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The Most Beautiful Woman in Vilna

Ruth R. Wisse

For Eva F. Raby, David G. Roskies, and in memory of our brother, Benjamin.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S portrait has always hung over my parents' ample bed. She wears a high lace collar, slightly open at the neck, and a tiara of her own light brown braids. Her solemn eyes look out flat into the distance, as if she had taken this photographic occasion to brood over her strange fate. I recognize the straight, slightly heavy nose that has passed down through my mother to me, and the thin mouth, here uncharacteristically closed. The portrait is of a young woman in her early twenties who has already had four of her more than a dozen children, though not yet my mother, her next-to-last.

This maternal grandmother of mine is the heroine of a saga, the serialized episodes of which I have been hearing all my life. My mother never told the story consecutively from beginning to end, but turned to it as a narrative icon signifying wisdom, fortitude, and skills of survival. A complaint from any one of us children of suffered injustice or pain would bring on a story of grandmother's triumph over injustice or pain (as when German soldiers in World War I threatened to shoot the family, and only shot down a chandelier). A boast of success would trigger a competitive example of "genuine" success, grandmother's edge over us deriving from the greater obstacles she had overcome. Of our own adventures in romance we would never speak at all because here, however reluctantly, we all had to concede our epigone status. True romance flourishes only when sex is under constraint. My grandmother came of age in Jewish Lithuania of the 1870's, when marriage still set the bounds of permissible love. Against this background, the story of her courtships and marriages was so marvelously dramatic that I never really believed it to be true, though the descriptive detail of mother's recitations never varied. (That may have been why I never believed it to be true.)

If I undertake to pass on this story on my own authority it is because at least once, quite by chance, I caught an independent glimpse of grandmother's radiance, confirming, if not the substance, then certainly the spirit of all that my mother had told me. It was in the late 50's, at the end of my first extended trip to Israel, the first time I had been so far away from home for so long. I wanted to bring back, particularly for mother, a present that would prove my unflagging attentiveness, and after some thought decided on a set of silver teaglass holders in an elegant filigree pattern like the ones used in the home of my hosts, a European couple much like my parents. They provided me with the name of a small jewelry shop on Allenby Street, and though I knew by then the siesta schedule of the Tel Aviv storekeepers, I turned up at the shop well before four on a humid August day to find it predictably closed. I sought refuge from the burning sidewalks in an open bookshop several doors down the street.

Even before I could make out the owner, the uniformly dark spines of the many books crowding the tables and shelves told me that the store specialized in religious works, the kind of book which then interested me least. Unprepared as I was, however, to go back into the glare of the street, I pretended to browse. The owner brought me up short. He was an old man with an unkempt tobacco-stained beard, wearing a black suit and an ancient black fedora on his head. His eyes, behind steel-rimmed glasses, fixed me sharply (in my shorts, of all things, and wearing a sleeveless white blouse!). In a European-accented Hebrew he rasped, "What do you want?" as though I had trespassed. I may have felt uncomfortable, but I knew the propitiating formula. There was nothing to be done about the shorts and the bare arms, but I replied in my best Yiddish that I was searching for books. Somewhat less harshly, he wanted to know what kind. And suddenly, inspired, I realized just what my mother might want me to bring her from Israel, the very item this old man might be able to provide.

"I'm looking for a book from the Matz Publishing Company in Vilna. It doesn't matter whether it's a prayerbook or a commentary or whatever. It's the publisher's imprint I'm looking for."

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The glasses came off. The old man took a few steps toward me and asked, with unfeigned curiosity, this time in Yiddish, "Why do you want a Matz book?"

"My grandmother, Fradl Matz, owned the press. I want to bring my mother a present from Israel that would remind her of Vilna. Do you have anything?"

The old man melted before my eyes. He came close enough to brush my hair with his fingers, for me to see small tears in his eyes.

"I knew your father," he said. "We sold books together."

Here was something wrong. My father was a chemical engineer, barely fifty, running a factory back in Montreal. He must have known my grandfather, Fradl Matz's second husband, who was once a book distributor in the provinces of Poland. The old man had let slip a generation.

"You mean my grandfather," I tried to correct him. He failed to notice or to care. My "father" had been his friend in the years before he married the legendary Fradl. They came from the same town of Józefow, Lubelsk. Both worked as booksellers, picking up consignments at regular intervals from the major Vilna publishers—Rom, Shriftzetser, and Matz—and distributing them through the Polish towns. He recalled their awe of Vilna, the inn they sometimes frequented, the amazing courtship that transformed my grandfather into a Vilna resident, a publisher, a wealthy man. I was prepared to stand forever in this wash of memory, but after these few items, origins, awe, the inn, my grandfather's good fortune, the narrative trickled dry. The old man turned to the shelves, perhaps looking for the item I had requested.

"What about my grandmother?" I was greedy for more. "Did you know grandmother too?"

He turned to me with an expression very much like love and said, "Fradl Matz was the most beautiful woman in Vilna." The legend was not mother's invention. *Di shenste froy in Vilne!* Even my mother had never made so magnificent a claim.

AT THE age of fifteen, my grandmother, Fradl, made her first conquest. She caught the eye of a young impresario, on a visit to Minsk from St. Petersburg, who wanted to take her back with him as both fiancée and protegée. The girl's lovely voice, if it were to receive the proper training, and her beauty, if but correctly cultivated, would make her a second Patti, internationally famous and rich. The original Adelina Patti was then at the height of her career as a coloratura singer; Rossini was said to have arranged expressly for her the role of Rosina in his *Barber of Seville.*

Of grandmother's voice I have no evidence, but her portrait does bear a resemblance to the vivid intensity of Patti, and the young man may have known what he was about. He chose to plead his suit not with the girl's father, Moishe Polachek, a government purveyor, but with Grune Soltz Polachek, the second wife he had taken shortly after the death of Fradl's mother. It was a fatal tactical mistake.

Though the Polacheks were well-to-do, Grune, an avid card player and generous hostess, was always in need of additional private funds. The young man's infatuation with her stepdaughter inspired her with a new idea. She went to the larger Jewish center of Vilna to consult with knowledgeable matchmakers, and found that Fradl was indeed a valuable property. In fact, her inquiries turned up a far more profitable son-in-law than the promising but impecunious impresario. Yehuda Leib Matz, a direct descendant of the Gaon, the great Rabbi of Vilna, wealthy owner of the Matz Publishing Company, father of two children of marriageable age, and unfortunately bereaved widower, was looking for a new wife.

