
The Birthday Party

Avner Holtzman

IT WAS taken on Saturday, March 20, 1937, in the town of Swienciany, which lies on the Polish border with Lithuania approximately 50 miles northeast of Vilna. Nine girls and two boys, together with three women and two men, had gathered on a pleasant spring day in the Svirsky home at 11 Pilsudski Street to celebrate the fourth birthday of the youngest girl, Hanele.

Called in to record the event was Yaakov (Yankl) Levine, the local photographer. As the guests arranged themselves in a half-circle around the extended table, he set up his heavy camera, inserted his head under the black cloth, calibrated light and distance, issued last-minute instructions, and finally pressed a button to capture the image on a glass plate at the bottom of his apparatus. The party broke up, the celebrants went about their affairs, and several days later the resulting photograph was delivered to the Svirsky residence, together with numerous postcard-sized copies. Several of these were distributed as souvenirs among the original participants, others dispatched far and wide to relatives in Leningrad, Berlin, and Argentina—testimony to the abundance, security, and sedateness of the lives depicted.

There had been, indeed, special cause for celebration: four-year-old Hanele had only lately re-

covered from a dangerous outbreak of scarlet fever that had seen her hospitalized in Vilna and had left her with permanent damage to her heart. From now on, she would have to adhere to a special diet and abstain from physical effort. The party was thus intended to mark her recuperation as well as her birthday, and many wishes for a long and healthy life were voiced by the adults in attendance.

Obviously, none of the participants could imagine what the future held in store. Not in their worst nightmares could they conceive that in September 1939, a mere two-and-a-half years later, their world would be completely overturned, or that within another two years the community of Swienciany, together with thousands of similar Jewish communities, would be put to an end. Of the sixteen people in the photograph, six were due to perish together on a single bitter day in early October 1941. Six more would be murdered or starved to death in various places between 1940 and 1944. Only four were privileged to see the day of deliverance in 1945, of whom three are still alive today.

ON THAT relaxed spring day, a week before the Passover festival, all this was far beyond the horizon. The family table had been carefully prepared for the event, fitted with an extension, bedecked with a white holiday cloth, and festooned with treats. In the center stood a vase of white ivory with a dark ellipse; from it, just before the picture was snapped, a garland of artificial flowers and fruit-

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Ironically, there is far broader consensus today on issues like the U.S. presence in Korea and Europe than ever during the cold war. Even the notion of American military superiority is taken for granted and seemingly welcomed by people who not many years ago regarded it as dangerous. This has happened partly because the Democratic party, under Clinton's leadership, has tried to contest the foreign-policy mantle won by the Republicans through the successes of Presidents Reagan and Bush, and thereby to reclaim the center of American politics. For opportunistically leading his party away from some of its previous stances, we should perhaps be grateful to Clinton.

While it is surprising that this consensus about American military power has developed at a time when the need for it has become less evident, perhaps the explanation is that these commitments now involve less risk and demand less courage. When Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," not only did he cause outrage among those on the Left addicted to moral equivalence, but he was attacked as a warmonger: offending the Soviet Union was a dangerous business. Confronting Saddam Hussein took leadership and great courage from President Bush because no one knew that victory would come at such a low cost. It is only recently, when confronting Iraq seems relatively easy, that everyone has become a "hawk." The debate over Kosovo was mild compared to what it would have been had the U.S. been suffering serious losses or even facing that possibility.

Among conservatives, many are now divided by the concern that the U.S. may be undertaking commitments whose importance to the national interest is unclear and which we may abandon if they prove too costly to sustain, as Clinton did in Somalia and as even Reagan did in Lebanon. Or, if we persist, we may find ourselves confronting horrendous costs that we failed to anticipate, as happened in Vietnam. In this connection, it is surprising and a bit unsettling to observe the ease with which Democrats who once embraced George McGovern now speak in a pale echo of President Kennedy's call to "pay any price, bear any burden" in behalf of freedom. Military forces are spoken of as instruments for diplomatic signaling, and even for nation-building. Such talk should make any sensible conservative nervous, and even more so when force is actually used with the gradualism that characterized the war in Vietnam and without any sense of how to "win."

To this I would add the qualifier, however, that the dangers of American overextension do not

seem to me comparable to what they were in Vietnam, and I would agree with Podhoretz that it is far more dangerous to underestimate than to overestimate the risks of a major war in the future. Still, in order to complete his very useful guide for the perplexed, one would need to specify more precisely the mission he sets forth—protecting and preserving freedom, and spreading its blessings—even if doing so may create new fault lines among conservatives.

In particular, when it comes to putting American soldiers in harm's way, there is a big difference between protecting freedom where it exists and spreading it. There are no less important differences between places like the Persian Gulf that could be the sources of major threats to U.S. security and places like Haiti that are not. When it comes to armed intervention, similarly, there is a difference between giving others the means to fight for themselves, as we should have done in Bosnia, and fighting for them. And when it comes to promoting democracy, there is a difference between defending it where it is established, as on Taiwan, and promoting it where it has not yet taken root. In the case of China, our limited influence on that country is more likely to be effective if we take the milder course that President Reagan followed in dealing with authoritarian regimes like the Philippines and South Korea than the approach he took toward our ideological rival in the cold war, the Soviet Union.

