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The Golem of Bidosz

by

Mark Mellon

“Allah, Allah, Allah.”

The janissaries charged the ravelin in bright uniforms and turbans, armed with blades alone, eager to close with the hated Franks. Death in battle meant Paradise. The ravelin towered overhead, a palisaded mound of packed earth twenty feet high, bristling with cannon and musketry. Moufaz, a squad leader, jumped into the defensive ditch and scrambled up, his men close behind. In the face of steady musket fire, they ran up the slope, and tried to climb over the palisade’s sharpened logs.

“Come on,” Moufaz urged.

A soldier fired his musket through a gap in the palisade’s stakes. The heavy lead ball tore Moufaz almost in half. Tergiz thrust his long spear between the stakes and badly stabbed the soldier, only to be cruelly caught in the back by a hook on a long pole. Soldiers slowly dragged Tergiz to his own gory end under Habsburg daggers and spears.

All along the ravelin, musket volleys and cannon fire tore gaping holes in the janissaries’ ranks. Hurling glass grenades exploded. Razor sharp shards scattered everywhere, leaving awful wounds. Cannon fire from flanking bastions also took its toll. Despite horrific losses, the Sultan’s sworn men continued the assault. Had not Yilderim Pasha promised a hundred gold dirhams to the first man over the palisade? The general himself looked down from his bunker on a nearby ridge, a prominent goad to courage. Hennaed brilliant orange, phenomenally long mustachios quivered in the wind.

“Five days yet they keep coming,”

Lieutenant von Scala said, blue eyes bright under his crested helmet.

“Keep quiet,” Waldeck snapped.

From Bidosz’s ramparts, he watched Turks attack the ravelin. The walled city topped a jagged hill that dominated the Drava’s headwaters, a key location. Built by Hungarian nobility centuries before, the antiquated high walls were extensively refortified at great effort and expense by Bidosz’s new Habsburg masters to thwart another Ottoman invasion at the empire’s edge. Under an Italian military architect’s careful supervision, the city was encircled by low earthen ramparts, further reinforced with slope walled, stone bastions, and packed with individual strong points. Any siege must first penetrate the outer defenses where besiegers would be hemmed in and raked by intersecting fields of fire.

Waldeck scanned the Turkish lines through a spyglass. Tens of thousands went about their many tasks. Artillerymen pulled tremendous, long-barreled brass cannon forward to fire more rounds. Crimean Tartars darted about on swift ponies, bent on reconnaissance, forage, and pillage. And everywhere, engineers toiled. With artillery, they were the Ottomans’ real strength. Diligently bent over, trench diggers worked with pick and shovel. Earth flew behind them and the Turkish lines slowly encircled Bidosz like filaments of a spider’s web.

Waldeck handed the spyglass to Scala.

“See there?”

Just behind the trenches, two files popped in and out of sight. The line of men that disappeared was empty handed; the line that appeared heavily burdened.

“Those baskets of earth,” Scala said. “They’re digging a sap.”

“Exactly.”

“Let’s use cannon.”

“They’re out of range,” Waldeck said. “The

sap's twenty feet down. Turks know siegecraft. I saw them at Candia."

BADDOOOM

A furious gout of flames, brown dirt, and black smoke. The ravelin was obliterated. The explosion's awful report made even hardened soldiers like Waldeck flinch. Silver trumpets sounded the charge. More janissaries charged the shattered palisade, held in reserve until now, each with a sack of grenades. The ravelin's commander tried to rally the remaining men, but they were simply overwhelmed, blown to pieces where they stood. Janissaries ran to the ruined ravelin's highest point and planted horsetail banners.

"Allahu Akbar. God is great," they shouted. The cry was picked up instantly by every Turk on the battlefield. Their terrible, ululating wail drowned out even the cannons' roar.

"Allahu Akbar."

Jubilant, derisive exaltation resounded like thunder. Waldeck looked on in helpless horror. Only days into the siege and defenses designed to hold out for weeks, if not months, were already destroyed. Through the spyglass, Yilderim Pasha capered like a schoolboy, mustachios waving, heedless of age and position.

"Esterhazy needs to know," Waldeck said.

Scala's eyes were wide. He was breathing hard. Waldeck shook him.

"Hold out while I retrieve the situation," he said. "You're all right?"

Scala assumed a resolute look.

"Yes, Captain."

"Good," Waldeck said with a grin. "Call every man. I'll send the reserve. Strong points must hold out to the last man. Watch for night attacks. Keep them away from the walls."

