his path and rubbing his eyes. He would deal

with Frieda, the serpent, later. The door of the pharmacy jingled as he entered, a sound he found grating in its levity. It smelled of liquorice, glycerin and lemon. A fat, self-important-looking woman stood at the counter blocking his view. A flash of figure on the other side. It was his son, clad in a white smock like that of a butcher. Joseph handed the woman a small vial.

“Here, Mrs. Weiss, have your husband take this each morning for a week. He should feel much better soon.”

The fat woman had several inane questions, which his son answered while Jacob shifted his weight furiously from foot to foot. This couldn't be his son's future. He wouldn't allow it. It would stop. The boy was the just the victim of his mother's myopia. Joseph always said how much he loved school and that he wanted to become a doctor. Jacob would straighten out this entire mess.

Finally, the woman left and the bell jingled with her departure. Joseph met his father's eyes without a trace of surprise, as if they had just seen one another this morning.

“Hello father,” Joseph said, replacing a glass jar on the shelf behind him. “Did you have a pleasant trip home?”

“I was at your school, looking for you.”

Joseph said nothing.

“Just because your mother made you --”

“No! It wasn't her idea. She was against it. But I convinced her. We didn't have enough money for food or the rent.”

“You could have . . . you could have sold the encyclopedias.”

“Don't you think we tried that? No one would buy them.”

“And how do you intend to become a doctor if you don't go to school?”

“I won’t be able to become a doctor but I can become a pharmacist. Someday I can probably even take over this store. I’ll help people just the same way as if I were a doctor.”

No, not the same way at all. A pharmacist sold powders and tinctures, not much different than a peddler hawking Bear Grease or a pair of glasses. A doctor eased pain, delivered babies, saved lives. The infernal bell jangled again and an old man hobbled inside. Joseph greeted him by name and turned his back. His son consulted an over-sized book and began pouring powder and water into a mortar and pestle which he furiously worked. In his movements, Jacob saw his son age into a middle-aged man now tending his own pharmacy while he himself slid toward old age and eventual death. *Ach Quatsch*

The slam of the door was sharp against the jangle as he headed toward home. He picked up one of the encyclopedias. He had thought all this knowledge would save his son, instead it had ruined him. He burned with embarrassment, humiliation, and rage. He picked up the first volume and ran his hands over the cover. He wouldn’t even get to read this one, to taste that knowledge for himself.

He boarded the first train headed back out to Chicago. The car was filled mostly with men traveling alone, no doubt seeking their fortunes out West so they could provide for their families. His eyes burned as he closed them and fell into a deep sleep.

The train stopped, likely a derailment. When the train didn’t move for what seemed like a long time, Jacob threaded his way toward the front to see what was happening. It was dark but his vision was suddenly excellent. He could make out such details as the buttons on the dress of the fat woman he’d seen in the drugstore who was now counting pills in a vial. And there was Frieda, reading from a volume of the encyclopedias, and Rosie playing a perfect Mozart sonata on her piano which was perched on the tracks. Joseph was also there, walking along the tracks

carrying a black bag and then leaning over a man with a bloody leg who kept saying “Please help me Dr. Kolb.”

A group of masked men toting revolvers kept guard over the tracks. One baby-faced man with honey blond hair and blue eyes pressed his revolver against the back of a conductor, who looked like Mr. Miller, Joseph’s school principal. He understood that the man with the revolver was Jesse James. James marched his captive inside towards the safe. The conductor opened it. Inside were big stacks of \$100 Brown Backs covering the tops of the entire Chalmer’s encyclopedia collection. James took some of the money but left the rest.

“All yours,” he winked to Jacob. “Tell Joseph I want him as my doctor.”

James disappeared into a plume of smoke and Jacob moved toward the safe. There were thousands of dollars there, enough for a lifetime. The encyclopedias were also his, free of charge. Now he just had to get home with these treasuries. Somehow, he made it onto the train as it started up again slowly and then catching speed, continuing its Westward direction, away from the direction he wanted to go.