The lovely young maiden, the greedy stepmother, and the middle-aged but robust widower are the very typical ingredients of the sentimental romances that local publishers had begun to commission to complement their reputable editions of religious and scholarly works. Life took its cue from literature. Matz offered Grune Soltz an impressive sum, which she accepted on Fradl's behalf. Since the wily Grune was afraid that her husband might not agree to this marriage between his fifteen-year-old daughter and his contemporary of forty-five, she introduced him instead to the prospective groom's younger brother, a slim, chestnut-haired bachelor of thirty. So the wedding was arranged. It was not until her veil was lifted under the canopy that Fradl saw the gentleman, substantial and stern, who was to be her husband. According to family legend, she cried for almost a full week.

The wedding itself became the subject of popular song. Many years after her marriage, Fradl attended a wedding in Warsaw where the entertaining bard was the famous Eliakum Zunser, brought down for the occasion from Minsk. As part of his varied repertoire, Zunser sang a lengthy lament on Jewish matchmaking that combined a familiar story line with a general social plaint:

Look, good people, at these parents
Who lead their daughter to the sacrifice.
There comes the bride
Her own father at her side
Her eyes are bound
In her heart is a wound
A few moments left to wait
Before they seal her fate
Regret always comes too late.

At the end of the evening, Zunser confided to one of her cousins that Fradl, at whose wedding years before in Minsk he had also officiated, was the subject and inspiration of this work.

But the sentimental romance and the lamenting ballad could not contain the actuality of my grandmother who was neither as helpless nor as unhappy as the fashion in heroines. On the days following their wedding, seeing poor Fradl cry in humiliation and sorrow, Yehuda Leib offered her the choice she ought to have been given at the outset. He was prepared to annul the marriage. Despite the difference in their ages, he had hoped to bring her much happiness; since she was unwilling to consummate the marriage, he would settle matters generously with her parents and send her safely home.

At the mention of "parents" and "home," Fradl grew suddenly calm. Return to her former condition was unthinkable. Matz was not, to be sure, her romantic ideal, but since she was his, this could yield its own kind of sweetness and triumph. She decided to stay, and settled in as his imperious young wife. She was never seen except in hand-embroidered dresses, tightly corseted to show off her waist, with high arched collars to protect her modesty. She bore many children over the next twenty years—though several died in infancy—handing them over at birth to a resident wet nurse so that she could retain her splendid figure, and placing them afterward in the care of housemaids as she helped to run the business.

The press and the residence were in the same spacious courtyard building at the corner of Zawalna Street. To grow up in the family was to grow up in the business. The hand operator responsible for turning the presses before the installation of electric equipment continued to live in the basement of the house on a small family pension, and my mother remembers celebrating his hundredth birthday.

Vilna was the center of Jewish publishing. Its most famous firm, world-renowned for its modern editions of the Babylonian Talmud, was headed in grandmother's time by "The Widow" Dvora Rom, a sharp businesswoman with a reputation for very hard bargaining. The widow Rom must have served grandmother as a formidable if not altogether satisfactory model.

During Yehuda Leib's tenure as owner-director, Matz Publishers specialized in religious and scholarly works. They put out rabbinic commentaries and Yiddish translations of homiletic works, as well as Joshua Steinberg's *Hebrew-Russian and Russian-Hebrew Dictionary* (1878-80) and Russian grammar texts. When a growing market developed toward the end of the century for popular literature, Matz commissioned "women's story books" from the very prolific Shomer (Nahum Meir Shaikevitch, 1849-1905), Bloshetyn (1840-1898), and Ayzik Meir Dik (1807-1893) with titles like *The Blind Orphan, The Husband of Three Wives, The Secrets of the Constantinople Court, Vichne Dvoshe Returns from America,* and *Gevalt! Where is My Beard?* The bread-and-butter items were always the prayerbooks and religious items for every occasion: flags for *Simchat Torah,* Haggadahs for Passover, *Megillot Esther* and Purim plays, Lamentations to mark the destruction of the Temple for the fast day of Av, and holiday prayerbooks published with either Yiddish or Russian translation. Fradl helped to manage the business as long as Yehuda Leib was alive. After his death, the company was incorporated in her own name, and Fradl took full control.

The children of this uneven marriage grew up with their mother's musical talent and their father's appetite, but with little of their parents' acquired discipline. Alexander was a dandy, affecting a more aristocratic manner than either his accomplishments or his pocketbook warranted. Helena taunted her father at the dinner table with defenses of Jesus Christ, until the old man turned to his wife and asked how God could have punished them with such a chastising rod? Minna was a gifted pianist who later married a gifted tenor; her husband was also such a compulsive gambler that he pawned her piano, although it had become for them by then the sole source of family income. Rosa too was a pianist, and both Lisa and Maria were singers. Anushka became the only professional singer in the family, but her tempestuous romances took precedence over training or career. Benjamin was known as his mother's favorite. Grisha, the youngest, became a strange blend of aesthete and social reformer; he helped maintain a local Jewish orphanage, without ignoring his interests in photography and theater, the actresses as well as the plays. Everyone spoke Russian and studied French. My grandmother worried about the continuous bickering, the laxity in Jewish observance, her children's restless indecision and momentary fits of self-abandon.

As long as Matz was alive, the combined authority of the parents kept the household in check, but when her husband died, my grandmother betrayed everyone by falling in love. She would have been expected to remarry. Jews did not sanction celibacy, and encouraged the quick resumption of civilizing intercourse as a precaution against the sickly moods of abstinence. Love, however, burned with its own sickly fever. It was regarded as a capricious, if not mischievous guide to human affairs. Yet apparently there was no resisting the avalanche of modernity that was transforming the tough, traditional Jewish community of Vilna into the breeding ground of every new secular devotion. Like her many adolescent daughters, like the heroines of her proliferating Yiddish novels, Fradl Matz fell in love and followed her heart into marriage. Had the story ended here, one would have said that she lived happily ever after, and perhaps she did, for a year or two.

At what point my grandfather entered on the

scene I have never learned. He was, as we have heard, a book distributor from Józefow, which is to say, he was a Hasid. Into Vilna he would come, with his long black coat and thick bearded piety, representing to the local Lithuanian Jews their backwoods Polish cousins, the superstitious yearnings of hasidic courts and bedraggled small-town poverty. As a businessman, a traveler, a dealer in books, he must have been known in his native region as something of a modern, but in Vilna he was the Polish provincial, the broad vowels of his Yiddish speech betraying his "uncultivated" origins. If the family name, Welczer, rang with Italian genealogy, it was by this time only an echo of a forgotten source.

