



CLUB PAPER
CXXVI

REFLECTIONS ON
A WORLD LOST

by
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THE CHICAGO
LITERARY CLUB
2005

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12 January 2004



Reflections on a World Lost

We arrived at Warsaw. It was the first leg of a long-awaited family trip that would take me back to Bialystok, the city of my birth.

In my heart, I always knew I would make the trip. While my parents, Icchok and Faygl Melamdovich, were alive, I had often offered to sponsor a trip that would take them back to where they grew up, where they were educated and became teachers, where they were married. They had been at the forefront of Yiddish culture in Bialystok, in the movement out of the shtetl so that Jews could become equal citizens in the world society.

But they repeatedly declined. "There is nothing there left for me," my father would say. Perhaps he was right. I wouldn't know unless I found out for myself.

I was a child in 1939, when the German army attacked Poland and began to turn Europe into an inferno of death. World War II had sprung its frightening trap that would ensnare millions of Europeans and deliver them into the hands of the Nazis. The story of our escape, as my parents,

with me at their side, miraculously outwitted the Gestapo and KGB, is not material to these reflections. Our two-year odyssey spanned three continents, six languages, the Trans-Siberian railroad, and Japan (a life-saving transit visa was issued by Chiune Sugihara, Japanese Counsel General to Lithuania), and happily concluded in the United States in 1941.

In this circuitous fashion, acutely aware that I was among the few fortunate souls who escaped the horrors unfolding in Europe, I found myself on the inner-city streets of Chicago's Northwest side. We settled in a neighborhood that was an ethnic melting pot of Italians, Poles and Jews, and where "Hey, you dirty kike" was not an uncommon greeting. Still, despite my precarious start in life, irrespective of the special strife I faced as do most foreign children unfamiliar with the culture of their new homeland, one could say that my achievements exemplified the splendor of America.

For it was here, in this land of the free and home of the brave, that this refugee from Bialystok, without American roots, without wealth, without proper credentials, without clout or influence, was given the opportunity to enter the world of futures markets and climb to the top of its complex structure. Within that arena, at a moment that was ripe for change, I was invited to use my imagination and skills, to innovate and invent. I was lucky. The world in the early 1970s had entered the first stages of globalization. There was a need for new instruments of finance. My colleagues and I responded to the need and our ideas gave rise to the era of financial derivatives. In this fashion, in a small way I was able to contribute to the growth of Chicago and American markets. A contribution, which in the eyes of some—the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, for instance—would merit my inclu-

sion in a list of the "Ten most important Chicagoans in business of the twentieth century."¹

While this background may be instructive and provide some standing for my point of view, it is also not material to these contemplations. Two facts are, however, germane to these reflections. First, emotionally, my parents never left the Old World; consequently, I inherited a portion of their mind-set. Second, as a child, I had never been to Warsaw—not physically, that is. Spiritually . . . well, that was another matter. In literature, theater, politics, culture, prose, song, and poetry, *Varshe*—as the capital of Poland is called in Yiddish—was alive for me, as if I were born there. *Varshe* was a constant and consequential topic of conversation at our home whenever my parents met with their group of Yiddish intellectuals as I was growing to adulthood. *Varshe*, I learned quickly, hosted the modern Jewish thought that emanated during Poland's exciting years: the early 1900s through the beginning of World War II. During that era, Jews flexed their cultural muscles, forcing the greater Polish society to contain its imbedded anti-Semitism and at least begin to accept them in the social structure.

Jewish roots in Warsaw are deep. They were there as early as 1414. But Warsaw's status as the main center of Jewish population growth in Poland was not visible until the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, in an effort to win support from Jews against the Poles, the Russian czar lifted from Warsaw and its surrounding provinces many of the existing anti-Semitic taxes, as well as the residential and employment restrictions against Jews, which were ubiquitous throughout Poland. As a consequence, Jews fled the small towns of Poland and migrated to *Varshe* to participate in the economic opportunities that the liberated laws al-

lowed. This process unleashed powerful evolutionary forces. By the end of the nineteenth century, Varshe had been transformed into the Jewish economic, political, and cultural capital of Poland.

