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The Journey to Poland

In late October 1975, when I was in my early twenties and completing my doctorate in Paris, I went to Poland. An almost impossible journey then for a young woman, alone, with an Israeli passport, at *the* time when there were no diplomatic relations between the Eastern Bloc and Israel. (It was only because of a French-Jewish friend, who! turned me into a "Representative of France" at the International Theater Festival in Wroclaw [Breslau], that I received a special visa for a week.)

The night before the trip, when everything was ready, I called my parents in Tel Aviv and told them. I asked my shocked mother for the exact address of her family home in Krakow. Only later that winter, when I visited Israel, did I understand what profound emotion took hold of my mother's few surviving friends and relatives from Krakow when they heard of the trip.

A week later I returned to Paris. For twenty-four hours, I closed myself in my student apartment in the Latin Quarter, far from the Parisian street scenes, and feverishly wrote to my parents. A letter of more than twenty pages. First thoughts, a summary of the rapid notes taken on the trip. Even the words groped for another language, for a different level of discourse.

That year, as every year, a commemoration for the Jewish Community of Krakow was held in the auditorium of my high school in Tel Aviv. News of my trip and of that letter reached the members of the community, and they wanted to read it aloud at that commemoration. I agreed, and after it was commandeered from the family circle, I submitted it for publication to the literary supplement of the newspaper, *Davar*, with the title, "Letter from Regions of Delusion" (the expression "Regions of Delusion" borrowed from the title of a parable attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov). Aside from some peripheral changes of style, that text appears here.

Traveling to Poland in '75 was not part of the social phenomenon it is today. The group definition of "second-generation Holocaust survivors" hadn't yet been coined. You had to find out everything by yourself. How to plan the trip and how to feel, how to talk about it. The letter to my parents began a long process of formulation. Even the choice of parents as the addressees of an intimate discourse was not the norm then.

Today, that trip seems like a geological rift that changed my emotional and intellectual landscape, and placed its seal on my writing. Yet the

"journey to Poland" *didn't* begin in '75, but in early childhood, in Tel Aviv in the 1950s. Distant shocks preceded the rift.

The "journey to Poland" began in that journey "to there"-the journey every child makes to the regions of before he was born, to the unknown past of his parents, to the secret of his birth. My journey to Mother's world began long before I "understood" who my mother, Regina-Rina Poser-Laub-Govrin, was, before I "knew" that she survived the "Holocaust," that she once had another husband, that I had a half-brother. But there was the other "knowledge," that knowledge of pre-knowledge and of pre-language, transmitted *in* the thousand languages that connect a child and his parents without words. A knowledge that lay like a dark cloud on the horizon. Terrifying and seductive. For years the journey proceeded on a double track. One *outside* the home and one inside it. And there was an almost complete separation between the two. As if everything that was said outside had nothing to do with Mother. Outside, incomprehensible, violent stories about the "Holocaust" were forged upon the little girl's consciousness. In school assemblies, *in* lessons for Holocaust Memorial Day, and later on in lessons of "Annals of the Jewish People," which were taught separately from "history" classes, and described events that happened *in* "another, Jewish time and place," where King David and small-town Jews strolled among the goats and railroad cars of the ghetto. Even the Eichmann Trial, on the radio *in* school and at home, was an event you had to listen to, but it had no real relation to Mother. (Arid even if things were said about it then at home, I succeeded *in* repressing them from consciousness.)

At home, there were bright stories about Krakow, the boulevards, the Hebrew high school, the cook, the maids, about skiing and summer holidays in the mountains, in Zakopane, and sometimes on Friday evening, Mother and I would dance a "Krakowiak" on the *big* rug *in* the living room. And there was Mother's compulsive forced-labor house cleaning, and her periods of rage and despair when I *didn't* straighten up my room (what I called "prophecies of rage" with self-defensive cunning), there was the everlasting, frightened struggle to make me eat, and there was the disconnected silence that enveloped her when she *didn't* get out of bed on Yom Kippur. And there was the photo album "from there" at the bottom of Mother's lingerie drawer, with unfamiliar images, and also pictures of a boy, Marek. And stories about him, joyful, a baby in a cradle on the balcony, a beautiful child on the boulevard. And a tender memory of the goggle-moggle with sugar he loved so much (and only years later did I understand the terrifying circumstances of that). And there were the weekly get-togethers at Aunt Tonka's house (who was never introduced as the widow of Mother's older brother

who was murdered), get-togethers so different from the humorous, confident gatherings of Father's family (members: of the Third Aliyah and the leadership of the Yishuv and the state). At night, in Aunt Tonka's modest apartment, I was the only little girl-"a blonde, she looks like a *shiksa*"-*in* the middle of the Polish conversation of "friends from there." And every year there were also the visits of Schindler, when you could go all dressed up with Mother's cousin to greet him at the Dan Hotel. And once, when Mother and I were coming back from "the city" on bus number 22, Mother stopped next to the driver and blurted a short sentence at him for no reason. The driver, a gray-haired man in a jacket, was silent and turned his head away. "He was a ca-po," she said when we got off, pronouncing the pair of incomprehensible syllables gravely. All that was part of the cloud that darkened the horizon, yes, but had nothing to do with what was mentioned at school or on the radio.

