

December 13, 1990

Dear David,

Thank you so much for your letter. The photo was a real surprise. I should not compliment you in order not to make you too vain, so I will just say that Aryeh is such a handsome and bright-looking boy taking all the best features from Shana and you. He already looks like a young boy while Marcin is still more of a toddler.

I liked your responses to the letters. When I read your article last spring I supposed that there would be lots of reaction to it, but I did not expect such diametrically diverse opinions, although I should have expected them knowing what a sensitive topic—Jewish—Ukrainian relations are. It is like—with Polish—Jewish relations: whenever you touch the topic and try to present it somehow objectively, you can be attacked from all possible sides for all sorts of reasons. Anders' review is very good, too. I know Jaroslaw Anders; actually he helped me a lot with some of my translations when I was still a student. He worked as an editor for the Polish monthly Literatura na swiecie (World Literature) at that time. He is a very good translator and critic.

I am so sorry that I have been such a bad correspondent lately. You are right that we were in touch much more when the Atlantic was between us. One of the reasons for this negligence is my general lack of energy. I have recovered after the operation but I seem to catch all possible germs. It is the same with Marcin. We have been to doctor's at least seven times because of his constant colds and so far he has taken antibiotics twice and penicillin once. I am just not used to it since he would never be sick before and he never took any medicines in Poland or in New York. I suppose it is his reaction to daycare and the different climate, very wet and rainy. All the energy that I have left, I devote to my translation and it really raises my spirits. Sometimes I feel like a Sisyphus or Benedictine monk but it is so rewarding and I am learning so much. I suppose that after I have translated Der Sotn I should not have major problems with translating Singer's stories and other novels, although - as you know very well being a translator yourself - every single text, even seemingly simple, may be a challenge. Several years ago I translated a large selection of passages from Richard Hakluyt's Voyages. Since they were the texts from the 11th to the 17th centuries I had to use lots of archaization and now I find this experience very helpful. For example, one of the authentic letters from the Turkish Sultan to Queen Elizabeth I was very similar to the letter in chapter 11. I am very grateful to Professor Shmeruk who volunteered to read my translation and make all kinds of corrections and suggestions (he has already corrected the first two chapters and did it very carefully). Otherwise I would worry that I have committed lots of minor and

major crimes, most often unawares. As you may guess, I have lots of problems with Hebrew expressions. Even if I know their meaning or am familiar with their English equivalents, I have problems with finding adequate Polish expressions. Fortunately, I brought a number of Polish translations of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem with me and they are sometimes very helpful. One of the paradoxes is that I use Yiddish-English and Yiddish-English-Hebrew dictionaries because a good Yiddish-Polish dictionary is not available. But it is such a joy when I encounter Slavic words and expressions written with Hebrew characters. I can visualize the shtetl much better when I read about it in Yiddish than when I used to read about it in English. And I am absolutely enchanted with syntax which is nearly as flexible as that of the Slavic languages. It gives the story such incredible rhythm. An the use of the present tense or historical present that I have already mentioned to you! Another paradox is that professor Shmeruk is in Poland now and it would be so much easier to cooperate with him if I were in Lublin at present. On the other hand, I would not have so much time for translating.

My working day is from about 9 till 5 when Marcin is in daycare. Apart from that, I have very little time as Chris is working really hard, quite often at weekends, as well. He is a supervisor of a group home for the mentally retarded and it gives his lots of duties and worries.

When I was still in Poland, I was so exhausted that I was dreaming of working as a security guard in the Lenin Museum at Poronin, or whatever you call these elderly ladies who sit in museums and read books or knit sweaters. Poronin is a place in the Tatra mountains where Lenin happened to stay for some time so, of course, they had to take advantage of it and establish a museum. No one would visit it apart from some eccentric Western tourists and you can imagine what a relaxing job it could be. Unfortunately, they might close this museum now (if they have not already done so) and my dream job will fly away. We have an expression in Polish (maybe it is borrowed from Yiddish, who knows) that life is like a short blanket - krotka koldra: when you cover your feet, your head is cold, and the other way round. Now when I have a relatively quiet life, I start missing my academic and editorial hustle and bustle. I wish I had two incarnations and two different lives. Well, you probably express this wish as often as I do. Anyway, I am trying to find some job, at least part time, so as not to forget how to speak English, socialize and make some extra money, but it seems to be difficult. I applied just out of curiosity to a couple of English Departments (in some of them they teach comparative literature courses). In one application, to the University of British Columbia, I allowed myself a liberty of giving you as a reference. But it is very doubtful that they will be interested in my application (I believe they give priority to native speakers of English) so most probably they will not bother you.

I was very depressed with the presidential campaign in Poland. I

am all for Mazowiecki and I really feel sorry for him and ashamed for the success of Stanislaw Tyminski. Now I can only hope that Walesa will at least stop behaving like a dictator and will come to terms with his former advisors. The whole story shows how crazy the situation in Poland is. Does not it resemble the madness in Goray? There was a popular joke in Poland when I was leaving that so far we have had the dictatorship of the proletariat and soon it will be replaced by the dictatorship of a proletarian. I am greatly worried with the situation in the Middle East as well.

Marcin is our great joy. He is so interested in everything and he is learning English so fast. I read lots of Polish books with him or English books in Polish so that he does not forget his Polish. It is so great to read Brzechwa's poems with him. Brzechwa is the most fantastic (and untranslatable) Polish poet for children, Jewish as most of the best Polish poets of the twentieth century are. All Poles know his poems by heart; he also wrote a number of wonderful stories and novels for children. It seems to me that just a few years ago my parents read them to me. Following your advice I let him watch the Sesame Street (actually this series is very popular in Poland, too).

We hope you are having a beautiful Hanukkah time. One of the things I miss here is a large Jewish community and this wonderful combination of Christmas trees and menorahs from New York. We shall have latkes tonight, though.

I might go to Montreal in April. Last week Raizel Candib from Montreal called me and invited to deliver a lecture at the Jewish Library. I met her in Lublin last July when I made a little party with a lecture at my apartment for a group of Canadians. Most of them were history teachers and they were visiting various places connected with the Holocaust in Germany, Poland and Israel. You probably know her, she mentioned going to school with you or your sister, I cannot remember now.

That is the first time I have written a letter to you on the computer. I do not like the idea because it seems to me that all my mistakes and clumsy expressions are more visible. It is good that one of your virtues is tolerance.

Love and best wishes to you, Shana and Aryeh.

*Elwira*

*I enclose two photos taken in November*