Many other cities, within Poland and elsewhere in Europe, made significant contributions to the total body of Jewish culture. Near the top of any list would be the legendary city of Wilno (*Vilna* in Yiddish), known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” In the latter half of the eighteenth century, under the influence of the fabled *Vilner Gaon*, Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, Vilna blossomed as the center for rabbinical studies and for the *Haskala*, the Jewish Enlightenment movement. A century later, in 1897, The Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund (“the Bund”), a Jewish faction of the Socialist movement, was conceived in Vilna.² My parents were ardent *Bundistn*, and I most certainly would have been inducted into the movement had the world not been turned upside down by Adolf Hitler. Over the years, Vilna, which produced some of the greatest Yiddish writers and poets, evolved as a flourishing source of Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Chaim Grade, Shmerke Katsherginski, Moyshe Kulbak, and my personal favorite, Avrom Sutzkever, were among them. The acclaimed Vilner Teachers Seminary, where my mother earned her teaching degree, was situated there. And, of primary significance, Vilna was the birthplace of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), the preeminent center for the study of the Yiddish language, literature, and folklore. Founded in 1925 under the direction of Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich, it was miraculously transplanted to New York in 1940. For *Yiddishistn*, such as my parents, the YIVO was the equivalent of the Bible on matters of Yiddish language.

Still, no other city could equal Varshe as a center of Jewish cultural life at the beginning of the 1900s. Varshe represented the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, and the second largest in the world, after New York. (At the start of the Second World War in 1939, Varshe's population included 380,000 Jews, or almost thirty percent of the total population.) Varshe became the unquestionable capital of modern Jewish thought and the epicenter of an emancipation movement—a metamorphosis—that was sweeping over Jewish masses and uncoupling world Jewry from its ancestral religious moorings. Yet this transformation did not diminish traditional religious participation—in the 1920s, there were over four hundred synagogues within Varshe.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Varshe evolved into a vibrant and dynamic center of secular Jewish life. The city became the headquarters for a large number of diverse political parties, including a strong orthodox religious faction. Jewish cooperatives, credit unions, orphanages, hospitals, newspapers, publishing houses, theater companies, orchestras, choirs, sports clubs, and cultural societies were formed there, and became the center of a European network that reached every touchstone of Jewish existence.³

Most important, Varshe was also the official seat from which Icchok Leybush Peretz presided over the Jewish cultural renaissance of that era. Without taking anything away from the other two classic giants, Mendele Moscher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz has to be regarded as the most influential Yiddish writer of all time. From 1890, when he settled in Varshe, until his death at the beginning of World War I, Peretz shaped Yiddish literature into an instrument of national cohesion. His writings served as a pulpit

from which he educated, admonished, and, in the words of historian Ruth R. Wisse, “[led] Jews away from religion toward a secular Jewish existence without falling into the swamp of assimilation.”⁴ Under his influence, the city became the center of a rapidly growing modern culture that was based in the Yiddish language and acted as a magnet for Yiddish novelists, poets, journalists, and thespians. From his Varshe home, Peretz transformed the teachings of the Ten Commandments into a modern paradigm of moral consciousness. He taught uneducated Jews how to liberate themselves from the controls of orthodoxy. He inspired young Yiddish writers to join in his mission of creating a national literature, and he championed the Yiddish language, declaring it central to Jewish life. He educated Jewish workers to understand their own self-worth, and he freed Jewish women from subjugation to male domination. Peretz gave the Jews hope that a new and better world was coming: *Hof Un Gleib, Nisht Veit Is Noch Der Freehling* (Hope and Faith, Spring Is Not Far Away).

My parents’ generation embraced Peretz’s ideals as gospel and used them to build the Bund into what Motl Zelmanowicz described as “a vision of democratic and liberal socialism—not as a dogma, but as a way of life—as a garland of values which incorporate social justice, internationalism, and brotherhood of nations.”⁵

That was the Varshe I knew without ever stepping inside its borders; or sitting within its restaurants and cafés and listening to heated discussions by Varshever Jews of current events, politics, or the latest literary works; or attending one of its plays in which the fabled Ida Kaminska reigned supreme and taught the Yiddish masses the cultural value of theater. That was the city I visualized even though I never

participated in the plans of its residents for the new world that was soon to come, and even though I was far too young to join them in singing *Di Shvive*, the Bundist anthem that, in the lyrics written by the renowned Shimon Anski, swore boundless loyalty to the Bund.

The images of *that* Varshe remained alive for me until—until the moment our British Airways plane touched down at Okecie, Warsaw's international airport. They were instantly shattered. My father was right on. The Jewish Varshe that was frozen in my memory, placed there by his reminiscences, had vanished from the face of the earth. Intellectually, I had always known this fact, but I was unprepared for the psychological impact of facing the reality. To be fair, I suppose my reaction was a purely "Jewish" reflex. Were I, say, an Indian or a Brit or a Pole, or anyone except a Jew coming to today's Warsaw, I would not have had to endure the devastating emotional letdown that I experienced. What I found was a nondescript city bereft of vigor, rebuilt cheaply by Communists after World War II, with hardly a trace remaining of its historic and distinctive past. And, for all intents and purposes, it was devoid of Jews. For me, without Jews, Varshe might as well have been the capital of Azerbaijan.