Finally, if pressed, I would be more inclined to analogize our own time to 1899 than, as Podhoretz does, to 1919—in the sense that the looming danger over the next twenty years is more likely to be a resurgence of great-power conflict than the ideological crusades of Nazism and Communism that produced World War II and the cold war. But while we cannot be certain what the greatest dangers confronting us will be, the worst imaginable indictment would be if future generations, looking back, were to conclude that our generation could have prevented a global conflict, but failed. It may be hard to measure our actions by so severe a standard at a time when dangers of a global magnitude seem remote. Nonetheless, it is the right standard, and the task of leadership should be to remind the American people that these are indeed the stakes of American preeminence in the world.

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like balls had been removed so as not to block the photographer's view. Another, smaller vase, a work of Polish folk art brought by Hanele's parents from their vacation in Zakopane, served as a napkin holder at the far edge of the table. Additional white cloths were arranged in a container that shows as a dark patch in the center of the picture.

Scattered on the table in the photograph are the wide tea mugs in which the children had been served their drinks. These were part of the family's special dinner service—white with a gold stripe around the edge. The refreshments set out on the table include, to the right of the two vases, a transparent bowl full of oranges—a rare fruit purchased especially for this occasion. Below this, in a flat plate, a large piece of cake is visible, and slightly below that, to the left of the big sugar bowl, is another dish that appears to have contained a collection of dark balls, several of which also repose on individual plates. These were *teigelakh*, dough balls fried in honey, a delicacy of the Lithuanian Jewish kitchen. The plates also hold round cookies with sharp dark edges. It seems the guests were at the height of their feast, or close to the end, when they were asked to assemble for the photograph.

The entire event took place in the family dining

room, its walls covered by wallpaper in a pattern of straight angles effecting a gradual transition from brown to pale beige. A white lace curtain over the window facing the courtyard reflects the light streaming in from outside. Against this background one can distinctly make out the leaves of a plant in an (invisible) vase under the window. On the wall hangs a framed picture of the birthday girl, Hanele, dressed all in white and holding a doll. This is in fact a detail from an earlier photograph of the extended family that the same Yaakov Levine had taken a year before; enlarging it, and presenting it to Hanele's surprised and joyful parents, had been the photographer's own idea.

BUT THE main interest lies in the people gathered for *this* occasion, and their families. Take, for example, on the right edge of the picture, the girl with the folded collar and short, straight hair, lowering her head slightly and casting a bashful glance at the camera. This is Rokhele (Rachel) Kreizer, aged eight, an unassuming, warm-hearted girl from a poor family who was a distant relative of Hanele. Her father, Shlomo Kreizer, short and of hesitant manner with a small mustache, was employed as an accountant at a local grain dealer. Her mother, Bat-

ceaselessly revert to the past. Those who lost their parents, siblings, relatives, and friends are inconsolable to this day. But in recent years more and more members of the younger generation appear at these gatherings, seeking to express their own sense of identification with the burden—and not only the burden, but the happy memories as well—of their parents.

In the summer of 1991, 50 years after Poligon, a large group of survivors and their descendants traveled to Swienciany, walked the route of that last march and held a memorial service near the large earthen structure that covers the mass grave. A new tombstone was erected by the visitors from Israel, stating explicitly in Hebrew and Lithuanian that a key role in the murder had been played by the local populace. Additional services were held near the collective graves of other Jews murdered in the area.

Along with the group ceremonies, Leah Svirsky-Holtzman—my mother—fulfilled a private duty at this gathering. In the old cemetery of Swienciany she located her father Haim's grave and finally erected a proper stone. Her younger sister, my aunt Hanele, is commemorated at the museum of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. There, visitors to the Chil-

dren's Hall encounter, upon entering the room, enlarged photographs of nine boys and girls representing, as drops represent the ocean, their million-and-a-half murdered brothers and sisters. One of the nine, in a white beret, is Hanele Svirsky, aged three, her small image enlarged by the museum's curators from the family photo just as the photographer Yankel Levine had enlarged it 50 years earlier.

Even though the name of Pilsudski Street has since been changed several times, the Svirskys' house at Number 11 still stands, now occupied by another family. In that house, or in another, are very likely kept the elegant cups, the vases, and the utensils seen in the photograph, together with other possessions looted from the abandoned Jewish homes of Swienciany. As for the photograph of the birthday party itself, this, preserved in one of its copies by relatives in Argentina, was returned to my grandmother after the war. It testifies that all who gathered in that house, on that balmy spring day in 1937, once truly existed. For some of them, indeed, and especially for the innocent children among them, the picture may be the only such piece of material evidence—that, and these lines now penned in their memory.