Poland and Krakow weren't "real" places either, no more than King Solomon's Temple, for instance. I remember how stunned I was when I went with Mother to the film *King Matthew the First*, based on the children's story by Janusz Korszak which I had read in Hebrew. In the film, the children spoke Polish! And it *didn't* sound like the language of the friends at Aunt Tonka's house. "Nice Polish," Mother explained, "of Poles." Poles? They apparently do exist somewhere.

Yet, a few events did form a first bridge between outside and inside. One day, in a used book store *in* south Tel Aviv, Mother bought an album of black and white photos of Krakow; "Because the photos are beautiful," she emphasized, "they have artistic value." And indeed, the sights of the Renaissance city in the four seasons flowed before my eyes. A beautiful, tranquil city, full of greenery and towers. Jews? No, there were no Jews in that album, maybe only a few alleys" on the way to Kazimierz."

At the age of ten, my parents sent me for private lessons in English, because "*it's* important to know languages." And thus I came to Mrs. Spiro, a gentle woman from London, married to Doctor Spiro, Mother's classmate from the Hebrew high school in Krakow; One day, when the lesson was over, Mrs. Spiro accompanied me to the edge of the yard of their house on King Solomon Street. I recall the sidewalk with big paving stones as she talked with me. Maybe I had complained before about Mother's strict demands, or maybe she started talking on her own.

"Of course, you know what your mother went through; she was in the Holocaust. You have to understand her, the tensions she has sometimes," she said to me directly.

That was an earthquake. A double one. The understanding that Mother was in "the Holocaust," that awful thing they talk about in school

assemblies, with "the six million." And that I, a ten-year-old girl, had to or even could "understand Mother." That is, to leave the symbiosis of mother and daughter constituting one expanded body, to cut myself off from my child's view, and see Mother as a separate person, with her own fate and reasons for moods that didn't depend only on me, or on my certain guilt. I remember how, at that moment, facing the spotted paving stones, I understood both those things all at once. Like a blinding blow.

Then came high school in Tel Aviv. Since both the principal and the assistant principal were graduates of the Hebrew High School in Kraków, their former classmates in that high school, including my mother, sent their children to study there. At that school, influenced by the principal and his assistant, both of them historians, there was an intense awareness of the Jewish past and life in the Diaspora—a rare dimension in the Zionist-Israeli landscape of Diaspora denial—and Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor in the Eichmann Trial, initiated a "club to immortalize the Jewish community of Kraków." A group of students met with members of the Kraków community, who taught them the history of the city and the Jewish community before the destruction. The club also heard testimony from the Holocaust, with a special (exclusive?) emphasis on the activities of the Jewish underground. The women's revolt in the Gestapo prison, led by Justina, was also dramatized and performed for the community members on the annual memorial day. ("Holocaust celebrations," as the memorials were called by members of the drama club.)

I was a member of the "club to immortalize," and I also played a Polish cook in the performance of the history of the uprising. But in fact, a partition still remained between me and the others, a zone of silence so dense that, to this day, I don't know which of the children of the Kraków community members were children of Holocaust survivors and not of parents who emigrated to Palestine before the war. If there were any, no bond was formed between us. We didn't talk about it. We remained isolated, caged in the sealed biographies of our parents.

There were other bridges here too, almost subterranean ones, which, as far as I recall, were not formulated explicitly. The bond with the literature teacher, the poet, Itamar Yazo-Kest, who survived as a child with his mother in Bergen-Belsen. In high school, there were only his influence on my literary development and a sense of closeness, a sort of secret look between "others." (Only later did I read the poems of *The Double Root* about his childhood "there," and his story describing, as he put it, a little girl who looked like me, the daughter of survivors.) And there was the love affair with the boy in my class, whose delicate smile on his drooping lower lip looked like the "different" smile of the literature teacher. His father, the lawyer, submitted reparations claims to Germany in those days—close

enough to the seductive-dangerous realm. My complicated relations with that boy paralleled the shock of discovery of) Kafka; and along with the tempest of feelings of fifteen-year-olds, that forbidden, denied, inflamed relation also had a pungent mixture of *eros* and sadism, a tenderness and an attraction to death, and above all, metaphysical dimensions that pierced the abyss of dark feelings which somehow was also part of "there."

In my childhood, when Mother was an omnipotent entity within the house, I couldn't "understand" her. Later, when she became the authority to rebel against, the enzyme necessary to cut the fruit off from the branch erected a dam of alienation and enmity between us; I couldn't identify with her, with her humanity. There had to be a real separation. I had to live by myself. To go through the trials alone. To listen slowly to what was concealed.

(An amazing example of the layers of memory and forgetting was revealed to me as I wrote *The Name*. The only detail I borrowed in the novel from things I had heard from Mother was a story of the heroism of a woman who succeeded in escaping from Auschwitz-Birkenau, and when she was caught and taken to the Appelplatz, she managed to commit suicide. I also borrowed the admiring tone in which Mother spoke of the event. (Only later did I discover how it had served her as a model.) I created a biographical-fictional character, a virtuoso pianist, and invented a name for her—Mala—immortalized in the name of the heroine, Amalia. Years later, as I was finishing the book, I came across a written description of the event in Birkenau and discovered that the name of the woman was the same as the name I had "invented," "Mala"—Mala Zimetbaum.)