My mother describes the courtship of her parents in a single vivid image: "Fradl Matz always wore high lace collars, but through the very narrow opening at the front, father caught a glimpse of her lovely white throat." There stands the knight at the castle moat, looking up at the thin gleam of light through the casement window. Had Welczer noticed the whiteness of her throat long before old Matz died, or did Fradl's fresh widowhood make him yearn to have and protect her?

And Fradl—had her eyes followed him whenever he entered and left the salesroom? Was this man just one of the many wholesalers who came once or twice a year to place their orders, or did she anticipate his arrival, and linger over the arrangements as they drank their tea? Let us suppose a heightened interest, as my grandfather, behind the long black coat and beard, was tall and handsome, with the piercing eyes that older Jews valued for their power to penetrate the Torah. It is also known that when Welczer proposed marriage, Fradl accepted without pause or consultation. Had she made the kind of routine inquiries that preceded the extension of credit to any new account she would have learned what she evidently chose not to hear:

Soon after the death of Yehuda Leib Matz, Welczer had gone home to Józefow to arrange a divorce from his wife. He agreed to a modest settlement for his several daughters (who remembered him thereafter without rancor) and returned to Vilna to present himself to Fradl as a *childless widower*. Perhaps having once or twice caught sight of the bulging Matz household, he had concluded there would be quite enough troubled responsibility as Fradl's second husband without the introduction of his own complicating family. Nor did he want to burden Fradl with unwitting complicity in his divorce. And since she, for her part, made no inquiries, she remained chastely innocent until so many years had elapsed that the old deception closed over, like a scar. He told her the truth only after the birth of my mother, their first and only child. A second daughter, born a year later, died within a month, and after that there were no more children.

SO MY MOTHER grew up as the only half-sister of nine or ten older Matz offspring, some with children her age. Their noisy rivalry consolidated in a single unifying passion—resentment of Fradl's new husband and resistance to familial happiness under his roof. The love between husband and wife stirred the envy of the daughters and teased the ambition of the sons.

Welczer's experience as a salesman was put to good use, and his emphasis on export brought the business unprecedented profit, especially when he leased the plates of the prayerbooks to the Hebrew Publishing Company in New York for more than 50,000 rubles. His fiscal management enabled

through the brutal famine of World War I. In household management, Welczer deferred to his wife's authority. He did not fulminate, as Matz had done, over breaches in Jewish observance, but let the children come and go as they pleased, or as they demonstratively tried to displease. His dignity may have provoked them no less than had their own father's flashing rages. The hapless Polish provincial they thought their mother had married proved no more endearing when he stood revealed as her altogether satisfactory husband and business partner. My mother's motto, "Life is a battlefield," would seem to draw its evidence not only from the wars that uprooted her but also from the great house on Zawalna Street where she was born and raised.

All her young life my mother sided with the house majority, resisting her father, addressing him by the formal second person pronoun, "you," instead of the intimate "thou," which she, his real daughter, would have been expected to use. It was only in posthumous identification with him that she began a lifelong habit of speaking Yiddish, in defiance of her Russifying half-sisters and brothers, and later, more boldly, in societies where German, and French, and English, or Polish (all of which she knows) were much more in fashion.

Her mother she idolized, the more so as she lost her very early. Fradl contracted tuberculosis during the war, and despite the family's appeals to every specialist, and application of every known remedy, she continued to languish. One day news came from the Russian front that Benjamin, conscripted two years earlier and unharmed in battle, had died in a military hospital of influenza. The family determined to keep the news from Fradl. For over a year they intercepted all her mail, warned visitors and censored their own conversation to prevent her from discovering the fact. She died, they believed, without ever knowing that her favorite child had preceded her (though I suspect she allowed her family its final deception rather than having to bear the extra weight of their sympathy). I have seen two of Fradl's letters, the only documents of the Zawalna household to have survived Vilna's devastation. The letters, written during the last year of her life to one of the children who was representing the firm in America, are as brittle as the paper, without epistolary charm or indulgence of sentiment. She sounds at this point like a woman whom it would have been hard to deceive.

Welczer did not long outlive his wife. Approached by a friendly go-between with an excellent match, he said that one privileged to have been married to Fradl Matz could never be satisfied with any other wife. The business closed upon his death, though my mother was able to live off the sale of remaining stock until about her twenty-first birthday. After that she was quite on her own.

Mother is one of those ancient mariners who press their tales on carefree celebrants. She absorbed all the deaths of the sisters, their husbands, and ex-husbands, of the brothers and their wives, and of the nieces and nephews, and her tales of the past signify her refusal to be moved to terror or pity. Their single theme is vitality, "life." The rooms of her mind are always noisy with voices, laughter, arpeggios, quarrel, the whir of the press. Her stories of famine extol the marvel of food. Her stories of illness conclude with a firm pinch of health. Failure is turned to advantage and malice becomes the involuntary accomplice of beneficence. My mother stands dedicated to the defeat of death, and with the odds laid out before her, laughs off the challenge. It is no wonder that grandmother looks so serene in her ageless portrait. "*Eyne, un a rekhte.*" Let it be only one, as long as it is the right one. My mother has convinced the generations on either side of her that she will prevail.

Between Passovers

Ruth R. Wisse

THE miracle of Passover was renewed for our family when my parents decided to make their own seder in 1941. This was six months, almost to the day, after we had arrived in Montreal from Europe, and there must have been a terrible desperation about it because when I raised the subject recently with my mother, she was too agitated to respond and later explained that my questioning had dug open a pit before her eyes—*"hot mir oyfge'efnt a grub far di oygn."*

It is my—our—seder, not that of my parents, that I really mean to tell about, but all its pleasures spring from the seders of my childhood. Had my parents not decided to renew the custom of *their* parents, there would have been no tradition of song and story for us to inherit. In my husband's family, though the seder was treated with full seriousness, it consisted of no more than a hearty meal with matzah in place of bread. Anyway, Passover seems always to have begun with the inherited past: the children of Israel, when they escaped from Egypt into the desert, knew that the Paschal lamb they consumed was not some new spring ritual, but the reclamation of a much older rite which their forefathers had practiced before the Pharaohs turned them into slaves.

My parents had never made a real seder before coming to Montreal. In 1931, the year following their marriage, my mother had spent Passover in a Cracow hospital undergoing ear surgery. She was then in the very late stages of pregnancy; when my brother was born on May Day, and the workers from the factory where my father was chief engineer paraded and sang outside her window—*that*, for her, was liberation. I gather that during the few years they spent in the Polish industrial town where my father's factory was located, they would mark Passover with a few of their friends at something resembling a thanksgiving meal.