Waldeck went down the ramparts to Bidosz's cobblestoned, winding streets. They were empty. The populace huddled in basements, undoubtedly shuddering at cannons' boom. Rather than flee and face capture and enslavement by Tartars, most had remained. He passed through the Jewish quarter, down a long

narrow street lined by shuttered shops where goldsmiths, jewelers, and moneychangers and lenders plied their trades.

"Gert."

A man darted from an alley. Thin but handsome, he wore the sober black garb, broad brimmed hat, and white stock of his tribe.

"Lurking, Judah?" Waldeck asked.

"I waited for you," Judah replied. "The rebbe said he'll see you."

Waldeck responded, "That's gracious of him. Tell him as soon as I see Count Esterhazy."

He ran to the town square. The cuirass dug into his chest, making it hard to breathe. Heavy armor plates crashed as he ran. Musketeers idled in the square, indifferent to the sounds of raging, steadily growing battle.

"Lieutenant," Waldeck barked, "Lead your company to the northern wall. The Turks have breached Ravelin Four."

"Sir."

Waldeck hustled into the Rathaus, Bidosz's town hall, appropriated as Esterhazy's headquarters. Under standing orders to let Waldeck pass, guards admitted him to the commander's chambers. Waldeck found him in a red silk robe, bent over a map.

"Your Excellency," Waldeck said, "The Turks have breached Ravelin Four."

Esterhazy jerked his head up.

"That's impossible. Whose fault is that? Yours?"

Esterhazy was red faced from drink. Waldeck kept calm.

"Your Excellency is correct. Nonetheless, something must be done."

"Where's the Duke of Lorraine?" Esterhazy demanded. "He should have relieved us by now. I sent out dispatch riders days ago."

"The riders were caught by Tartars and tortured to death, Your Excellency," Waldeck said. "The Duke of Lorraine needs every man to defend Vienna. Even if he knew, there's nothing he can do."

"What does the expert on siege warfare propose?" Esterhazy sneered.

“Your Excellency,” Waldeck said, “the Turks may soon breach the walls. The Zrinyi regiment stands idle. Ready them for a last sally.”

“With you in the lead, to certain death?” Esterhazy asked.

“Gladly.”

Esterhazy snapped his fingers said. “Done.” He reached for a bottle of wine and drank. “If there’s nothing else.”

“Your Excellency, one more thing. There’s a young scholar, Judah Zedok, I hired to teach me Greek.”

Esterhazy said, “Your pet Jew. There’s talk at the mess of your scholarly pretensions.”

“I admire Homer, Your Excellency,” Waldeck replied. “Zedok speaks well of his teacher, Sinai Loeb, the High Rabbi.”

“The so-called Jew scholar. What of it, Waldeck? By Mary, you tire me.”

“Zedok says Loeb has powers, the far sight and more.”

“Rubbish,” Esterhazy snapped. “The year of our Lord 1683, and you believe such childish nonsense. As if any good could come of any Jew.”

“The Turks are at the gates, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said. “We’ve no choice but to try anything that might stop them. If nothing else, it might help morale if the men think we’ve magic on our side.”

Esterhazy drank more wine.

“Do as you see fit, Captain,” he said. “On your head be it.”

“Exactly, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said. He left.

After ordering the Zrinyi regiment to stand to, Waldeck hurried to the Jewish Quarter. Humble wooden houses stood in neat rows. Turk artillery had drawn closer, near enough for massive marble cannon balls to land inside the walls. A sharp whistle warned Waldeck. He dove for cover. A cannon ball crushed a nearby house like rotten twigs smashed underfoot in the forest. There were low moans of pain from the ruins. Waldeck couldn’t help. He ran down the street.

Nervous and jumpy, Judah was still there, at his post like a soldier. He led Waldeck to a small house, indistinguishable from other dwellings that crowded the Quarter. Judah opened the door without knocking and motioned for Waldeck to follow.

“This is an honor,” he whispered. “The rebbe usually never sees anyone but students and family.”

They entered a low ceilinged room, lit by beeswax candles, walls covered by brilliantly patterned tapestries. Scrolls and codices were piled everywhere. An old man with an ornately embroidered, black silk skullcap sat on a red divan, cross-legged and stiff-backed, more like the husk of a dead locust than a human being. Age and asceticism had pared away his face until only a hawk nose and dark, slanted eyes remained prominent.

Judah bowed low and said, “Rebbe, this is the Gentile, Captain Gert Waldeck, a scholar-”

The rabbi raised a tremulous hand.