From this point forward, I was sleepwalking, as if in a dream. I was conscious of people—my wife, Betty, my daughter, Idelle, and her husband, Howard, my four grandchildren; and of the places and things on our tour—old buildings, statues and sights tourists should see. But, for me, a strange surreal silence, the silence of those who were missing, enveloped everything and everyone. Author Jozef Hen, in defining Warsaw's old Jewish Cemetery, which contains the grave sites of some esteemed historical personages in

our culture and was somehow left virtually untouched by the Germans, explains: "The cemetery is a peculiar monument, unique evidence of what has happened. No, not because of the graves of those resting here. On the contrary, because of the graves that are not here. The Absent give evidence to the crime committed."

In a similar vein, the greatest impact to my consciousness was caused by what was absent from Warsaw. The Yiddish language was gone. It was missing from the names of shops and restaurants, from the chatter of voices on the streets, from the haggling between buyers and merchants in the marketplace, from the babble of discussions in the coffee houses, from the playful cries of children on the streets and in the courtyards.

The Polish government, with help from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and others, has done its best to mark the sacred and notable sites. The Polish tour guides are very professional as they carefully escort their clients through the history of the city. We too had done our part in preparing ourselves and telling Joshua, Aaron, Jared, and Mara, our grandkids, who ranged in age from sixteen to seven years, the story of the Holocaust. The older two boys had visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, and were provided with written material that they judiciously studied. But how is it possible to do justice to demonic acts that, in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's words, *beggar[ed] description?*⁶

The missing voices that I sought have been replaced by plaques; the haunting sense of vibrant Jewish life has been marked by monuments. These were all around me. I found it difficult to repress a sudden desire to run away, as if somehow, by leaving, I could preserve the images of the Varshe that had been infused in me. My fingers trembled as I

touched the plaque for Icchok Kacenelson, the great Yiddish poet. As a child, I had recited his words. His voice was silenced in Auschwitz. My heart pounded as we stopped at the plaque for Janusz Korczak, the Polish physician (born Henryk Goldszmit), who chose to perish in the Treblinka death camp, together with the Jewish children from his orphanage, rather than continue to live when they were being taken to their death. I couldn't find the words to explain to my grandchildren the majesty of his martyrdom. There is a plaque honoring Icchok Nyssenbaum, the rabbi leader of the Mizrachi and a member of the Warsaw underground. He perished in Treblinka. The members of the Bund who died in the Ghetto Uprising also have a plaque. Another, in the form of a manhole cover, memorializes the sewers through which Jewish inhabitants clandestinely entered and escaped from the ghetto; still another is dedicated to Shmul Zygelbojm, a member of the Warsaw Ghetto's first Jewish council. He escaped but later committed suicide in London—his way of protesting the world's indifference to the Holocaust. His final words were addressed to the exiled president of Poland: "I cannot remain silent, nor can I remain alive, while the last remnants of the Jewish people perish in Poland." The plaques and monuments house the ghosts of those who lived and perished here. Their silence speaks volumes.

On the mandatory tour through the Memorial Route of Jewish Martyrdom and Struggle, I steeled myself and tried to overcome the icy chill that encased my being. The tour route begins at the Monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto, runs down Zamenhof Street, past Shmul Zygelbojm Square, and arrives at the memorial to Mila 18, which gives special honor to Mordechai Anielewicz. His name has been etched in my memory since childhood. His plaque is silent, like so

many of the others. He was the twenty-three-year-old commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization, known in Poland as the *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (ZOB) who, on April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover, stood fast with his brave contingent of 750 Warsaw Ghetto fighters and faced the onslaught of the powerful German army.⁷ The story has assumed hallowed proportions and is recited at all uprising commemorations. On the exact day when Jews throughout the free world would sit down for their traditional Seder feast, SS Gruppenfuhrer Jurgen Stroop, commander of the Warsaw occupation forces, led a trained German army into the ghetto to deliver its final liquidation. By then, only fifty thousand Jews were left in the Varshever Ghetto. No longer did anyone have illusions about their destiny. Anielewicz's Resistance Fighters—poorly armed with handguns, a few rifles and grenades, iron rods, and Molotov cocktails, some made from light bulbs filled with sulphuric acid—stood ready to greet the foe.

They were prepared to die fighting. Against impossible odds, without military training, they inflicted considerable casualties on the Germans and were victorious in forcing the invaders to leave the ghetto and regroup. Although the outcome was a foregone conclusion, it took twenty-eight days of intense fighting and the full might of the German Wehrmacht—tanks, artillery, and fighter planes—to firebomb the ghetto and quell its defenders. Not until May 16 could Stroop report: "The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw no longer exists."

In 1951, Jurgen Stroop was sentenced to death and executed in Poland.