The 1930's passed for them in a blur. While the rest of the world sank into economic mire, my father came to direct the construction of a new factory in Czernowitz, Rumania, where he brought his wife and (by then) two children to settle. The younger of these children, a girl, died short of her second birthday, and I was born not long after that, so that when my parents fled the city in June 1940, they again had two children, only not the same ones; two more would be born in Canada. During their eventful sojourn in Czernowitz they attended annually the communal seder of *Massada*—a mildly Zionist organization, really more like a cultural club, for Jewish professionals and their wives. Once, probably before I was born, they made the trip back to my father's birthplace of Bialystok to celebrate at Grandfather's table.

It was from his father that my father derived his *nusach*—his manner of chanting the text, the Haggadah, and of conducting the seder. My grandfather, a man of intelligence and learning, had honed his tongue to compensate for the steady decline of his eyesight; by the time he was blind, about age forty, he had become a fearful wit. And more than a wit: about such as my blind grandfather Shakespeare wrote, "A man may see how this world goes with no eyes." At the seder of 1939, which we missed because my brother and I had scarlet fever, Grandfather told the assembled family members that they must set out for Canada to buy a textile factory, and thus transplant their business to the new continent. He directed his second son and eldest grandson to leave immediately after the holidays; such was his authority that they did, buying a mill in the Province of Quebec where unemployment and anti-Semitism were both at a peak (ours being one of the very few cases in which the exigency of the former phenomenon would outweigh the virulence of the latter). My parents, my brother, and I were the last ones to make it to safety. The war trapped my grandfather in Bialystok along with his only daughter and her family who had remained behind to care for him. They did not survive.

Is it any wonder that I sometimes think Passover was created for my sake, commemorating my family's miraculous flight, just as the Haggadah says, "from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to holiday, from darkness to great light, and from bondage to redemption," and absorbing our own private selves into the vast national drama?

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This is how the drama begins. After the customary blessings, the youngest willing child, coached for days by parents and teachers, opens with four questions:

> Why does this night differ from all other nights: for on all other nights we eat either leavened or unleavened bread; why on this night only unleavened bread? On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs; why on this night only bitter herbs? On all other nights we need not dip our herbs even once; why on this night must we dip them twice? On all other nights we eat either sitting up or reclining; why on this night do we all recline?*

But once questions begin, who determines where they shall stop? "Why do we drink four glasses of wine?" asked a four-year-old at our seder this year. "Why does freedom have to be celebrated by such exhaustively bourgeois preparations?" I used to ask when I first began to make a seder. "Why do we deserve to be at this table when our fellow Jews, let alone so many other members of the human family, enjoy no such bounty?" Today, no matter who conducts the reading of the Haggadah, those of us who once sat at my father's table continue to imitate his cadence, stopping as he did from time to time to ask a question, to comment on a passage, to sing a song. For years our discussion took place in Yiddish, the language of our home and of all my parents' friends. Once we began bringing friends, Father moved from Yiddish to English, depending on who was being addressed. Everyone was encouraged to interrupt, thus creating an inevitable tension between the Haggadah and the *kneidlakh*, between the reading and the matzah-ball soup.

"Avodim hoyinu lefaroh bemitsra-yim. . . . " The adults approach their formal response to the four questions with a paradox that each generation of Jewish geniuses discovers for itself:

> We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, our God, brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not brought our forefathers forth from Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would still be Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt.
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> So, even though all of us were wise, all of us full of understanding, all of us elders, all of us knowing in the Torah, we should still be under the commandment to tell the story of the departure from Egypt. And the more one tells the story of the departure from Egypt, the more praiseworthy he is.

First, then, a précis of the text that will serve as the basis of our commentary; then a bow to the spirit in which the story will be told. The second paragraph is one my father would recite with heavy emphasis, loving the way it twitted us "intellectuals" while playing up to our vanity. He knew just how confidently his own youthful circle had once trusted in the exclusive powers of reason and enlightenment to guide them through life. Leon Trotsky's voice, when my father heard it as a boy in Moscow, had drowned out the more balanced Jewish faith he had imbibed from his own father. So too most of the other adults at our seder in the 40's and 50's, writers and teachers, had once quit what they regarded as the chauvinistic prattle of their parents' Passover table to join the Revolution, the International, the Bund—one or another branch of the secular vanguard. Now they were drawn back to the Haggadah, not in nostalgia or repentance but in amazement at the poor exchange they had made.

The Haggadah long ago anticipated that while a "wise son" might ask to be instructed in the customs of the tradition, a "wicked son" would throw them back in his father's face, while a "simpleton" would lack either the interest or the capacity to understand in full. My father used to like to point out that the difference between the wise and the wicked son lies in tone rather than in diction: the one speaks respectfully, the other poses almost the identical questions, but rudely. The iconography that accompanies the parable of the Four Sons usually portrays the fourth, the one "who does not know how to ask," as very young. In my family we have come to identify him as the deprived offspring of the wicked son—after all, had our parents not taken up the unraveling threads of the tradition, we might never have learned to put the questions either.

I adored the intellectual excitement of the seder. My model was the five rabbis, who, according to the legend, tell about the departure from Egypt all night long, until their disciples come to them and say, "Masters, the time has come to read the morning *shema*." For years I pictured myself as a participant in that all-night session where the talk would be so stimulating that dawn would catch us unawares. Later at school I learned that this passage about the five rabbis who talked through the night probably recalls Bar Kokhba's rebellion against Rome in 132 C.E. The explanation made sense: at such a conspiratorial gathering, "Egypt" would have suggested "Rome," and the story of the liberation would have served as a spring for regenerating the passion for freedom. To me, though, at least in those days, the image of Jews fighting for their national liberation was probably less compelling than the image of Jews *arguing* over their national liberation.

Throughout my teens and far beyond, I took the discussion of life to be its essential part. I even located in literature the ideal modern seder: in one of his dramatic narratives, Edmund Wilson, then my ideal intellectual, imagines the Prophet Elijah

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* For the most part I will be quoting from the translation by Jacob Sloan in *The Passover Haggadah*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (Schocken Books).

turning up at a seder of Jewish scholars and professionals on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He is accompanied by the Messiah, who has come to redeem the world. But the New York Jews know better. The Hebraist among them is appalled by Elijah's faulty pronunciation; the psychoanalyst tries to figure out the nature of the Messiah's delusion; the Marxist trips him up on dialectics; the rabbi-turned-editor tries to square the pronouncements of the visitors with those of Maimonides, Saadia Gaon, and other sources. Wearied by this brief exposure to those he has come to redeem, the Messiah decides to postpone his advent. The story is very witty, but what really appealed to me about it was the verve of the talkers. Even at the risk of becoming a butt of Wilson's satire, I would have wanted to be a member of that party.

