

## THE ROAD FROM DRUBNA TO DROVITZ

by Aharon Appelfeld

We were about to make the night journey from Drubna to Drovitz once again. The horses went ahead of us, and behind us glimmered the last light of day. We had left our houses, the smell of men and of sweat, and delivered ourselves over to the sweet incense of the balsam. For the child and the penitent,\* suddenly caught up in this transformation, it must have been a strange and marvelous thing: to witness the exalted separation, to feel with the exhilarated crowd the slow plaint, the exultant groan of the wheels.

The merchants had left their meager businesses behind in the care of their wives. Only the tough waterdrawers remained in the town, the woodcutters, the tradesmen whom hammer and nails forever fasten to their workbenches. Likewise the blind, the dumb, and those whose handicaps make long journeys arduous for them had stayed behind to fill the unseeing void of the otherwise empty town.

Between Drubna and Drovitz stood a tree. It must still be there. And early on a summer's night it seemed like a forest, where all birds nested and all melodies were sung. And a light mist rose from the stream. There Father sliced the twisted loaf on the ground, in an embroidered cloth.

There were two hardy gentiles with us, trusted servants well versed in the ways of the horses, who kept apart from the excited throng. Melody accompanied us. It must have been a great song, for to this very day it hums within us, as if at some inner

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\*Hebrew ba'al teshuvah: a Jew who becomes pious after living an irreligious life. -Translator

remove, fearsome in its sound.

Then came a flat expanse, and a monotonous rhythm which permeated you, along with the night, along with the breathing of the steaming horses. How strange Father looked holding a liquor bottle. He spoke tenderly to his son, eager to show him the way from Drubna to Drovitz before the time came for the lad to make the trip on his own. Uncle was there too, completely carried away with enthusiasm. Father never rebuked him, for he knew how studiously he applied himself to his books at night. Uncle was suspected of doing things that ought not to be done, but Father knew that, in fact, the only thing he ever did at night was pore over his books.

A bridge loomed up ahead of us, its railing engraved with the name of the Emperor. A child looked upon it and trembled. What a clatter the horses' hooves made when they struck the wood. Waters from above and below would mix and then freeze for a moment in their courses. Someone climbed down from the wagon, leaned hard over the railing, and peered in, under the bridge.

And the waters were drawn to the forests. They must have been big forests, for their rustling continues to this very day: big, to judge by their trees; big, to judge by the sound they made. The father took off his fur coat for the child to sleep in, or perhaps to shield him from the spreading fervor, for the child was small and the cart open to the night.

And we had a penitent with us, a thick-bearded Jew whom the others had refused to take along until his face was covered with hair and a Jewish gleam shone in his eyes. Now he was with us. Much taller than the rest, the years of licentiousness had dis-

tended his body, and the years of penitence had blenched his face. How hot his hairy hand was on a boy's cheek.

We passed the empty ruins, the palaces of noble lords who had been exiled many years before, now standing vacant. This must be the way empty palaces stand, their windows open to the depths of darkness. You could tell they had once been palaces. And had we not been warned about empty ruins? Father knew the names of the nobles as well as he did the names of the cities laid waste by Joshua.

And we met two gentiles along the way. Invoking their gods and the night, they walked along the shoulders of the road so as not to disturb the plodding caravan. And the stars, glimpsed from time to time through the overarching foliage, were closeby then. They must have been; no one can say otherwise. Father was a little embarrassed at the heavy drinking--rapture glistened on his brow--and he said, "Lie down, my son." And the boy closed his eyes so as not to see with eyes open. He could not have fallen asleep, for how then explain the sights that he saw? Father's cloak flashed in the dark, and he exchanged some grave words with his friend the penitent. A true penitent he was, for his face shone.

Then it was night there, far from the day, enveloped by the light of darkness, so much so that eyes became recognizable, and the horses' breath rose like the smoke of incense. And we were then in the heart of the plain, in the heart of the crop. On such a night you had to take care not to be sidetracked by the streaming light, not to lose touch. So you would close your eyes to avoid being exposed to the eye of the night, which is bigger

than all staring eyes put together. But after that there were only stars, and even an infant could open his eyes without fear of harm.