Mordechai Anielewicz couldn't have foreseen the full significance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In a defiant act reminiscent of the heroic deed of his brethren, centuries

earlier, at Masada, he and some of his brave compatriots committed suicide in their Mila Street bunker rather than allow themselves to be captured alive. But he sensed that the ramifications of the ghetto battle would go far beyond military reports and casualty statistics. In his last letter, written two weeks before his death on May 8, 1943, Anielewicz wrote: "I feel that great things are happening and that this action which we have dared to take is of enormous value."⁸ Indeed, news about the uprising inspired Jewish underground resistance elsewhere. There were revolts in more than sixty ghettos and in about one hundred regions, including those well documented in Kovno, Vilna, Minsk, Bialystok, Lachva, Novogruok, Lublin, and Krakow.⁹ And, ignoring the certainty of severe retribution, and irrespective of fences, guard towers, machine guns, searchlights, and vicious dogs, uprisings occurred in death and concentration camps, including those in Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz/Birkenau.¹⁰ Of a different dimension and of incalculable magnitude is the fact that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising will forever remain an exalted flashpoint of pride for Jewish people everywhere.

Elie Wiesel, a Nobel laureate author and a Holocaust survivor, in his introduction to *On Both Sides of the Wall*—the memoirs of Vladka Meed, whose real name was Feigele Pel-tel-Miedzyrzecki and who acted as a courier during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising—asks a puzzling question: Where did Mordechai Anielewicz "draw the strength, the knowledge, to go out in battle against the most awesome army in Europe?" One might think, Wiesel muses, that, as a consequence of German atrocities, the Jews would turn into animals. After all, as he suggests, "there are limits to human endurance. One must break at last." And yet, "the hangman

was mistaken." Throughout the ghetto years, Wiesel writes, the Jews refused to break: "The ghetto, half-a-million souls, for the most part did not become a jungle. Quite the contrary; people tried to help each other." Therefore, as Wiesel points out, "One must marvel even more at the fighters and couriers. Instead of falling into despair, they found reasons and strength to help others."¹¹

The silent Anielewicz plaque tried valiantly to tell my grandchildren all of that.

The Memorial Route then took us to its conclusion. We followed the tour guide down Stawki Street: past numbers 5 and 6, which once housed the SS Unit Command; past numbers 6 and 8, the former school and Jewish transit hospital; and to the intersection of life and death—the entrance of the *Umschlagplatz*. At this place, Varshever Jews were loaded into cattle cars and delivered to the gas chambers of Treblinka or other extermination centers. To distinguish the ignominy represented by this site from the evil of the others, four plaques, inscribed in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, silently explain: "Along this path of suffering and death over 300,000 Jews were driven in 1942-1943 from the Warsaw Ghetto to the gas chambers of Nazi extermination camps."¹² It doesn't—it can't—describe the starvation, disease, terror, and torture that were daily fare for those who managed to survive long enough to be brought here. Next to the Wall Monument are the remaining traces of the brickwork comprising the gate of the *Umschlagplatz*. Above the gate is this inscription from the book of Job 16:18: *O Earth, Cover Not My Blood, And Let My Cry For Justice Find No Rest*. Job's words don't register; instead, I hear the ringing words of children singing: "*Hof Un Gleib, Nisht Veit Is Noch Der Freehling*"—Hope and Faith, Spring Is Not Far Away.

Visiting the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery proved to be a momentary respite from the oppressive strain of the ghetto experience. The contrasting psychological effect between the death we encountered along the Memorial Route and its counterpart within the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery was as remarkable as it was immediate. There is silence here too, but this silence represents normalcy. As Jozef Hen notes, "Silence hangs above the place, but it is not a deathlike silence, not torpor." It is the silence of historic acknowledgment—of reverence toward past deeds and accomplishments. Whatever events defined the life and death of someone who found a final resting place in this venerable cemetery, they have no compelling comparison to the circumstances surrounding those who perished in Varshe during the Holocaust. The fact that this Jewish cemetery, the largest in Europe, exists at all is one of the wonders of the world. During the Nazi occupation, the cemetery was part of the ghetto. How and why the Nazis forgot to—or chose not to—destroy it will forever remain an enigma of wondrous proportions.

Established in 1806 and surrounded by a brick wall, the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery contains some 250,000 tombstones. The celebrated names inscribed there—names spoken with reverence in my parents' household—offer a rare walk through Jewish history. They include Shimon Askenazy, an historian and diplomat; Adam Czerniakow, president of the Warsaw Jewish Community, who became head of the Warsaw Judenrat and took his life rather than obey the SS order to deliver ten thousand Jews to the Umschlagplatz; Bronislaw Grosser, a Bund activist for whom the Yiddish school at which my parents taught in Bialystok was named; Esther Rachel Kaminska, the "mother of Yiddish Theater"; Ber Meisels, a legendary rabbi of Warsaw; I. L. Peretz, the

father of modern Yiddish literature, whose funeral on April 3, 1915, was attended by more than one hundred thousand people from all over the world (Peretz's monument, created in 1925 by sculptor Abraham Ostrzega, is shared with writer Jacob Dinezon and with Shimon Anski, the author of *The Dybbuk*, which premiered in 1920 at the Warsaw Elizeum Theater); Feliks Perl, a political activist and head of the Polish Socialist party; and Ludwik Zamenhof, who created the international language Esperanto.