Then came the move to Europe, to Paris. To study for the doctorate and to write literature intensively. I went to the Paris of culture, of Rilke, of Proust, of Edith Piaf. But in '72, soon after I arrived, the film *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophüls was released. When the screening ended in the cinema on the Champs-Élysées, I emerged into a different Paris, into a place where that mythical war had gone on. "I understood" that here, on Rue de Rivoli, beneath my garret room, German tanks had passed (ever since then they began to inhabit my dreams); "I understood" that the description of the French as a nation of bold underground fighters and rescuers of Jews—a notion I had grown up with in the years of the military pact between Israel and de Gaulle's France—was very far from reality. The clear, comforting borders between good and bad were shattered for me, and so were the simple moral judgments mobilized for ideologies. Here, far from a post-Six-Day War Israel secure in her power, far from the official versions of Holocaust and heroism, a different time was in the streets, a time not completely cut off from the war years. Here, for the first time I experienced the sense of

the other. As a Jew, as an Israeli. Wary of revealing my identity at the university that served as a center of *Fatah* activities, trembling in the *Metro* once as I read the Israeli newspaper, *Ma'ariv*, until someone called it to my attention: "*Mademoiselle*, somebody spat on your jacket."

Distance also allowed a different discourse with my parents, especially with Mother. In the weekly letters, without the daily tension of life at home, a new bond was formed, between people who were close, who were beginning to speak more openly with one another. Even my clothes in the European winter, in the "retro" style, began to look like the clothes in Mother's old pictures from Poland, like her hairdo in the photo next to the jeep from Hanover, when she served after the war as a commander in Aliyah B, the *Brikha*, camouflaged in an UNRRA uniform. Poland, Hanover, suddenly turned into places that were much closer, more present than the little state on the shores of the Mediterranean.

On the first Holocaust Memorial Day in Paris, I decided to stay in my apartment all day and to cut myself off from the street that lived by its own dates (for example, Armistice Day of World War I, the "Great War" that took place at the same time of the year). I spent the day reading works on the sources of Nazism, on the roots of anti-Semitism, on the German nationalism of Wagner (rehearsals of whose *Parsifal* I had attended at the Paris Opera).

That summer, on a tour of Europe, an accident forced me to stay unexpectedly in Munich for three weeks. And then the blank spot that filled the heart of the European map for me-Germany-the blank, untouchable spot that sucked up all the evil, also fell. Here, next to the beer hall of "the Nazi buds," where some Israelis had taken me, in what was obviously a sick gesture, there was also an opera, where Mozart was performed, and there were wonderful museums, and parks.

The forced stay in Germany and the Yom Kippur War the following autumn, which I spent in Paris facing the brightly lit Champs-Elysees while my dear ones were in mortal danger, proved to me that there is no refuge in the soothing distinctions between "then" and "now," between "there" and "here." And I also understood that there is no racial difference, imprinted at birth between "them" and "us," nor can we hide behind the fences of the Chosen People. And that, in every person, the murderer and the victim potentially exist, blended into one another, constantly demanding separation, every single day, with full awareness. I understood that I could no longer hide behind the collective, ready-made definitions of memory. That there would be no choice but to embark on the journey that is obstinate, lonely, and full of contradictions.

Germany, France, Europe: What is in that culture, in its roots, mixed with the gold of the baroque and the flickering brasses of symphonies; what

is in the squares, in the churches, in the ideologies that allowed what happened? Prepared it? Didn't prevent it? What inflamed the hatred? What repressed it under pious words of morality? What fostered it in the heart of religious belief? What prepared it in the tales of God that man told himself to justify the outbursts of his evil instincts under the disguise of *Imitatio Dei*?

And what still exists right before my eyes? Keeps on happening?

How to draw the borders between good and bad with a thin scalpel under a microscope? How to distinguish anew, here and now? All the time?

And what is the terrorizing persuasive force of tales and of their metamorphoses into theologies, ideologies? How to struggle with forgetting, with denial, without whitewashing, but also without reiterating the same stories, without inflaming the same evil instincts? How to tell responsibly?

Jarring questions that filled me, that nourished my research, my theatrical productions, my literary writing, but did not yet touch Mother's hidden place.

I spent the summer of '75 between Princeton and New York, collecting material for my doctorate, reading the works of Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav in the old JTS library, and in the evenings, swallowing the plethora of fringe theater, jazz and transvestite clubs, and the international bohemian life of Manhattan. And thus I met that young violinist from Krakow who had fled Poland, and was working as a cabdriver. A handsome young man from Krakow. Krakow? A place where people live?! The summer romance was a way to confront the profound seduction of the depths of the past stamped in me, as well as the depths of my femininity.

One day that summer, my aunt, Mother's sister-in-law, came to my apartment in midtown Manhattan. I knew her vaguely from a visit she had made to Israel years before, and after the death of Aunt Tonka in Tel Aviv, my aunt from Queens, the widow of Mother's second brother, who perished in the camps, was her last living close relative. She had survived Auschwitz and her young son was hidden by a Christian woman. After the war, my aunt and her son emigrated to New York.

That day, on the balcony on the thirtieth floor, facing the roofs of mid-town Manhattan, my aunt spoke in broken English only about "then" and "there," as if here and now didn't exist, as if we had never left there. She and the Polish pop music at night melted the last wall of resistance. Now I had no excuse not to translate my preoccupation with the subject into action, no excuse not to go to Poland.

In late October, after the administrative alibi was concocted in Paris, I left. Ready. And not ready at all.