Mine was not the only intellectual passion in the family. My older brother Benjamin, who sat beside our father near the head of the table, the very embodiment of the "wise son," had been encouraged throughout childhood and early teens to develop all his manifold talents, including the talent (inherited from my mother) for music. After his first year in college he decided to study textiles. It was never clear to me nor, I believe, to him whether he did this because he wanted to be useful to the state of Israel, where he planned to settle, or because he wanted to be useful to his father in Canada, where he did settle. In either event he seems to have regarded business as a form of servitude, from which he sought occasional release in music—every kind of music except opera.

Perhaps I should not be fully trusted in this account of my older brother, because I have not yet made my peace with him for hastening the end of his life at the age of forty-three and would drag him from the grave by his grassy hair if I could. Apart from my parents, he was the most important influence on my life, as he was on our Passover. For years he introduced new commentaries on various passages of the Haggadah; then he began teaching us new melodies, some for passages we had never sung before, others to replace melodies we habitually used. He taught us Sephardic melodies which were as exotic as saffron and cardamon—this was before the first recordings of Ladino songs appeared—and sometimes the melodies were so complicated it took a few years before we could get them right.

The melodies Ben taught us came to constitute a kind of Passion in his memory. I risk this image though it would have annoyed him. The great oratories, music sung to sacred text, were to him the heights of glory. He would listen to the St. John and St. Matthew Passions in the semi-dark, in votive awe. Music being his gateway to ecstasy, Ben must have felt at least a twinge of envy for those who could actually worship God by way of J.S. Bach. Theirs was the grandeur—a touch of which he seemed determined to bring to our own domestic annual rite of the seder. And so our singing grew ever more exalted, our voices more full, and Ben remained present in the chorale that he crafted, directing traffic.

One last word about music. My brother died in the autumn. When, years later, his eldest son Joshua decided to follow, he took his life in the spring. We had barely risen from the *shiva* for Josh when we had to sit down to the seder. Everyone knew what had to be done: the imperatives of celebration, life goes on, for the sake of the children. . . . We prepared the seder as always, gathered as always, began to read through the Haggadah, determined to hold firm. But this was not enough for our children, Josh's siblings and cousins. There are certain songs in the seder that consist of verse and refrain, *many* verses and refrains. We generally sing the first three or four, quickly recite the rest, then conclude with the final two. This time the young generation rebelled, insisting on every last word of every last verse of every last song. As they realized what they were doing, two of their number slipped out of the room to return with sets of hand drums we keep in the house, transforming the song into a tribal chant. Since then, our seder has always included a reenactment of this musical battle between the young zealots and the stodgy formalists, in honor of Josh whose greatest pleasure was also music. Despair was our Egypt. Our children followed the example of their grandparents in breaking free of it, to the accompaniment of timbrels.

JUST see how this account of mine threatens to narrow into family lore, how easily a family becomes absorbed in its own high drama rather than the one that the Haggadah invites us to join. I say "threatens" because, however much we are expected to celebrate as a family, we are also warned against illusions of self-sufficiency, lest we upset the balance that Passover celebrates. Before the younger child asks the Four Questions, the host says the following:

> This is the bread of poverty which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry enter and eat; let all who are needy come to our Passover feast. This year we are here; next year may we be in the Land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year may we be free men.

Touchstone of Jewish morality, this passage translates freedom into responsibility at the very moment we taste it. The wafer, not the body of Christ but the bread of affliction—an equally ambiguous symbol—comes complete with national instructions. Liberation, whatever else it may mean, requires that you feed the hungry and house the needy. The connection between celebration and obligation is bred in the bone.

At the seder all symbols are made flesh. The matzah enters the digestive system, the stranger

comes to sit among us—nowadays more often an assimilated or Gentile acquaintance than a dust-worn traveler. Sholem Aleichem tells a story about an exotic Passover guest who makes off not only with the household silver and jewelry but with the maid as well. My friends used to invite new immigrants from Russia who chain-smoked their way through Haggadah and food. A rabbinical student once commandeered our table for his first pulpit. It seems, then, that we are not meant to equate freedom with comfort. Even the presence of family all around us, family being both the chief reward and the warrant of freedom, can be either a constraining or a liberating force. At the Passover table, at any rate, the family is enjoined, significantly, not to feed on itself but to open its door—with due respect for the dangers involved.

Edmund Wilson describes the seder as "the combination of a family party like Christmas dinner with a ritual of resurrection that resembles an Easter Mass." The appropriateness of the analogies aside, the characterization omits the main feature of Passover, which also happens to be the one that so discomfits the intellectuals around Wilson's imaginary table—namely, the celebration of Jewish national freedom:

> This year we are here; next year may we be in the Land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year may we be free men.

It has driven many modern Jews wild, this story of national liberation. There was Marx unveiling the great international future, and were they then supposed to crawl back into their tribal tents? Squirming, they would read God's promise to strike down the enemies of their people: ". . . for in every generation they stand up to destroy us, and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand." Here was the sticking point! They may not have minded all that talk about the "bread of affliction"; they might bask in the injunction to be compassionate, to let "all who are needy come to our Passover feast"; and as for the core notions of liberation and the struggle to be free, were these not the very stuff of class revolution, from the Bastille to the Winter Palace? But a struggle against enemies of the *Jews* was another matter. When the Haggadah begins robustly to recount how the liberation from Pharaoh had to be achieved, through plagues of blood, frogs, lice, beasts, blight, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the slaying of the first-born of all the Egyptians; when, adding insult to injury, it tells how the ancient rabbis, unsatisfied with ten plagues, multiplied them into fifty, two hundred, three hundred—then would these sons and daughters of the modern age run from the table in disgust.

Until recently, Jews used to flick a drop of wine from their cups as they pronounced each of the plagues, as if drawing the blood of battle. Under the influence of liberal thought, this old custom was reinterpreted in the 19th century by the great modern Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, to mean that we were thus signifying our sympathy for the misfortune visited upon the Egyptians, and in that measure tempering our joy at our own liberation. And why not? Liberal interpreters still point with delight to the midrash in which God scolds his angels for singing as the Red Sea waters engulf the hapless Egyptians: "What! Shall you sing while my children are drowning in the sea?"

In retrospect, however, it is easy to see that in attempting to upgrade morality, the liberal interpreters were trying to lighten their own moral load. Turning the drop of wine into an expression of compassion is really a form of self-pity, as the reluctant warrior ostentatiously displays his conscience and, under the guise of pitying his enemies, subtly renounces his own wish for victory. Or, if not the wish for it, then the determination to attain it, which requires assuming responsibility for the blood it may cost. Thus have many Jews determined to become tender as a people, without considering that the tender part is the easiest to chew.