We stopped at Helonkes' Well, the one the nobleman had dug for passersby. The horses dipped their heads into the trough, and their thirsty faces gleamed, long and quivering. The wheel above the well groaned, and the night water was chill to the tongue. And then they sang the Song at the Sea. Such is the custom of the pilgrim caravan: they drink coffee and sing the Song at the Sea, and the light of lanterns and the light of the water shine upon each other. For a moment, the voices of the dogs too would be heard.

The night soon drew low, touching the forehead with dew, a summer dew such as blossoms on grass. Someone raised his staff, and its tip touched the path of the constellations. So remote, as if all through the years we had been nomads, accompanied by campfire light. The merchants had left their business affairs and their wives behind, taking but one child along to absorb the night's sights, to marvel and to store away in his heart the whispering murmur between Drubna and Drovitz.

Then we went up the mountain. Out of its side a chapel had been carved, and two idolaters' candles burned within. This mountain led to other, higher mountains and deep valleys. The sense of separation was heightened: a little more and we would find ourselves dangling in the void. But evidently someone had noticed the weakness, perhaps weakened himself by the climb and the mounting exhilaration. More liquor was unpacked, to awaken the heart and restore equanimity, lest, God forbid, one ascend or descend too far. It was whispered that years before,

while climbing the mountain, a kind of sadness had come over the pilgrims, and, had it not been for the steady pace of the horses, they might have fallen back. And ever since, the pilgrims have been commanded to keep their composure, as if in the face of some tangible threat. But not everyone can withstand the temptations. The melodies are strong.

There were misgivings about the penitent: the higher we climbed, the more ecstatic he became. For after all, he was being brought near to holiness.

It had happened years before. A young man from Vienna had come to the country for a vacation. For days he had wandered about the town like a wonderstruck stranger. After a while it had come out that he was a Jew, the son of wealthy people close to the royal family. Whatever had happened to him cannot be spoken of aloud--it must have been something unspeakable. Nor had the efforts and threats made on his behalf been of any avail. Even the governor's intervention had accomplished nothing. Penitents are praiseworthy, but evenness of temper is a quality they hardly know. Always at the extreme, always holding on by a thread.

Since then, hair had sprouted on his cheeks. He had become as strict about the lesser religious obligations as about the greater ones. After all, strangers are never told the difference between the two; and since they don't know, they behave as if all were equally weighty. Even the saying of "amen"! And he had been teased by them for learning our language from grammar books. "The Mountain, the Mountain," he stood exclaiming, as though it were not, in fact, a mountain.

Before long we reached the summit. A thin light from not far ahead illuminated our path, like the light of a star that had come to dwell here below. The innkeepers knew that the caravan was close by. All year long, they wait alone at the crossroads for its arrival. The years had widened the distance between them and civilization. In anticipation, it had been imposed upon them to live on this mountain height. Lazer's Inn is an important waystation on the way up to Drovitz. It is mentioned in many books. But to me it had been revealed as a fallen star, this stage on the long night journey. The smell of barley and millet filled the open spaces. The wings of a windmill and other sights were veiled by the night's dimness in a damp light. The penitent recognized the inn--he knew of it from the books--and happiness welled up in him until he shouted, "Lazer's Inn!", as if this had been the light of the Eternal Flame itself.

The innkeeper came out to greet the honored guests. In his heavy fur coat he looked like one of the mountain gentiles. If not for his wife, one might easily have mistaken him. But it was Lazer, a creature of the local rocks and the wind. And the penitent was startled, his eyes widening behind their thick lashes.

The gentiles stayed with their horses, and we went inside. It was as though there were no light but that of the blazing stove; beside it all the other lights seemed dim. The millet was served by the lady of the house, she too a mountain creature. Years before, the holy one had enjoined them not to leave the place. Though his desire had not yet been fulfilled, they were still waiting expectantly.

The penitent was too excited to eat. The others were frightened by his agitation and said to him, "Eat," as if trying to dampen the blaze a bit. In his emotion he even forgot our language and began to speak in the language of Ashkenaz\* Father answered him in his own tongue, knowing it was only the excitement that had confused him.