I was not ready for what I would find or for what I wouldn't find. I was not ready for the fear. The fear of returning to the strange hotel room at night, the primal fear that I would starve to death, which impelled me to eat nonstop, completely violating the rules of *Kashrut* which I had observed ever since I came to Paris to study, eating with the dispensation "allowed during an emergency," that I granted myself (insolently?). Not ready for the fear that rushed me in a panic straight from the visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau to meetings with Polish artists and bohemian parties. I was especially not ready for the complexity of my responses, for their force. For what was revealed to me in "the living laboratory" I had poured by myself. The contradictory burst of fascination and revulsion, alienation and belonging, shame and vengeance, of helplessness, of complete denial. . . .

When I returned, the letter to my parents was a first attempt to look at what was revealed, to talk. The restrained language of the letter reflects the difficulty of going beyond the taboo, hoping they would understand through the silence. That different, new discourse with my parents accompanied us throughout the years until their death. A discourse of closeness, of belonging, of acceptance, beyond the generational differences.

The sense of belonging-along with my parents-to the "other, Jewish story" revealed in the depths of the journey only intensified in the following years, as the doors to the centers of European *culture* opened to me, as I devoted myself to writing. But at the same time, the understanding that it is impossible to go on telling as if nothing had happened also grew. Understanding that, after Auschwitz, there are no more stories that do not betray, there are no more innocent stories.

And what about Mother's shrouded "story"? Details continued to join together in fragments. For years, here and there, she mentioned events, some in conversations with me, some in conversations with others which I chanced upon. I listened when she spoke, and she spoke little. Never did I "interview" her; never did I ask. I respected her way of speaking, as well as her way of being silent. Even after I returned from Auschwitz, I didn't think she had to report or that I had to (or could) "know," I learned from her the lesson of telling in silence.

I heard the first fragment of a chronological description from my mother under extraordinary circumstances. In the autumn of 1977, she was summoned to give testimony in a German court in Hanover. I accompanied my parents to the trial, sitting with Father in the gallery and seeing Mother, with her special erect posture, surrounded by the black robes of the attorneys. In her fluent German, she described the Plaszow camp,

where Jews from the Krakow Ghetto were removed; she pointed authoritatively at the maps. Her voice trembled only a moment when she came to the description of the *Kinderheim*, the children's home in Plaszow, where children were taken from their parents. In a few words, she dealt with the *Aktsia*, told how all the inmates of the camp were taken out to the square while an orchestra played lullabies, to see how the SS loaded the children onto the trucks that took them to the gas chambers. She was asked what was the name of her son, and how old he was at the time of the *Aktsia*. She replied with an effort, "Marek. Eight years old." The prosecutor asked for a momentary recess, and then the questions resumed. (That prosecutor' accompanied us when we left, apologizing in shame for the accused, the deputy of Emon Gantt, the commander of Plaszow, who was absent from the courtroom "for medical reasons. . . .")

A few years later, Mother tried to dramatize the story of the revolt of the women in Krakow at the vocational high school where she taught, wanting to bring the subject close to her women students. She worked with Father on the script and developed original ideas of staging designed to increase audience participation. But, during the rehearsals, she developed such a serious skin disease, clearly as a reaction, that the doctor advised her to stop the production.

The presence of the Holocaust receded completely in her last months, as she struggled with the fatal cancer that was discovered in her. Death was too close to think about its old dread-at any rate, that was my feeling as I stood at her side, admiring her yearning for life, the audacity, the amazing black humor, which restored the dimensions of human absurdity even in the most difficult situations. The day before she lost consciousness, she spoke a lot, in a stupor, in Polish. What did she say? Was she still living there? I couldn't go with her. I remained alone, at her bedside. Then, as I was massaging her feet, those feet that had marched in the death march through frozen Europe, I was struck with the simple knowledge that it was to Mother's struggle, there, that I owed my birth.

I heard Mother's "story" only after her death-death that always turns a loved one into a "story" with a beginning and an end. During the *Shiva*, Rivka Horowitz came to Jerusalem from Bnei-Brak. A woman with bold blue eyes, whom I knew only by name. She was one of nine women, all of them graduates of Beit Yakov, the ultra-orthodox school for girls in Krakow, whom my mother joined in the ghetto, despite differences of education and ideology. The ten women, "The *Minyan*," supported one another in the ghetto, during the years in the Plaszow camp, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, throughout the death march, and in the final weeks in Bergen-Belsen. For three years, they hadn't abandoned one another;

together they fought exhaustion and disease, lived through the selections, until all of them survived. "There was strength in them. Moral strength," Mother explained when she and Father, both of them members of the liberal secular *Mapai* assiduously attended the celebrations of the friends in Bnei Brak. At the *shiva*, I heard from Rivka Horowitz for the first time about that period. She spoke for a few hours-out of a responsibility to tell me-and left. And after that, we didn't meet again. Later on, when I was almost finished writing *The Name* (and after Mother's death, it seemed to me that, more than ever, the novel spoke of a "there" that was lost forever), came the first information about the family property in Kraków. Apartment houses, a button factory. . . .Property? There? "In the regions of delusion?" And then, the name that had been common at home, Schindler, which suddenly became a book and then a film, and turned into a general legacy the story of the rescue of Mother's cousin and his wife, Mother's refusal to join the list of workers in the enamel factory in order to stay with Marek. .