THE uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, which began on the first night of Passover in 1943, after most of the Jews had already been killed, should have stiffened the national resolve of all who came after. In the only formal addition my family ever made to the seder, we included a commemoration of that event, initially one of our own devising, then the one circulated by the World Jewish Congress whose preposterously archaic style gradually acquired the power to move us:

> On this night of the seder we remember with reverence and love the six millions of our people of the European exile who perished at the hands of a tyrant more wicked than the Pharaoh who enslaved our fathers in Egypt. Come, said he to his minions, let us cut them off from being a people, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more. And they slew the blameless and pure, men and women and little ones, with vapors of poison and burned them with fire. But we abstain from dwelling on the deeds of the evil ones lest we defame the image of God in which man was created. . . .

Followed by the singing of *ani maamin*—"I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarry, nonetheless do I believe"—this part of the seder was raw and disturbing to me. Tumbling images of burning buildings and people ablaze that I had seen or imagined came to rest always on the photographic image of two women with their hands in the air, surrounded by the Germans who would in a moment execute them. These women had been resistance fighters, and we were marking the bravery of their resistance; but it was the Germans who were walking triumphantly through the sea, and

it was a sea of Jewish cadavers. Perhaps there had been people in the ghettos and concentration camps who believed with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, but he had tarried. In the meantime, we were willy-nilly celebrating the liberation of Europe from the Jews.

Can one really fault those Jews who refuse to yoke themselves to the national fate? Now that our children have taken over the job of reciting the texts commemorating the ghetto martyrs, I sometimes wonder what we are doing to them. What have we already done? In France last year I met a lapsed Jew whose grandmother had begged him to have his first child baptized: "*Ça suffit!*" She had had enough, this woman who had spent the war hiding in barns and cellars. Similarly with Jews who convert to other faiths, especially the ones that promise to "transcend" national limitations. They too want to escape a surfeit of grief.

Our ancestors, those who were neither killed nor cowed, saved themselves through a blast of rage. Today we follow their example, verbally. The natural place to commemorate the European massacre occurs right before the *shfoykh khamoskho*:

> Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not,
> And upon the kingdoms that call not upon Thy name.
> For they have devoured Jacob,
> And laid waste his habitation.
> Pour out Thine indignation upon them,
> And let the fierceness of Thine anger overtake them.
> Thou wilt pursue them in anger, and destroy them
> From under the heavens of the Lord!

The custom of reciting these verses, carefully stitched together from Psalms 79:6-7, 69:25, and Lamentations 3:66, originated after the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries when Christian Europe made the first of its several attempts to cleanse itself of Jews, and when the landscape of corpses, men and women and little ones, must have looked much the same as it would in 1945. Before emitting their eloquent howl, Jews have customarily flung open the doors of their houses. One does not know which to admire the more, the courage it has taken in some places and times to tell the Gentiles, *We will not cringe before you*, or the courage to keep invoking, in this connection, the name of God.

Of course, no sooner has the pain of catastrophe begun to wear off than some Jews have come to feel embarrassed by this outburst; in our time the Haggadah of the Reform movement does not include the passage at all. But as it happens we are well placed historically to appreciate the charged fury of our medieval forefathers. They could not have continued to trust in God unless they also believed in His justice. Certainly, they could not have celebrated their ancient liberation as a people without some cry for retribution in the present. My brother-in-law can cite relevant psychoanalytic writings testifying to the sources of depression in stifled anger. For myself, I need that outburst and the rush of cold air through the open door as much as I once needed my mother's love and my father's approval. I want those who hunt the Jews to be hunted down themselves, wiped from under the heavens of the Lord. I feel ashamed not at the demand for retribution, but at how little Jews have done to bring their destroyers to trial.

OUR local rabbi once said that if Jews did not ask God—at the top of their lungs—to pour out His wrath on their enemies, they could not properly sing His praises in the Hallelujahs that follow. When I was younger this second, post-meal half of the seder, composed of psalms and songs of gratitude, seemed frivolous compared with the high history we had recalled earlier in the evening. Perhaps because we were by then too well fed to do much *gribbling*—my mother's term for our (pointless) analyses of text—or perhaps because we were following the established rhythm of the generations, we did little but sing and joke, as the Haggadah obviously intended. This was the time for satisfaction, which I used to equate with triviality.

But nowadays, when the meal is over and we have reassembled around the rumpled table, the children beginning to droop, the young people hauled back from ping-pong or the hockey playoff that in Canada perennially competes with the seder, the men with their jackets off, the women unburdened of family problems, I feel the unparalleled joy of being a Jew. The reenactment of the Exodus, which for me begins weeks earlier when I clean out the first section of cupboard and carry in my first Passover supplies, has brought us through all the stages of affliction and triumph to these hours of grace. The journey undertaken at the behest of God cannot be realized without gratitude to Him.

Since early adolescence my strongest contact with God has been through the traditions of the Jews who first recognized Him and received His word. That is to say, my contact has been indirect, which for me is sufficient. But the night of the seder differs from all other nights of the year; it requires my participation.

> How can I repay unto the Lord
> All His bountiful dealings toward me?
> I will lift up the cup of salvation
> And call upon the name of the Lord.

Our homage is as rich as we can make it, combining the hymns of many centuries composed in many parts of the globe. There have accrued to the seder playful songs, historical allegories, a mystically layered hymn, "And so it came to pass in the middle of the night," that begins with the frightening nocturnal break for freedom. In sum,

the liturgy proclaims, "The breath of every living thing shall bless thy name, O Lord."

It is my younger brother who undertakes to recite this particularly glorious hymn in a single swooping breath, just as Father used to do. Father may have done it with a touch of irony, to show that he was not altogether comfortable with the language of sanctification. But so much for irony: my younger brother, who devotes his life to teaching and forging Jewish continuities, has translated the irony back into homage for both his earthly father and the One in heaven.

The story of the Exodus concludes when the Jews have achieved their freedom in the land of Israel.

> Concluded is the Passover Seder,
> According to its law and custom.
> As we have lived to celebrate it
> So may we live to celebrate it again.
> Pure One, who dwells in His habitation
> Redress the countless congregation.
> Speedily lead the offshoots of thy stock
> Redeemed, to Zion in joyous song.
> NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM!

At this point my tongue begins to fail me. I cannot explain, least of all to anyone who may require explanation, the joy of Jerusalem in our lives. Many of us around the table have lived in Israel, plan to live in Israel, want to live in Israel, or believe they ought to live in Israel, though we could not separate out these impulses or even account for all of them.