“I know, my son,” he said, barely audible over the siege’s din. “What would you, Gentile?”

Waldeck said, “Rabbi, Judah says you can work miracles. I’ve come to ask you for any help you can give.”

The old man faintly smiled.

“This is not the first time a Gentile has requested a favor. I have never agreed, despite threats or bribes,” the rabbi said. “Judah should have told you. I pay scant attention to the temporal world.”

“Rabbi,” Waldeck said. “Soon the Turks will break in. Yilderim Pasha has sworn no quarter, to put Bidosz to fire and sword. Jew or Christian, every man will be slain and women and children enslaved. As a man of God, will you not help?”

“It’s our duty,” Judah interjected.

“Don’t lecture me, my son,” the rabbi said. “Let me think.”

The rabbi sat with closed eyes, long silence punctuated by ragged volleys of cannon fire. By quivering candlelight (or perhaps due to

Waldeck's increasing exhaustion), the old man was invested with numinous light, surrounded by a halo. Waldeck blinked and blinked again. Still the rabbi seemed to hover above the divan, corporal body light and airy from contact with divinity.

At last he said, "The situation is dire. The Jews of Bidosz are threatened. I'd be less than upright in the Lord's eyes if I didn't act."

"Rabbi, my thanks," Waldeck said. "From now on, I am your friend and protector."

The rabbi smiled again.

"You're a good and true knight, Captain," he said. "Return to what you know while I do what I can."

"Send a messenger to the north wall if you need me."

Waldeck left.

The rabbi said to Judah in Yiddish, "Fetch Menachem and Avrom. Tell them hurry and bring what they need for worship."

"Yes, rebbe," Judah said. He left. The rabbi rose from his divan. Moving quickly for his age, he said, "Where is that scroll?"

Night fell, but without peace or rest in Bidosz or beyond. In the darkness, the Turks appeared more like demons from the pit than humans. Cannon roared with tremendous gouts of smoke and flame. There was the clang of blacksmiths' hammers and forges' glow as horses were reshod and weapons repaired. Martial music was constant, blaring horns and thundering kettledrums. Torches bobbed everywhere, each borne by a tireless janissary on the attack.

Thousands of janissaries and engineers pressed past the fallen ravelin. Fire raked them from bastions and the walls. Men fell like new mown hay, but survivors pushed on toward the dry moat, the last obstacle before Bidosz's walls. Habsburg soldiers fired muskets and dropped grenades on milling Turks below. Others in strong points fought on until overwhelmed.

A great battery hammered at the two

bastions, every big cannon in the Turkish siege train. Snipers and light cannon took up positions in the wrecked ravelin. Engineers dug trenches for janissaries to advance and saps below ground to lay mines. Habsburg engineers dug countersaps to blow the Turks up before they reached the walls. Muffled explosions were the only sign of a grim, claustrophobic battle waged below ground. From the ravelin's ruins, a musketeer, fresh off an isolated, Balkan mountain, took a careful bead on a Frank officer in a crested helmet. He prayed to Allah and squeezed his trigger.

Scala fell. Waldeck bent over him, but he was already dead, shot through the helmet. Enemy fire, intense and unrelenting, kept Waldeck pinned behind the ramparts.

"Tell the bastions to direct more fire at the ravelin," he shouted to a messenger boy.

What's the rabbi doing?, Waldeck wondered.

"Allah, Allah, Allah," the janissaries screamed.

In a turnip field, three old men prayed and meditated while Judah and other students frenziedly dug up the black soil. When their unaccustomed toil had produced sufficient dirt for the rabbi's purposes, he said, "Pile it here."

The students dumped earth until a sizable heap formed on the indicated spot.

"You shouldn't see this," the rabbi said. "Go fight the Turks."

The students left. The old men took shovels and shaped and tamped the earth into a man's form over ten feet tall. Labor done, they donned prayer shawls and phylacteries. They walked around the heap, recited the alphabet, and the most sacred and powerful word in the universe, the Maker's name. After their first turn, the pile compacted and hardened to stone. On the second turn, a face emerged, rugged and simple. After the third, the arms and legs moved.

A scaling ladder hit the rampart. Waldeck

raced over, but a big janissary reached the top, about to leap over, yataghan in one hand, triumphant grin on his face. Waldeck smashed his head in with a war hammer. He fell, dead before he even hit the ground. Waldeck and a soldier pushed the ladder over. Janissaries fell screaming. The soldier blew on a smoldering length of slow match until the end glowed cherry-red, lit a grenade's fuse, and dropped it.