And then, one evening, the telephone rings in Jerusalem, and on the other end of the line, in English with a thick Polish accent, another member of that "*Minyan*" introduces herself, Pearl Benisch, who published a book in 1991, *To vanquish the Dragon*, with the full story of the group (from the author's religious perspective). A copy arrived on Friday. On the Sabbath eve, I sat with my two little daughters in the living room and picked up the book. I leafed through it distractedly, until I came to the description of the destruction of the *Kinderheim*. And then I fled to the other room so the children wouldn't see me, and there I burst into sobs I didn't know were hidden inside me. A weeping that arose from there. Mine? Hers?

Until dawn that Sabbath, I read for the first time the story of Mother, in chronological order, dated, revealing the few facts I knew situated in their context. Even the description of the goggle-moggle with sugar that she had secretly made for Marek in the sewing workshop, where the women from Plaszow worked, smuggling the treat to the child when she came back. And how one day the Jewish supervisor discovered her stealing the egg, and threatened to turn her in. And how she stood before him then in mortal danger, and accused him in front of all the workers of the sewing shop of being a traitor to his people. I read how in the *Aktsia* of the destruction of the children's home, against the horrifying background of lullabies, Mother burst into the square toward the SS men who were pushing the weeping children onto the trucks. She shouted to them to take her with the child. And how her friends, the women of the *Minyan*, held her with all their might, pulled her back. I read about the sisterhood between the women in the group, about the pride, the unbelievable humor,

how with astonishing freedom they maintained their humanity in the *Lagers* of Auschwitz-Birkenau. They and many other women and men were described in their humanity facing the crematoria. How they succeeded in putting on makeup to get through the selections, how they sneaked the weak women out of the line of the condemned, how they secretly lit candles at Hanukkah and held a Passover Seder, and how, after the death march from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, they still managed to laugh together when they got the wrong size prison uniforms. I read, frozen stiff, how, in Bergen-Belsen, Mother dared to be insolent to the female SS officer with the pride she still had left, surviving the public whipping, which few survived, without shouting, "so as not to give the SS the pleasure." Between the pages, the figure of Mother returned to me, cheering the women in Auschwitz with stories of her visit to the Land of Israel, singing them songs of the homeland on their muddy beds, where they fell exhausted with typhus and teeming with lice, in Bergen-Belsen. Suddenly I understood one of the few stories Mother had told me about the camps, how she would sing to herself Tchernihovsky's poem: "You may laugh, laugh at the dreams, I the dreamer am telling you, I believe in Man, and in his spirit, his powerful spirit," emphasizing with her off-key voice the words: "I believe in Man, and in his spirit, his powerful spirit. . .

Mother's "story." Discovering it in the heart of the journey to what was stamped inside me. Discovering it now in the middle of life, when I myself am a mother, and older than she-the young woman and mother who was there.

"Mother's story," or maybe only milestones around what will remain hidden.

Letter from the Regions of Delusion

November 2, 1975, Paris

My dears,

Back home-what a relief!

A week in Poland is like a year, like years, like a moment. Ever since the visa was approved, a week before the trip, I felt as if I were facing an operation. I was waiting for something to stop me, for an iron curtain to block the way. And even in the dark, when the bus took us from the plane to the airport in Warsaw, I still didn't believe that the distance between me and Poland would be swallowed up just likethat, in a few steps.

Your letter, which reached me just before the trip, was a lifeline in moments when the dizziness intensified; in moments when there was only a definite absence of my imaginary picture of those places, when instead, there were only the long lines in gray raincoats; in moments of awful loneliness, when there was no one to shout at; in moments when I ' didn't believe I could finally get on the train and leave that madness behind.

How to tell, and wasn't there any chronology? How to live that over again?

Wroclav. A dreary city and a theater festival. I was ejected into the darkness in the heart of an empty field. That's how it began. Night in the hotel. An enormous radio, and voices from Russian, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian stations. Stifling heat from the furnace, the chambermaid, a blond Gentile woman, fills the bathtub for me. In the soap box and in the closet are roaches. A strife-torn night in dreams and a grayish morning. The outside was stopped by the curtains. Crowds of people with rubbed-out faces. A few old cars. Awful cold. Fog.

How to leave the room and go into that reality? How to be a "tourist" in it?

Wroclaw. In the display windows rows of laundry soap in coarse packages. Cooperative restaurants smelling of cabbage and sweat. In the festival offices full ashtrays, organizers with sleepless faces. And then a writers' cafe, in Kosciuszko Square, and it was as if I had come to a kind of Jerusalem before I was born, from the thirties, a Jerusalem I lived from books. With that blend of provincialism and culture. Waitresses dressed in black with starched aprons, newspapers in wooden frames, cigarette smoke, grave discussions about art, literature, politics, metaphysics. The soft tones of a language that is so familiar, so close. The intonations, the gestures, the excited seriousness.

An international festival-a few days of devotion to joy, before the regime returns to its everyday gray.

And I, a stranger at the celebration. Only an "alibi" for another mission, which no one in fact has assigned to me. Yes, a few addresses for it's impossible-not-to-accept-with-a-letter-to-take before setting out. Backs of houses, yards, covered with trash and rubble. Staircase supported by boards. Number 72, apartment 9A. Two old people in the doorway. A kitchen black with soot. Examining me, the letter, with a scared look.

Sneaking back to the~ ongoing celebration. Just so they won't find out. It's only because of sloppiness that they haven't yet arrested me.

And then, early one misty morning, wrapped in a coat, at the railroad station. Among hundreds of people in a line. Buying a ticket to Krakow with black market Zlotys. . .to the regions of my real trip.