When our daughter left to spend a year at the Hebrew University she said, "I'm afraid I'm going to like it there." One of our sons recently wrote from Jerusalem that the city felt like a book he had begun five or six times but had never read through to the end. Our niece stopped us this year as we were reading the passage, "And he [Jacob] went down into Egypt . . . and sojourned there." The Haggadah interprets this to mean that Jacob did not go down to Egypt to settle, but only for a temporary visit. Nothing has changed, she said with a rueful smile, no one ever intends to settle outside the land of Israel, we just sojourn elsewhere—for hundreds of years at a time.

I know there are Gentiles who suspect and modern Jews who fear that this longing for the East makes Jews less trustworthy citizens of their adopted countries and native lands. Yet even in Israel, Jews recite the verse, "Next year in Jerusalem rebuilt." They are expected to accomplish the trick of enjoying their national freedom while remembering that they—that we—are not yet fully redeemed.

After the Exodus from Egypt it took Moses forty years to turn a slave people into a nation sufficiently disciplined and worthy to reenter its land. Forty years used to seem a preposterously long time, but now I doubt whether in the forty years since the Jews of modernity reclaimed their homeland, they have even yet begun to shed the bonds of slavery. There are still so many who prefer victimization to the onerous tasks of governance. And this time they are without a prophetic leader. Moses, the hero, is not even mentioned in the Haggadah story, as if in warning that once the Jews had the law in their hands and had been pointed in the direction of the promised land, they would have to manage themselves as a people, and venture forth together and alone.

THIS past year there were changes at our seder. Some of our grown children were elsewhere, at the tables of hospitable strangers or friends, while we again were hosting small children and an infant, my parents' first great-grandchild. Suddenly, the rhythm of adult discussion and song was punctured by fresh excitement. As in years past, children controlled the main action: the theft of the *afikoman*, the matzah that is required to end the meal, and its concealment with breathless squeals somewhere in the house. My husband could be counted on to conduct a search sufficiently vigorous to convince the children of his sincerity, and sufficiently careful to avoid accidental discovery of the purloined dessert. He then "redeemed" the stolen treasure with a promise of toys, invoking for anyone paying sufficiently close attention yet another echo of the theme of the evening.

Which may also be why, the following night, we rose at the conclusion of the second seder in my sister's home to sing *Hatikvah*—"Hope"—the Jewish national anthem. All evening long we had been talking about the nonstop bombardment of Lebanon at the hands of the Syrians. An Armenian friend had been vainly trying to contact his family in Beirut. That morning, our daily newspaper had reconfirmed, through its silence about what was going on in Lebanon, that an Arab is of human interest only if he is threatened by a Jew. As for us, we thought, and as for our kinsmen in the Holy Land, there but for the grace of the Israel Defense Force go we. The more we talked about the political war against Israel and the failing spirits of the Jews, the more discouraged we grew. We tried to walk the tightrope of the Haggadah between festivity and grit, but when we arrived at the end we had still not managed to fight off our dumb dejection. Let's sing *Hatikvah*, someone said, and we all got to our feet. Standing erect we found it easier to believe that we were now and would forever remain a sovereign people.

What My Father Knew

Ruth R. Wisse

On the morning of June 22, 1940 my mother, my elder brother, and I fled the Romanian city of Czernowitz to join my father in Bucharest. The signal for our departure was a phone call from one of my father's former employees, a certain Boncescu, and it had not been entirely unexpected. Boncescu asked for Father and, when told that he was in the capital on business, instructed my mother to prepare a bag for the children and to take the next train there. She had two hours to pack. We left the house where I was born at 4 Urban Jarnik without good-byes. Years later the neighbors' son described to me how he had come to visit my brother as they had arranged, but found the door bolted, his knock unanswered.

My father was by profession a chemical engineer. In 1934 he had been sent to Czernowitz by his Polish employer to build the first rubber factory in northern Romania, and within a year he had Caurum up and running (as it does to this day), employing between 600 and 900 workers in two or three shifts, producing rubber boots, hospital sheeting, tubing, bouncing balls for children. For his achievement he received a medal from King Carol. It was this medal, along with his skills of persuasion and probably significant bribes, that after two months in Bucharest, and on the condition of no return, finally secured for us the exit visas we needed to leave the country. Since my parents' Polish papers would have doomed us, we traveled across Europe as stateless persons, with Lisbon as the port of departure and Montreal our final destination.

Father plotted our future and our itinerary as carefully as he could. South American papers were the easiest to buy, and given his passion for rubber, he should have taken us to Venezuela. But after six years as a Romanian manufacturer, he said he did not want to live again where there were only two classes—the rich and the poor. He decided to join his brothers who had recently immigrated to Canada.

We took the first leg of our journey by train. A photograph of the four of us at the Acropolis shows what improbable tourists we made, standing impassive in brilliant sunshine with our backs to the glory of Greece, white shoes scuffed in the sand. Athens was the high point of the trip. Through the Mediterranean we cruised by boat, anticipating the dangers at each port of call. At age four, with blond hair, my precocity sharpened by the tension, and speaking German as my mother tongue, I was the one the officials questioned at points of inspection, or if not, I was encouraged to volunteer the answers. In Italian waters, where my father had expected trouble from the fascist militiamen, there was only a perfunctory passenger check on board; at British Gibraltar, smiling soldiers in short khakis did their work so scrupulously that some hapless souls were left ashore.

In the way of such things, the real danger came to us as a complete surprise.

We had reached Lisbon in the middle of September, two weeks before our ship was to sail. Our Canadian visa authorization had arrived—how, is another story—but because our ship would be docking in New York (from where we would take the train to Montreal), we were also required to have transit visas for the United States. Before giving us these documents, the American consul wanted proof of our wealth and our health. Instructing my very short-sighted father to undergo an eye examination, he gave him the name of the local opthamologist. The doctor turned out to be away on holiday, scheduled to return several days after our ship would leave port.

No refugee family is without at least one story of this kind, of the moment their lives hung by a hair. We went back to the consulate and Father explained the situation: could the consul please give him the name of another specialist? The consul could not. Father stressed the importance of this journey for us as prospective Canadian immigrants (not as Jews—the dread word was never spoken), and the value of four trans-Atlantic berths. The consul regretted that he could not change the rules. Then Father lost his head, or else chose to gamble. Grabbing the consul's hand, he pointed it at my brother and me and shouted, "You are a crazy man! Will you throw

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away the lives of these children? Give me the name of another doctor or I will kill you!"