"Die, heathens," he shouted.

Waldeck looked back at the Jewish Quarter. He'd been foolish, clutching at straws like a frightened child. Why expect help from a wizened, old recluse?

The rabbi bent low and blew weak, old breath into the earthen man's nostrils. With his right index finger, he traced Hebrew letters on the forehead: "אמת." Emet, the Hebrew word for Truth. As the Maker created Adam, the rabbi quickened the golem.

The giant's eyes opened, full of ponderous life. The colossus rose slowly with a sound of raw rock torn loose from chthonic earth.

After a prolonged, gallant defense, the Löbl bastion had literally shattered under the combined impact of a sap exploded underneath and relentless shelling from Turkish artillery. This left the Buda Gate virtually defenseless. Yilderim Pasha himself took charge. Artillerymen pulled heavy cannon along the zigzag trenches, dug wide to accommodate siege guns.

"Hurry, you sons of Franks. Get those guns in place so we can crack this walnut," Yilderim shouted.

The heavy wooden gates were barred, but not blocked with earth and rubble, another of Esterhazy's odd decisions, inexplicable unless he wanted an escape route. There was nothing left but to stand atop the walls and keep up a continuous fire of musketry and grapeshot.

The area before the gate became a killing field. Hardened Turk artillerymen ignored dead comrades and grimly continued their business

while others replaced the fallen. Yermak the master gunner put a torch to his cannon's touchhole. Fired at nearly point blank range, a marble cannonball slammed into the massive wooden doors. One gate bent from the blow, but held.

"One more will do the trick," Yilderim said.

A second cannon fired. The bent door folded over like a playing card and fell from its hinges.

"We'll have women tonight," a janissary crowed.

"Inside before they rally," Yilderim ordered.

"Everyone rally," Waldeck shouted.

He raced to the shattered gate. Soldiers with pikes used their long weapons to stab any Turk who climbed inside. More men raced to the defense. Musketeers fired into janissaries' faces. Saber-wielding cavalymen hacked men to pieces. The defense was fierce to the point of frenzy, but the Turks, the scent of victory in their noses, had their own battle madness.

"Allah, Allah, Allah," they screamed.

Men scrambled over the shattered gate, sword or spear in hand, shoved comrades aside to attack the Franks, none bolder than Yilderim Pasha, at the vanguard despite his rank. His sharp blade severed an infidel's thigh.

"At them," he shouted. "Tonight Bidosz must fall to the Sultan."

Waldeck and other defenders fought back. It helped that only relatively few Turks could pass through the narrow breach at one time. Soldiers and citizens, men young and old, ran to the gate as word spread that the last, desperate moment to repel the Turk had arrived. Waldeck found himself side by side with Judah who valiantly, if somewhat ineptly, slashed at the enemy with a sword. Waldeck pulled Judah back. He took the sword from him in exchange for his war hammer. Sweat tracked narrow channels in their soot-blackened faces. Judah and Waldeck returned to the fray.

"What about the rabbi?" Waldeck shouted.

He ran a black-haired Circassian through the stomach.

“A miracle is coming,” Judah gasped, near collapse from physical combat.

“Soon?” Waldeck said.

A man next to Waldeck fell dead. Turkish musketeers had pushed through the breach and brought their heavy guns to bear. Christian soldiers fired back in turn, but the Turks had momentum. The Habsburg line buckled. Any moment now, Waldeck sensed, untrained civilians would panic and bolt, even though there was nowhere to flee.

BDDDONNGG

A leaden plod shook the earth beneath their feet. There was another earthquake shock. The noise grew steady and rhythmic. Muslim and Christian alike, a throng at each other’s throats, ceased their strife in awe-stricken fear. A shadowy figure slowly rounded the corner. Plainly vast even from a distance, taller than the low-roofed houses that flanked the street, he advanced with a curious, stiff-legged gait. Damaged from shelling, houses tumbled into rubble with each bone jarring tread of the approaching colossus. The figure emerged into the light cast by a burning house.

“Spawn of Shaitan,” a Tartar cried.

Twice a normal man’s height, the sandy brown colossus was barrel chested with limbs like tree trunks. The only human aspect was the roughhewn, impassive face, eyes blank under Hebrew letters that burned like white fire. Massive arms extended as he drew near, titanic fists balled like a boxer about to fight.