Visiting the grave site of Esther Kaminska, who was compared during her life to the likes of Eleonora Dusa and Sarah Bernhardt, was of special moment for me. Her daughter was the fabled actress Ida Kaminska whose performances on the Varshe stage as well as throughout the world materially advanced I. L. Peretz's goal in establishing Yiddish as the centerpiece of modern Jewish life. Although my parents often saw her perform, I was never privileged to meet her. However, I did get to know her niece, Dina Halperin, who carried forward their family tradition and became a renowned international star of the Yiddish stage. Dina Halperin was a close personal friend of our family. She would often call on my father to discuss the deeper meaning of a given playwright's writing or in her quest for an unfamiliar Yiddish word. More to the point, I had the good fortune of performing in Chicago Yiddish theater productions under the direction of Dina Halperin.

My career in Yiddish theater was strictly as an amateur. Still, I did get recognition from a large segment of the Jewish population both in Chicago and New York, as a Yiddish actor. My parents were responsible for launching my acting career. Upon arrival in Chicago, they arranged my appearances at many of the Jewish cultural events with which they

became associated, where, to the delight of the audience, I would recite poetry in an impeccable Yiddish. Under my parent's tutelage, I spent countless hours preparing poems and learning to properly emote the poet's words and meaning. These public undertakings brought me a measure of fame. It also led me to participate as an actor on the legitimate Jewish stage in Chicago, as well as to partake in soap operas on Jewish radio programs. Subsequently, when the Chicago Yiddish Theater Organization was organized under the direction of Dina Halperin, I became a proud member of its permanent troupe.

These distant connections to the life of Esther Kaminska flashed though my mind as I stood in reverence in front of her grave.

If the visit to Warsaw left me unexpectedly shaken, the one to Bialystok did little to grant relief. The two-hour trip northeast from Warsaw was across flat and monotonous farmland that seemed frozen in a time warp. It offered no clue to the cataclysmic events that, half-a-century before, had occurred here and had altered the course of history forever. The countryside is peaceful now; the farmers plow and till their land, and their family members dutifully sell mushrooms to motorists passing along the highway. Life is now—as it always was before 1939—as it should be. But nearby is Treblinka; to the southwest is Gross-Rosen; to the southeast is Majdanek; and further south, behind Warsaw, is Auschwitz. The black storks that, for generations, have made their homes here still return to their former nests. If they could speak, I wondered, would they remember to inform their offspring that in this region of the world, where once lived three million Jews who spoke in Yiddish, their winged ancestors witnessed the darkest days in human history?

Elie Wiesel remembered. He wrote, "The beginning, the end: all the world's roads, all the outcries of mankind, lead to this accursed place. Here is the kingdom of night, where God's face is hidden and a flaming sky becomes a graveyard for a vanished people."¹³

Although it is the city where I was born, I found myself less connected to Bialystok than to Warsaw. Upon reflection, this is understandable. My memories of Bialystok are those of a seven-year-old. They remained frozen in that time-space construct. My subsequent strong connections to Jewish life—those that molded my identity—were formed by actions and events that occurred thereafter, either with a historical Varshe reference, or as a consequence of an educational format directed mainly by my parents, or based on world events that took place as I grew up. The images I retained of Bialystok were only momentary memory snatches: my immediate family, the house I lived in, the street I played on, some familiar city sights, and a few critical flashes after the onset of the war and during our escape from the Nazis. Some of these snapshots I was able to get close to during our visit, but most of them were gone forever.

When I was a child, the Bialystok *stotzeiger*, or town clock, seemed of landmark proportions. My recollection was not far from the truth. Renovated now as a museum piece, its structure still stands proudly in the middle of the city and offers a warm welcome. Constructed circa 1900, the clock's four faces look down on the citizens of Bialystok and provide a reassuring image of a small but ambitious Polish town. Bialystok, the largest city in northeastern Poland, now has a population of 280,000 and acts as the seat of a land region that encompasses over ten thousand square kilometers. Deriving its name from the Biala River (*biala* is the

word for “white” in Slavic languages), which runs through the city, it was founded in 1320 by Prince Gedimin of Lithuania. The first Jews came there in 1558, but, for some two hundred years, until the rule of Count Jan Branicki, whose heirs governed the Bialystok province from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Jews were denied full citizenship. In 1939, just before the Germans invaded Poland, there were 110,000 Jews living in Bialystok, representing over sixty percent of the city’s population. It meant that Bialystok had the highest percentage of Jews among the world’s cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants. Bialystok also had the greatest number of synagogues per capita, with thirty-three rabbis in attendance.¹⁴