Getting off the train, and simply walking into the light-flooded square, among ancient buildings, whose carved facades are sparkling in the sun. Walking among the other people on the boulevard with the autumn chestnut trees, on Planty, Mother's route to the tennis courts. Leaves struggle on my shoes. Entering the Rynek Square resounding around itself. The Renaissance arches, the Sukiennice market in the middle like an island in the heart of a lagoon of light, the breeze rising from the Virgin Mary Church. . . .all those names, with a soft r; as I ("wonderful child!": the only two words I understood in the foreign language) would accompany Mother to the nightly suppers on an aunt's balcony, with a smell of down comforters and the saltiness of the sea air on hot Tel Aviv nights, when friends from "there" would gather. All those names, when the conversation would climb in the foreign tremolo, and in the cafe downstairs, in the yard of the building, the cards would be shuffled on tables. The places frozen in slides on the wall of the high school, in commemorations held with a sudden frenzy. Places that were stopped in the thirties, with an amazed look of some Jew who came on the camera by mistake. . . .The warm-cool air caresses the fur of my coat, my face, moves the parasols over the flower vendors' booths.

The road rises to a high hill overlooking the city and the Vistula River. Above, the Wawel Castle covered in ivy burning with autumn leaves. And here, on the slope, along the banks of the Vistula, the way to Paulinska Street, Mother's street.

The three o'clock twilight lingers and softens. Mothers with babies in buggies at the river. (Mothers and babies? Still? Here?) Paulinska Street. On the secret side of the street the wall of a convent, and behind it fruit trees. Someone passes by on the corner. A woman in a heavy coat and old boots. Number eight. The staircase floored with blue tiles. A list of tenants in fountain pen. First floor on the left-a strange name. The door is locked. On the first floor a balcony. Closed glass doors, covered with lace curtains. To throw a stone at them mischievously, a schoolbag on the back and stockings stretched up to the knee? As I walked there, dressed carefully by Mother, among the children giggling at my different clothes. To sit down at a steaming lunch, close to the breath of forefathers I never saw? Only crumbs of medicines and old lipsticks in the drawers of the aunt who died. That silence. The quiet of houses. Take a picture? A picture of air? Quiet. Across the street, in the convent garden, a bell rings. Children pour out of the gates of the school, climb on the fences, chew on apples.

Spotted facades and the street spins. Not far from there, Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter. The soot of trams on the doorsills of the houses. In the windows of the reform synagogue, the "Temple," spiderwebs, and in the yard, a tangle of weeds. In the alley of one of the houses is a blurred sign

in Yiddish, "Prayer House." The big synagogue is empty and whitewashed. Turned into a museum. Only a guard passes by like a shadow along the walls, and two fragments of tiles from back then are embedded in the entrance.

It's late now. I wander along the track to the cemetery. Here at least I am sent by permission, to an address that does exist, to the graves of the family. The gate is closed. There is no one to ask. Everything is closed.

An evening full of mist. Suddenly the trams are hurrying. The voices of the flower vendors in the Rynek are swallowed up in the fog. To go to the reserved hotel? In Krakow? Like going to a hotel in Tel Aviv instead of returning home. The desk clerk scurries up to help: "Yes, of course, Madam, here's the bus schedule to Auschwitz. From the town of Oswiecim, you have to go on foot a bit."

On the table at the entrance are old newspapers. Two elderly lady tourists are interested in a jazz festival that may not take place. And there, at the foot of the stairs, on the way to the room, the movement that had swept me up ever since early morning stops. No, just not to return alone to the gigantic radio in the strange room! I buttoned the coat and went out in pursuit of a dubious rumor that was given to me. Slawskowska Street. Maybe. . . .

And indeed, in the dark, in Yiddish, among the artisans' signs, a small address: "Mordechai Gvirtig Culture Club." A door at the edge of a yard. A doorman sits at the entrance. And in the depths, in the gloom, a few frozen figures are playing cards, gazing vacantly behind the wooden frames of newspapers. "Israel!" the doorman sits up straight, leads me with sudden importance to the "board" room. Five wrinkled faces rise up to me: "Israel!" They sit me down in the middle, following my efforts in a mixture of basic German, a few words in Yiddish, and gestures. They nod at length in deep wonder at every word, assault one another in noisy arguments. Finally, they answer together, in a strange chorus: "Ha! Yes, Poser's daughter! Poser and Abeles," they nod: "Buttons, buttons!" "Yes, buttons," I affirm; "a button factory." "The Hebrew high school," I continue. "Yes, the high school. Now a Polish technical school." The Christian cook serves me a sandwich with a lot of bread and a cup of tea. They dismiss her with the superiority of a bygone age, and urge me: "Eat, eat." For a moment, they go back to their business. The "chairman" is dictating a petition to the "secretary" about the cultural situation. To whom? On behalf of whom? Still? Like those stenciled pages in cellars and photographs of pale-faced choirs that were presented every Holocaust Memorial Day in the glass cabinets of the school. I attempt to explain; they will certainly understand that it's impossible to get on the bus and simply ask the driver in a foreign language to tell me where

to get off for Auschwitz. They certainly have their own ways of getting there. And indeed, it turns out that tomorrow, a "delegation of rabbis from America" is about to come, and they will go in a special bus. When will they arrive? When will they go? Where are they now? Impossible to know. Got to wait.