Yilderim Pasha broke his men’s reverie.

“What’s this?” he cried. “Idling like eunuchs? Shoot that Frank abomination.”

Reassured by Yilderim’s confidence and grateful for the familiar comfort of orders in the face of the unknown, musketeers opened fire. Lifetime training had instilled the instinct to kill his foes into a janissary’s very bones. Heavy gauge muskets blasted away at close range, each charge aimed by experienced gunners at the center of mass. Yet lead slugs only chipped tiny, ineffective clay shards off the massive torso.

With an awful groan of grinding stone, the

giant bent over. He picked up a heavy roof beam that lay in the street. The beam looked like a tinder stick in his huge hands. Beam held high, he advanced.

“Make way,” Waldeck shouted.

Terrified Habsburg soldiers eagerly drew away. The giant waded into the Turks.

“Destroy the infidel abortion,” Yilderim Pasha screamed. “Throw grenades. Janissaries, attack.”

Grenades rained down on the rampaging giant with no more effect than hurled pinecones. Musketeers poured round after heavy round into the giant at almost point blank range. They bothered the giant like gnat bites.

A janissary cried, “He can’t die. He’s a djinn.”

He swept left and right with the beam, in grim silence that made the carnage all the more terrible. Placid as a farmer scything wheat, the giant smashed heads, limbs, and torsos into unrecognizable, bloody red pulp. Superstitious panic swept through the Turks. Some cast nervous glances toward the breach, the only way out.

“Don’t lose heart, you wretches,” Yilderim Pasha said. “I won’t be strangled because a few so-called soldiers of Allah turn coward.”

The giant’s dead eyes fixed on Yilderim Pasha. With inhuman aim, he hurled the beam straight at the Turkish commander’s head. Skull shattered like an eggshell, Yilderim Pasha’s corpse dropped.

Incipient fear became outright panic. The cry went up among common Turkish soldiers, “Run for it, lads. No shame fleeing a demon.”

Disciplined formations degenerated into a frightened mob bent only upon escape. They trampled one another in their haste to push through. The breach was packed with men like writhing worms. The giant worked havoc on the rearmost. He crushed them like bugs beneath his feet. The continued slaughter only further fueled the Turks’ terror. Some passed through the breach. Word spread of the infidel monster and Yilderim Pasha’s death.

“Beware. The Franks have a demon.”

Fear became general. The Turkish army, sure and confident of final victory only moments before, ran like so many craven cowards. Tartars and regular cavalry wheeled their horses and galloped away, heedless of their mounts' condition. Janissaries dropped muskets and turned tail. The Turks were so demoralized that standard bearers even threw down sacred horsetail banners to flee.

“Open the gate,” Waldeck commanded.

Soldiers cleared rubble and bodies away from the Buda Gate. The remaining, intact gate was pulled open so two columns of mounted men could pass. At the head of the Zrinyi Regiment, five hundred strong, well armed and mounted, Waldeck held his long lance high.

“At the trot. Harry and kill as many as you can. With me.”

He rode out, the regiment thundering behind him, angry after long inaction, hell bent upon revenge. The giant stood to one side, immobile once the Turkish threat subsided. Outside, the regiment spread out and attacked in squads. Though small in number, the regiment's disciplined units ripped through disorganized Turks like foxes in a henhouse. Lances leveled, they ran men through the back without compunction, sometimes two at a time. Many threw down their lances and used long sabers, hung by cords from their wrists. They cut down foot soldiers and slashed horsemen to ribbons.

They hunted Turks all night, chased them to the Drava's shallow waters and beyond, an orgy of killing that left men and mounts spent, heads hung low, barely able to move. Waldeck ended the pursuit only because of exhaustion. The return was slow and tedious, but weariness was eased by the salve of unexpected victory. Upon their return, they found that the Turks, in their frenzy to retreat, had abandoned their entire camp down to an enormous treasure of gold and silver in Yilderim Pasha's silk lined bunker. Men of Bidosz streamed from the city, Judah among them, to acclaim the regiment and escort them back by torchlight.

“We did it, Gert,” Judah shouted.

“Yes,” Waldeck said. “All due to the rabbi. I'll see he's rewarded.”

A celebration was held the next day in the town square, even as rubble was cleared and the dead were tossed into mass graves. Burghers and their families donned finery. The square was decorated with garlands of bright wildflowers, gathered from the fields by the city's young women. Troops were drawn up in their ranks, dirty and ill favored, with no time to burnish armor or wash uniforms, but still proud, fatigue forgotten in the bright sun. The giant stood in a position of honor, draped with red and white flowers. Initially feared by wary townspeople, they had hailed him as the city's savior once Waldeck and his men assured them that the motionless giant was harmless.