The innkeeper wanted to detain us with another helping of millet, for, after all, it wasn't every day that he had such honored guests; and we obliged him. And there was someone who began asking about the going price of grain in those parts, for the innkeeper was always among gentiles and privy to their hearsay. Even far from home and relishing the best part of a journey, no Israelite who happens to be in the vicinity of a mill can refrain from asking about the price of grain. Not to mention plums: thereabouts was their natural habitat, and a man could simply stretch out his hand and take hold of a ripening fruit.

Only the penitent was surprised at this mixture: in his innocence, it seemed to him that one ought not to confound sacred and profane, particularly at such an exalted hour, when all roads lead to Drovitz. But the more experienced know that workaday conversation is the best kind at such times. It serves to curb the swelling enthusiasm some, to prevent it from bursting its bounds, God forbid. The road from Drubna to Drovitz is not an easy one--the attempt to make the trip has failed on more than one occasion--and therefore only the experienced venture forth. They know when the caravan should be delayed and when it should be spurred on.

And so when the innkeeper ordered the first fruits of the

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\*The name customarily applied to Germany in medieval Hebrew literature.

new season brought out, no one objected. There is nothing like the rite of eating a new fruit; it has even been compared with the observance of the new moon. The mistress of the house had learned this custom, and only for politeness' sake did she ask her husband what to serve. Each year the caravan passed through here. The mighty summer rains sometimes delayed it, but it came. For was there not someone who accompanied it on its way?

And even Uncle Shmuel, not known for being overly pious, could not help but be surprised at the delicate haggling which the men of affairs were carrying on, like a stoker who lights a fire and then puts it out in order to be sure the flame is free of impurity. Uncle Shmuel was known as the town letterwriter. He knew the language of formal correspondence as well as the language of Ashkenaz, having begun by studying tea and spice wrappers. He wrote letters for the widows and the women whose husbands were missing, which is why he was called the town letterwriter. And he read books late into the night.

And we had a year-old baby with us who was mortally ill. His father had brought him along so that the holy one might lay hands upon him. The whole way he was curled up fast asleep, but now he opened his eyes. The penitent was all excited about the child. Penitents get excited about everything--never having made the journey from Drubna to Drovitz. Are we not warned concerning converts and penitents (not that there aren't differences between them) that wonder drives them out of their senses? At first the penitent would say, "What a great idea this is! It ought to be spread far and wide! Why are you keeping it to yourselves?" By now he had stopped saying such things--evidently he



had come to realize that one simply didn't say them--but his capacity for amazement was still not to be contained.

The child whom his father had brought along opened his big eyes to take in the sights. For is there any hour as lovely as that of the stopover along the way, when you suddenly feel both the separation and the approach, when you become aware of the house that stands at the crossroads waiting to shelter the pilgrim caravan on a summer's evening?

And we had to pass through a certain village that was thick with dogs and gentiles. The drivers unfurled the canopies, and the darkness was redoubled. There were brawny men with us-- Shmiel the butcher, for example, who had left his shop to join the pilgrim caravan. He knew his way around in the villages and among the gentiles and had never traveled in a covered wagon, a Gypsy wagon. But practical men know it is better not to risk an open fight in an exposed place, in the middle of a village, especially where the dogs are powerful and bold. Shmiel, too, withdrew inside. And he had a kind of exultation on his face, as one has in a secret hideout--an exultation that was enough to transport him back to the flat landscapes, free of gentiles and dogs, where earth and sky kiss each other with black lips. No longer tied down by the shop counter and the women, you are given over entirely to the night, free to attend to the beautiful melodies that bathe the heart.

Still, there was someone with us who hadn't forgotten his home. Even the long trip could not erase his household or his wife from his thoughts. The gentiles bought on credit and did not pay. Threats were no help. The gendarmerie sided with the pea-

sants. The landowner had gone away for a cure and left his servants in charge. And what is a man to do on a fiery summer day when he finds himself penniless and with nothing to sell? This is just what had happened to our companion, and it made him sad. So when he took a snort from the bottle, he did it voraciously, as though to drown something that threatened to take hold inside of him.