I want to sneak away from them now, back to the big square. To go into an anonymous cafe with drunkards. To be swallowed up there. But they hang onto me, wrapped up in their coats, accompany me to the hotel. Argue with outbursts of rancor, finally declare, that the "secretary" will come to "guide me" tomorrow morning. They all press around, shake my hand. Downtrodden faces. So small. In threadbare coats.

In the room the suitcase is waiting, with a few things. Makeup, passport. Will have to go on and move it. Impossible to hide in the suffocation under the blanket.

The next morning, before I have time to ponder the other world in my dreams, the "secretary" is already here, dragging me with a soft-limbed domination. Turning me around in dark streets, getting on and off trams, talking incessantly in the incomprehensible language, as if to herself. And I plod behind her, bending down to her, making an effort.

In Kazimierz, on the bench across from the synagogue, the doorman of the "Mordechai Gvirtig Culture Club" and two old men are already waiting for me. It's not clear if they're beggars or rabbis. They came to welcome the "American delegation." The doorman waving as he approaches, "Yes, yes!" One of the old men hurries me, opens the gates of the ancient synagogue of Rabbi Moshe Isserlish. For a minute, a separate hush. The figures that follow in my wake remain beyond the fence. A small building whose heavy walls are leaning, and a white courtyard. Inside the synagogue, there is still a warmth among the wooden benches, around the Ark of the Covenant. On the tables are old prayer books. Black letters. And in the small enclosure crows land on the ancient tombstones sunk in mist. For a moment the past seems to continue with all its softness, without any obstacle, in that distant murmur, up to the morning covered with mist, to me.

And the doorman is already rushing me hysterically; he arranged with the gatekeeper of the Miodowa cemetery to be there, to open the gate. Hurry, hurry, got to get back in time for the "delegation of rabbis!" And thus, in single file, the doorman limping, the muscular Christian gatekeeper on his heels, and I behind them, we march between long rows of sunken, shattered gravestones, covered with mold. Names, names. I recite to them the names I've managed to dredge up from my memory, "Poser, Mendel, Groner." Tombstones in long rows whose edges vanish in mist and piles of fallen leaves. Many strange names. Don't find. A Christian woman with legs swathed in bandages rinses the graves with boiling water,

raises her head wrapped in a turban to us: "Yes, Groner, saw it once. . .maybe there." I still hold on, persist in reading the names, seeking under piles of leaves. But the limping doorman and the gatekeeper behind him are already hurrying out. We didn't find. No maps. No books. No witnesses. Mission impossible. Only a delusion of a mission. And time is limited.

Meanwhile on the bench the number of idlers and "rabbis" waiting for the "American delegation" has grown. According to the doorman, they are already in Krakow and will arrive very soon. Maybe you can find out in the hotel when they'll arrive? No, impossible to know. I break away from the doorman, tell him I'll come back in a little while, he should beg the rabbis of the delegation to wait, and I hurry to Wawel Castle, for the visit that was arranged. On the streets people in gray coats, buses, trams. You can even eat an apple. The body goes on functioning over the abyss between the worlds. And when I come back from the royal palace, from the halls with waxed floors whose walls are covered with embroidered tapestries of feast and forest, devoured by torments of treason, I run down the slope carpeted with fallen leaves, back to Kazimierz, to my Jews. From the end of the street, the doorman stumbles toward me. He drops his hands in a gesture of dismissal: "Well, the American delegation. . .a call came that they didn't leave America. Well, the fog, they didn't leave America."

Empty. No one there. Even the idlers who were waiting on the bench have gone home.

Entrusted with the last mission, the doorman rushes me into the community organization offices. Second floor, a smell of boiled potatoes, a few old people with tin plates and spoons. Even the bright light filtering from the shutters doesn't bring the scene in the room any closer. Around an enormous table sit the activists of the "congregation," their chins leaning on their hands, and their crutches leaning on the chairs. A few old portraits on the walls. At the head of the table, Mr. Jacobovitch, an irascible Jew, head of the community organization.. The mutual curiosity dies out after a few sentences, and after I am given the travel arrangements, I slip out impolitely. I also flee from the kosher meal of mashed potatoes on a tin plate and the ritual washing of the hands in a stained sink, to Sukiennice Square, to the light, to the fancy cafe with red velvet chairs and torte powdered like the cheeks of the Polish women. Here you can shout aloud that maybe everything is a delusion, that maybe there never were Jews here.

And it was as if a shout burst out of me in the evening, at the performance of "The Night of November Ninth" by Wyspianski, directed by Swinarski. Mythic characters singing against a background of a burning horizon. The tricolored flag of the revolution waves over the stage, and the audience is galvanized~ A moment of naked yearning for freedom is revealed, of metaphysical emotion, a moment of a personal world despite

the constant oppression. Something so familiar, so close in temperament, in gestures. Such belonging. Belonging?

An old car. The shaved nape of the driver's neck stuck in a cap. Poplar trees, autumn fields. I am in the back seat, huddled in my coat. On the way to Auschwitz.

And perhaps you should be silent about that trip. Not talk about the yellow flowers, the gravel in the sun, the chatter of the Polish cleaning women who laughingly point out to me that my trousers are unstitched. My trousers? On what side of the barricade?

How to write you about the heavy marching in an attempt to grasp something through the remnants of constructions-as from archaeological digs of thirty, not two thousand years ago. To understand the chasm separating sanity and madness with barbed-wire fences. The house beyond the fence, half a mile away, was always there, with the same smoke in the chimney and the same geranium pots behind the curtains. And here?