Waldeck went into the Rathaus to fetch Esterhazy. The Count had gone from despair to ecstasy. When told of Yilderim Pasha's abandoned treasure, his joy only grew. He immediately appropriated the booty. Esterhazy celebrated as he grieved, with alcohol. Waldeck found him at his desk in his ceremonial robes, drinking Tokay wine, mouth open in a loose, unpleasant grin.

“Waldeck. Good to see you. Really splendid. Leading that charge, bringing me coin. I was completely justified relying on you. What can I do for you?”

“Your Excellency,” Waldeck said. “We await you outside to celebrate your victory.”

“Splendid,” Esterhazy said. “Even your pet Jew, him too?”

Waldeck frowned and said, “Judah fought alongside me at the Buda Gate.”

“Of course, he fought to preserve his skin,” Esterhazy said. “All a Jew ever thinks about.”

“If it wasn't for the rabbi and his giant, we'd have lost,” Gert said.

“He's only a Jew,” Esterhazy said. “Where is that Grand Rabbi?”

Waldeck said, “The rabbi is ascetic, devoted to prayer and study like a monk. He lives apart.”

“He’ll do what I say,” Esterhazy replied. “I sent men to fetch him. As soon as he arrives, I’ll make my entrance.”

“Beg pardon, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said, “but why? The rabbi’s old and frail. We owe him gratitude.”

Esterhazy laughed and said, “Waldeck, what has come over you? Too many blows to the head? The idea, I owe some Jew anything. I can’t stand them here, the stink makes me choke.”

He drank more wine.

“What do I want with that rabbi, as if my affairs were your business, you wretched commoner. I want him to end that monster outside. As long as that thing exists, it’s a menace, a threat to my authority. Every Jew must leave Bidosz too.”

Waldeck said, “Jews live here under imperial remit. You’ve no authority to drive them out, Your Excellency.”

“I can do what I want, Waldeck,” Esterhazy said. “Understand. I’ve no problem with you playing hero, taking credit for that foolhardy cavalry charge. But don’t you dare interfere.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Waldeck said.

Esterhazy’s adjutant entered the room and said, “Your Excellency, the Jew is outside.”

Esterhazy said, “Let’s be off.”

He half-walked, half-staggered to the door. Once outside, fresh air seemed to revive him. The rabbi was carried by four students in a borrowed sedan chair. They carefully set the chair down. Judah helped the rabbi out, wizened countenance still serene despite the rude interruption of decades long isolation. Waldeck hurried over to the rabbi.

“Beware,” he hissed, “Esterhazy plans to-”

“Hush, my son,” the rabbi said without speaking. “Let me handle this.”

With the aid of his staff and Waldeck’s strong arm, the rabbi bowed to Esterhazy and said,

“Your Excellency. You do me great honor. How may I serve you?”

Esterhazy barked, “I want that walking statue stopped. That’s a public menace, you know. No telling what that thing might do.”

The rabbi said, “As you order, Your Excellency.”

Esterhazy smiled and said, “Good of you to cooperate.”

“I need a ladder,” the rabbi said.

“Waldeck, have engineers fetch one,” Esterhazy said.

A ladder was propped against the giant’s broad torso.

“Your Excellency will find this of interest,” the rabbi said. “Please stand close so you may see firsthand.”

“Gladly,” Esterhazy said.

The rabbi went to the giant, followed by Esterhazy, who scowled at his slow pace. The old man set down his cane and put an unsteady foot on the ladder’s first rung. Judah and Waldeck tried to help but he said, audible only by them,

“Keep well away.”

Esterhazy watched the rabbi’s slow ascent, even deigned to steady the ladder by propping a foot on the bottom rung. Panting, the rabbi reached the topmost rungs. His palsied hand erased the letter “א.” Only “מת” remained. Met, the Hebrew word for Death.

There was an earthquake’s rumble. The townspeople screamed, fearful the Turks had returned. Bound solely by the rabbi’s will, the giant fell apart. Loose rock slammed down with the impact of a winter avalanche. The rabbi and Esterhazy were crushed by the collapsed giant. Waldeck and Judah ran to the rabbi’s aid, but it was too late. He lay next to Esterhazy, in death as in life his people’s defender, battered face graced by a faint, ironic smile.