Upon our arrival, the mayor of Bialystok, Richard Tur, sadly advised us through an interpreter (an appointment had been arranged, courtesy of the Polish Consulate in Chicago) that we had come too late. The last Bialystoker Jew had died three weeks before. “Just think,” my wife whispered, “had you come back to Bialystok a little sooner, there would have been two of you.” The tragic reality that had haunted me throughout our time in Varshe had followed me here. The great Jewish center of Bialystok was *Judenrein*, just as Hitler had intended. Alas, the black swastika painted on the adjacent wall of the archival building reminded us that you don’t need the presence of Jews to have anti-Semitism.

I had clear memories of our home and the neighborhood where I grew up. Our house, a simple wooden bungalow, sometimes referred to as a *chaate* in Yiddish, was inherited by my mother from her father, who died before I was born. It stood in the heart of the Jewish section and had a dining room, a kitchen, and one bedroom. The kitchen was domi-

nated by a black potbellied stove that sat in the middle like a headless dark Buddha. The dining room boasted a white-brick wall oven that allowed my *babba* (my maternal grandmother) to prepare *cholnt* over the weekend. Cholnt was eastern European manna: a thick stew made of pieces of beef, potatoes, onions, carrots, beans, and a host of spices mixed together in a thick pot and cooked overnight. The house also had an attic where babba slept, and a cellar where she stored the bottles of pickles and preserves that she prepared during summer months. We also enjoyed indoor plumbing, a luxury seldom found in Jewish homes. My father, who, along with my mother, was a teacher by profession—and who, in my childish mind could do almost anything—had built the washroom, complete with a pull-chain for the overhead water box. That room lifted our family well above the station of our neighbors.

To my surprise, although most were abandoned, we found a number of such chaates still standing in what once was the Jewish quarter. I was now faced with the moment of truth I had often contemplated—my reaction to an encounter with a close and personal object of my childhood. Sighting the Bialystok *stotzeiger* was exciting but had brought on no deep emotional response. However, seeing the row of old dilapidated wooden houses, any one of which could have doubled for the house I was born in, suddenly brought forward unexpected waves of nostalgia that were as frightening as they were welcome. I experienced an immediate rush of disparate childhood memories—the youthful faces of my parents; my mother's white satin blouse that she sometimes wore to work; my babba's black woolen shawl, and how she placed it over her shoulders on the Sabbath; the outline of our kitchen cabinet; the voices of my

friends—some of whom I didn't know that I remembered—shouting out my name in Yiddish and calling me to come outside to play—all these came at me at once, causing gooseflesh along my spine and—for the first time in many, many years—bringing tears to my eyes. A similar effect, perhaps in combination with the wooden relics from the past, came from seeing the cobblestones beneath my feet precisely as I had remembered them on Fastowska Street, where we lived. If I had any remaining doubts that I was again standing in the neighborhood of my childhood, they were completely dispelled by a nearby structure that was amazingly similar to the little Beth Midrash synagogue that had been at the foot of our block. The plaque on its wall confirmed that it was indeed the former Piaskower Synagogue. Built in 1890, it had survived the decades almost intact. Its renovated structure now serves as offices for a construction firm and for the Zamenhof Esperanto Society. The entire episode was for me an emotional watershed.

In our search for the area where the Great Synagogue of Bialystok once stood, we were directed to the wall of a small building, where a plaque memorialized the victims who died when this illustrious house of worship was burned. Designed in 1908 by a renowned architect, Shlome Jakow Rabinowicz, the Great Synagogue's dome exhibited a Byzantine-Muslim influence and was famous throughout Europe. In this synagogue, open only on Saturdays and holidays, women prayed together with men, although in separate halls. Between World Wars I and II, national holidays were celebrated there and the services were attended by such dignitaries as the mayor and the governor of the region.¹⁵ I was suddenly confronted by a flashback of tragic proportions. The Nazis recaptured Bialystok on June 27, 1941. Six

days later, to celebrate their victory, German soldiers, at gun point, forced eight hundred Jews, mostly women and children from the neighborhood, into the Great Synagogue. They locked the doors and then set the structure on fire. Both of my grandmothers and my only aunt, Bobble, were among those who burned to death. How was it determined, I wondered, that I should escape their fate?