How to write about the dark steps with a group of Polish high school students on them. The wall of liquidations between two blocs. A barred window. A few fallen leaves scattered on the sill. Expressionless walls in the gas chambers, the iron doors of the ovens. Polish sky. Between the chambers, in the corridors, photographs and numbers. Printed columns of names. And the silence of another morning now. As when I held my breath, a girl of six or seven, in the schoolyard for a whole minute, through the whole siren, so that I'd be dizzy when I intoned the words, *six million*.

How to write you about the forced march through the tremendous extents of Birkenau Camp. About the dampness still standing in the abandoned blocs, between those three-tiered wooden bunks, and the straw sacks on the dirt floor. How to imagine Mother within that silent madness. Mother. A shaved head in nights of hallucinations, nights among packed bodies. How to put Mother into one of the gigantic photos placed along the railroad track. How to force myself to imagine her in this emptiness?

Polish earth. Small autumn flowers. The driver waits. Dozes in the sun in the car.

And maybe all the questions are not right. For it's impossible to understand. Not even at the end of the journey to this stage set. Impossible to understand without the fear of death that catches the breath, without the palpable threat on the flesh. Impossible to grasp death from all the hundreds of photos. Maybe only the heaps of empty shoes are still hovering between life and death. There I finally recited the *Kaddish*. *Kaddish* over heaps of shoes.

And maybe all the questions start only after the shoes also crumble. Beyond the crazy stage set of death, which will always remain incomprehensible. And maybe all the questions begin, only with the silent

emptinesses of now. How to go on living in a world that has turned into the enemy. With the fear stamped in the blood. With the constant paranoia. "*Arbeit macht frei.*" How to live within the world and outside it. In the flow of its life and in the flow of other life and eternity. How to go on nevertheless believing in man, how to take the beloved head in the arms.

In the afternoon light, trivial thoughts pass through the head. Impossible to pretend suffering; that would be hypocrisy. Impossible to go back to the past-clinging or accusing--that would be the triumph of the past. There is no escape from the constant questions to be asked now, impossible to flee from them to the images frozen in the photos.

And in Warsaw, in the Ghetto, there aren't even any ruins where the imagination can take hold for a moment. There are no stones that are emitted outside of time. Only concrete blocks built a few feet above the ground, above the ruins and the mounds of corpses that weren't even cleared away. To hold your head in your hands and shout. Life goes on. Cars in parking lots, a few poplar trees on the sidewalks. And that emptiness. Only the lip service of a memorial with the pathos of socialist realism, and a Jewish museum behind the building of the Communist party. The director of the museum and his secretary, two Jews with bowed heads, show me a building excavation out the window. "Here was the great synagogue of Warsaw." And the cleaning woman smiles like an accomplice in a crime, points at the exit to the guest book full of emotional comments. Gray cement boulevards and gigantic statues of soldiers with forged chins. Impossible to believe that there was once a different life here. Only in the nationalized *Desa* stores are scores of Jewish objects. Hanukkah lamps, synagogue menorahs, spice boxes. Objects with price tags. No, there is nowhere to return. The whole thing is only a delusion. Deceptions of the imagination. In my head, crushed fragments of all the artistic creations resound, the assemblies, the recitations that tried to convey the other reality to me, and they only increase the distance.

The rain doesn't let up. An awful cold penetrates the clothes, makes you shiver. Warsaw-a gray horizon by day, and gray in the pale neon lights at night. The trip back seems like an illusion, like opening the camp gate and being outside. The unbearable loneliness, the unrelenting stifling.

Only the friendship of my acquaintances, Polish theater people, supports me in the hours before the departure. Figures between reality and dream. Alicia in her theatrical clothes, waving her hands like a Chekhov character. And Andrzej with ironical humor, in fragments of literary French, with the credo from Communism to the surrealism of Witkiewicz. Fervent confessions in small apartments, when tomorrow is unknown, and only the dream is left. Like the awakening appreciation for Bruno Schulz, thirty years after he perished, like worshipping the theater,

the word spoken from the stage, received with a sigh. Like the clandestine grasping of Catholicism.

Childhood memories extend between Mediterranean summers and alleys in northern cities, woven in the dreams of Polish romantic literary heroes, shrouded in the sounds of the language, and open accounts of the blood of the dead. Life in a pre-time is always present, in the double look at all the places. Always through the other place I belong to, where you don't come on journeys. A wiped-out place, condemned to delusion, where I will never be able to rest the wandering of existences.

With relief, I finally board the train. Sleeping cars that came from Moscow with a conductor in an undershirt and a stifling of sweat and orange peels. A twenty-four-hour trip to Pads, like a day of fasting. To another world? At midnight, the train passes die East Berlin station. Signs in Gothic script: "Welcome to the Democratic Capital." On the platform is a white line three feet from the cars. Soldiers in riding boots with German shepherds and submachine guns are standing at regular intervals. A patrol of two soldiers goes through the train. Another patrol checks between the wheels with flashlights, and another one marches on the roofs of the cars. Maybe someone has succeeded in escaping. A white line, soldiers, and a train. Only the site of madness or freedom has changed.

Back in Paris: The clear sky, department-store advertising instead of propaganda slogans. Quiet. The silence of the room. And that drawn orbit of life where you two are so close at hand. "Flesh of my flesh."

Beloved father and mother, I press you to my heart, and once again am gathered in your arms.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara Harshav