But the melodies are powerful; they come rushing to the rhythm of the gallop, bursting into the gorge and climbing the heights of the night. There comes a moment when you know with a certainty that far transcends yourself that, if the gentiles do not pay their debts, that is just the way things are.

The inn was far behind us now. Once again we were on the endless plains, a race-course for the horses. The wind turned coattails into wings, pressing the wagon ever faster onward, shortening the distance.

And we passed the apostate's house, a tiled house with a chimney jutting out of it like a red flame. He had left the fold years before. His flourishing homestead on the plain bore witness that age had not enfeebled him. We had been commanded to avoid the house out of respect for his aged father, who was with us and who had been nursing his wound all these years, hoping to run the course of his tribulations while yet in this world. As for the child in the wagon, when he opened his eyes he too would see the fire, the alien fire, that issued from the chimney.

And there was a certain silence, a wall of the kind that separates one man from the next and that even you who are part of

the caravan can sense. A child, tired from the journey, could feel it too, for the dark clouds had settled in close, and the horses had begun to stumble. An hour of transition had come upon us. The last darkness thickened, the mists froze over the river which accompanied us, and the smell of different air began to envelop us, though we were still some distance from Drovitz, separated from it by villages and fields of grain. A kind of fear suddenly sprang up. After all, it's not easy to be on the way from Drubna to Drovitz, cut off from home but not yet within the ambit of your destination. And we had been warned that this plains route and this hour were frequently beset by calamity, that only those who clung to the truth could make it through. With the stopping-off points already behind us, there was nothing left to protect us but, as it were, providence itself.

The penitent made everyone uneasy; he painted everything in the most exaggerated terms. And when the occasion arose for a bit of levity, people said they would never again bring children or penitents along.

Thus were we able to press onward. The waters in the stream coursed ever more strongly, the currents roared. To stay awake they sang "Thou Hast Been Revealed," sucking in the melody and broadcasting it out across the expanse. And the little boy wrapped himself tightly in his father's fur, unable to cope with this rising intensity in the all-encompassing darkness.

Then two drunken gendarmes lit upon us and halted the caravan. Shmiel the strong man wanted to get out and confront them with the might of his arms, but they wouldn't let him. And Reb Berl, who was an expert in negotiations with drunkards, spoke

and said to them what one says to drunkards, placating them with a bottle of liquor and some money. The gendarmes waved the bottle and laughed, and their laughter echoed. And the child was frightened at the sight of two drunken gendarmes in the middle of the night.

Then we began to go toward the glow. And when the redness broke forth from the horizon, the convoy once again burst into singing "Thou Hast Been Revealed," as though witnessing a theophany.

From north and south the wagons streamed, ponderous and heavy-laden, and the squeak of the wheels could be heard from far off. Someone pointed and said, "Drovitz!"--as if, after many days of aimless wandering, he had discovered the lost point of departure. Now the child knew with a sublime concreteness that the world had a center, that all are drawn to Drovitz, that even the light of dawn is attracted to it. And the man who makes the journey in order to arrive at the holy one's court in time for the Days of Awe suddenly feels how remote and cut off he has been all the rest of the year.

To be sure, the gentiles too go to Drovitz, because Thursdays are market days, and they sell their wares there. Even now, in this mix of darkness and light, one could tell the wagons laden with people from those bearing merchandise. Though all are drawn toward Drovitz, not all are drawn there by the same intent.

The horses could not keep pace with the heart. They pulled the wagons sluggishly, as if purposely trying to slow us down.

And by the time we reached Drovitz, it was morning. The town was empty, and the houses stood as though planted in slumber.

Not a soul was to be seen. So this was Drovitz. The eyes took in the houses and the lanes. And when we called out the names of Reb Berish and his sons and the whole great retinue, the emptiness absorbed our voices without returning so much as an echo. And we trod our way through the narrow streets, following the horses and the squeak of the wheels. Even if we had never been there before, we could still have recognized those houses, could still have seen that they were ours. Breath billowed from them, darkness shone from their windows. The court stood there too, a stone house with a fence around it. We were afraid to go near, for it was all so silent and empty that the wind's hand, unaided, could have toppled it.

translated from  
the Hebrew by  
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