There is another visible commemoration of the Great Synagogue of Bialystok. On the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, a monument was erected in its honor in a small square near its original location. The monument corrects some of the errors contained in the original plaque and exhibits the only remaining part of the structure: the iron beams that once supported its magnificent dome. In another flashback, my father's determined face appeared as he lectured me about the importance of holding true to one's principles. That incident happened just after the outbreak of the war. The mayor of Bialystok asked the synagogue's rabbi, Dr. Gedali Rozenman, for permission to hold a city council meeting there because the city hall had been destroyed by bombs. The rabbi agreed, but requested that all city council members wear a yarmulke (a skull cap). The mayor readily agreed; council members would surely respect the nature of such a request. Well, not everyone. My father, one of the few Jewish representatives to the Bialystok City Council, was an ardent Bundist. Although steeped in the Talmud, my father and the legions of his fellow Bundists had found religion too restrictive in their battle for equality and social justice for Jews. Their god was the Jewish worker. My father refused the rabbi's request because the wearing of a yarmulka might compromise his oath to the Bund. It was a matter of principle.

We visited the memorial to the leaders and fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising. It was led by Mordechai Tenenbaum, one of the organizers of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters. Upon his arrival in Bialystok in November 1942, Tenenbaum, convinced that the Germans meant to murder them all, advanced this credo: "Let us fall as heroes, and though we die, yet we shall live." As a youngster, I first heard those words in conversations around our kitchen table. The motto unified the various underground factions, who then formed The Bialystok Organization of Jewish Self-Defense. The new organization issued the following manifesto: "Don't be lambs for slaughter! Fight for your life to the last breath. . . . Remember the example and tradition of numerous generations of Jewish fighters, martyrs, thinkers and builders, pioneers, and creators. Come out to the streets and fight."

On Sunday night, August 15, 1943, the call was answered. It is a story I know well. The ghetto fighters attacked three rings of German soldiers and police surrounding the ghetto. Two days later, Bialystok was a city under siege. The Bialystoker Self-Defense Organization, with more than two hundred armed Jewish fighters, was holding the ghetto hostage. The fighting lasted six days; the Germans used tanks, artillery, and airplanes to quell the uprising. Unofficial data and eyewitness accounts put the Nazi losses at one hundred soldiers killed or wounded. The name of one of the heroes of the uprising was strangely similar to my father's, Icchok Malmed. After throwing acid in the faces of some particularly savage Nazi soldiers, Malmed gave himself up when the Germans threatened to retaliate by shooting one thousand Jews. He was executed by hanging. A plaque in his memory was placed on Malmeda Street, named for him.¹⁶

The memorial to the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising stands on the site of the old Jewish cemetery on Zabia Street. A telling

story is connected with this site. After the war, when about 1,100 Jews returned to Bialystok, the damage to the old Zabia Street cemetery at the hands of the Nazis was repaired. Then, the remains of some 3,500 ghetto victims were buried, a wall was built around the cemetery, and several obelisks were erected. Two decades later, in 1971, an anti-Semitic wave, allegedly incited by Communist authorities, caused the Bialystok ghetto cemetery to be destroyed once again. Its monuments and obelisks were blown up. This incident provoked former Israeli prime minister Icchok Shamir, who, as a youth, had attended the Bialystok Hebrew gymnasium (high school), to remark: "The young Polacks destroyed everything the Nazis did not—even the Jewish cemeteries."

Little wonder that there are no Jews remaining in Bialystok. And without Jews, Bialystok has lost its meaning, its *raison d'être*—or so it seems to me. And something else is missing. Bialystok was the Polish center for textile production and finished goods. It was also a bustling city filled with Jews from every walk of life. Some of them became quite distinguished. Icchok Shamir, who served as prime minister of Israel in 1983-84 and again in 1986-92, was a Bialystoker; so was Dr. Ludwik L. Zamenhof, an ophthalmologist by profession, who, in 1887, became world famous as the inventor of the international language Esperanto. Dr. Albert B. Sabin was also a Bialystoker. As a microbiologist in the United States, Sabin improved on the Salk polio vaccine and developed an oral equivalent. A renowned Parisian, international lawyer Samuel Pizar, who spent his adolescence in Auschwitz, was a Bialystoker. His autobiography, *Of Blood and Hope*, published in 1979, has been translated into twenty languages. And it should not be forgotten that, beginning in

the 1880s, Bialystok thrived as a center of the Jewish labor movement, a revolutionary arena that produced many prominent personalities and writers.

However, more than the weavers of Bialystok or its citizens who distinguished themselves in medicine or in politics, were the bakers of Bialystok who exported the fame of the city to the world. Over the years, Bialystok would leave its gastronomical mark, especially on the United States, where bakeries, delicatessens, and food stores would sell the "bially," a breakfast roll—the creation of Bialystok bakers.

Mimi Sheraton, the respected food aficionado, recently wrote a book, *The Bialy Eaters*, devoted to this subject. She talks of the success of the bialy—a distant cousin of the bagel but without the hole in its center—and describes her search for the original "Bialystoker Kuchen," a baked roll about nine inches in diameter (larger than a bialy). It had a perimeter of raised dough, and its flat, crisp, disklike center was impressed with *mohn* (poppy seeds) and shreds of roasted onions. Bialystoker Jews who loved the kuchen (that included nearly everyone) were known as "Bialystoker Kuchen *fressers*" (immense eaters). Sheraton tells how she traveled far and wide to record personal memories of those who had first-hand experience with this fabled delight. She also reports that Nina Selin, of Washington DC, describes her family as descendants of three generations of bialy bakers. Ms. Selin claims that her maternal great-great-grandfather, Moshe Nosovich, born in Bialystok in 1835, was the inventor of the Bialystoker Kuchen.¹⁷ Perhaps. But what every Bialystoker, including myself, can testify is that the Bialystoker Kuchen was the original McCoy and was far tastier than its current counterpart. Alas, there no longer are any Bialystoker Kuchens or, for that matter, any Jewish Bialy-

stoker bakers. Sadly, my father's "There is nothing there left for me" echoes through my mind.

A strange and infectious silence overcame our group upon departure. There was much to think about, and many emotions to sort out. My daughter, recognizing that I might be experiencing a letdown after all the anticipation, quietly said, "Well, at least it was closure." That it was! But I wasn't so certain that closure was what I had been looking for. Much later, when we returned to our hotel in Warsaw, a happening of an astounding nature hit us. The coincidence was strange and ironic. Here we were, at the very heart of the Holocaust—the place where Hitler's *final solution* for the Jewish people had begun. Yet, six decades later, news comes to us that a Jew, Senator Joe Lieberman, had been chosen as the Democratic Party's candidate for the office of vice president of the United States.

Notes

1. F. Richard Ciccone, *Chicago and the American Century: the 100 most significant Chicagoans of the twentieth century* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, The Chicago Tribune Company, 1999).

2. Decades later, the fascist movement in Germany also used the name "bund," which means "league," in creating a Nazi organization with dramatically opposite objectives.

3. Miriam Weiner, *Jewish Roots in Poland* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1997), 116.

4. Ruth R. Wisse, introduction to *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), xii.

5. Motl Zelmanowicz, *Memories of the Bund, In Love and in Struggle* (New York, 1998).

6. On April 12, 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then commanding the Allied military forces in Europe, visited the Ohrdruf concentration camp. After viewing the evidence of atrocities, he wrote in a letter to General George C. Marshall, dated April 15, 1945, "The things I saw beggar[ed] description. . . . The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were . . . overpowering. . . . I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to 'propaganda.'" Letter reproduced in The U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter "USHMM").

7. The ZOB was made up of twenty-two fighting groups, mostly leaders and active members representing various points on the political spectrum. The groups ranged from the orthodox religious organization (Agudas Israel) through the Zionist parties (Hechalutz groups, Poale-Zion Left, and Poale-Zion Right) to the Socialist Bund and the newly created branch of the Polish Workers' Party.

8. "Resistance During the Holocaust." USHMM.

9. The armed revolt in Vilna took place in September 1943 under the command of Itzak Witenberg and, upon his death, un-

Notes

der the command of the twenty-three-year-old Abba Kovner after the issuance of a manifesto by its Jewish Fighting Organization imploring the remaining fourteen thousand Jews to resist deportation. The most successful organized resistance was carried out by members of the underground in Minsk, who helped between six thousand and ten thousand persons flee to nearby forests. The Jews in Lachva, lacking guns, set fire to the ghetto and attacked Germans with axes, knives, iron bars, pitchforks, and clubs. USHMM.

10. Louis Weber, *The Holocaust Chronicle* (Publication International, Ltd, 2000), 492.

11. Vladka Meed, introduction to *On Both Sides of the Wall* (Israel: Beit Lohamei Hagetaot and Hameuchad Publishing House, 1972), 6.

12. The concentration camps in Poland where Jews perished were Auschwitz/Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Gross-Rosen, Majdanek, Plaszow, Sobibor, Stutthof, and Treblinka. USHMM.

13. Elie Wiesel, "Pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Night," *New York Times*, November 4, 1979.

14. Tomasz Wisniewski, *Jewish Bialstok* (Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Press, 1998), 34-35.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Mimi Sheraton, *The Bialy Eaters* (New York: Broadway Books/Random House, 2000), 37.

This paper was written for The Chicago
Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday
evening, the Twelfth of January, Two Thousand and Four.

This edition of three hundred copies
was printed for the Club in the month of
September, Two Thousand and Five.