His English was not strong, nor was he, so I cannot imagine that his words struck fear into the consul's heart. Mother, recalling the scene, said she knew we were finished. But perhaps something in Father's desperation forced the American to recognize him as a man. Without saying a word, he extricated himself from Father's grasp and issued us the visas. Consequently, we were able to leave Lisbon aboard the New Hellas on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, 1940—the same day, 36 years later, that my father died.

HAVING perused many such accounts of Jewish flight across Europe, my reader is now probably imagining us spared the Nazi death camps. But like the history of our time, our family's history was more complicated than that. It was the Soviets, not the Nazis, we were fleeing—and had we not eluded them, my father and probably we, too, would have expired somewhere in the gulag along with many more victims than were killed in the Germans' crematoria.

As general manager and part owner of Romania's largest rubber factory, my father was the very model of the class enemy. He was also a well-read and intelligent political observer. Monitoring the threats from both ends of Europe, but especially from the East, he had asked the trusted Boncescu to wire immediately if the Russians should cross the border and, anticipating their invasion that summer, had already gone to Bucharest to try to get us exit papers. No one could have known yet of what the Nazis were capable, because despite the virulence of their anti-Semitism, the scale of governmentally-organized killing in Germany was still relatively small.

By contrast, Russia had already registered its trademark on state murder. The kulaks lay forcibly starved by the millions. The purges had set a record in the elimination of elites. Many of my parents' friends who had crossed from Poland into Russia to participate in the great socialist experiment were already known to be dead or missing "in Siberia."

But, of course, the main reason my father knew just what he had to fear from the Communists was that he had once been attracted to Communism himself.

"YOUR mother would shoot me if she knew I were telling you this, but your father Leibl was a Communist in the 1920's." The woman who favored me with this information in Jerusalem in 1980 had grown up with my mother in that legendary life called "Vilna,"* and had stayed on in Communist Poland after the war. She and her second husband had come to Israel only in 1968, when Europe's most durable ideology claimed Poland anew, making reluctant Zionists of yet another group of Jewish internationalists.

Now that she had settled among the Jews, this woman's Communism rested uncomfortably on her conscience, like a mink coat that becomes embarrassing once public opinion clamors for animal rights. That is to say, she felt obliged to apologize for her political views only out of deference to the scruples of others. Assuming the same held true for my father, she thought it unlikely that he would have risked the scowl of his Americanized children by recounting his political past. But she was wrong: my father's experience with Communism was precisely the sort of thing he *was* willing to talk about. What better form of moral instruction than to try to understand the nature of error?

Leibl had been initiated into Communism at its source. The story had begun with an earlier expulsion, this one from Bialystok, Poland, in 1914, when the Germans captured the city. The entire family had fled to Russia, where my grandfather and his two elder sons tried to continue the family business by starting up a small textile mill near Moscow while his wife and their three younger children—Leibl being the littlest—sought safety in Saratov on the Volga. In the absence of a Jewish *heder*, Leibl was sent to the local school.

Only in 1917, after the February revolution, was the family reunited in Moscow, and there they reaped the fruits of liberty. The factory my grandfather had started in the nearby town of Pavlovski Passad, employing Russian workers, produced cloth that he could now sell legally in the city, and within a short time he had amassed enough capital to consider expanding the business. Under the czar, Jews had been prevented by discriminatory laws from living in Moscow, but now Grandfather could legally rent a room for his family, legally send his children to school, and legally instruct his youngest son for his bar mitzvah.

But by the time Leibl came to read his portion of the Torah in the small synagogue and to taste his reward of brandy and cake, there had occurred a second revolution. Lenin had replaced the young parliament with a dictatorship of the proletariat and set up the Cheka, the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle Against Counterrevolution and Sabotage, or political police, with orders to shoot "speculators" on sight. The press, the schools, the law were nationalized, along with the banks and industries.

The Soviets confiscated Grandfather's business and his savings without any right of appeal; he was told he could stay on as the state's temporary manager. Trying to recoup some of his losses by selling a fraction of the production on the black market, he eluded the Cheka for three years, once daring to drive a wagon of his goods through the Moscow streets.

* See Ruth Wisse's "The Most Beautiful Woman in Vilna," COMMENTARY, June 1981.—ED.

WHILE Grandfather tried to exercise his freedom, his youngest son fell in thrall. The year of his bar mitzvah, 1918, Leibl stood among thousands listening to Leon Trotsky (né Bronstein) in Red Square. As between the two Jewish lawgivers, he much admired the perfect orator of Moscow over the all-too-human stammerer of Sinai. By the time the family returned to Poland, he had decided to claim his independence. Refusing to study in a yeshiva, he attended the Polish high school in a neighboring town, then passed the entrance exams for Stephen Bathory University in Vilna. He supported himself through tutoring, and performed prodigious feats of memory. Once, during a set of final examinations in mathematics, he pointed out an error in the test, and after being threatened with expulsion, was vindicated when a supervisor came in to report the mistake.

How shall I characterize Leibl's idealism during his student days in Vilna? Idealism was then as plentiful as food was scarce. With the release of moral energies that Judaism had historically tried to discipline, idealism gushed from Jewish youth as from a thawing mountain, spilling down into many rivers and streams. Historians try to sort out the Communists from the nationalists, the Hebraists from the Yiddishists, the Bundists from the Labor Zionists, the anti-Zionist Orthodox Agudah from the pro-Zionist Orthodox Mizrahi; but, swept up by the yearning for a better world, the young people who had come of age during the war were not always on Sunday what they had been before the latest rally on Saturday.

Leibl, for instance, originally wanted to study agriculture because he had decided to become a farmer in Palestine. When he learned that the university would not accept Jews into agriculture, he settled for chemistry (like Chaim Weizmann). His colleagues in the chemistry lab found him a room in the house of Anna Vladimirova Rosenthal, Vilna's inspiring Bundist leader, for whom Yiddish was a sacred trust but whose Jewish nationalism was thoroughly anti-Zionist.

But it was the Communists who held the moral edge over all the other political groups. Outlawed under Poland's Pilsudski regime, they were the only ones who had to function clandestinely, thus arousing sympathy as well as respect. By contrast, the Zionists who promised to take Jews out of Poland to Palestine seemed at times to be working hand in hand with the Polish nationalist government, and their popularity among some of the wealthier and religious Jews of the city almost lent them a bourgeois respectability.

Leibl put study ahead of politics, but he developed a reputation for foolhardy courage. He brought food to political prisoners, pretending to be their relative. One night, walking with his cousin, he refused the orders of some drunken Endecs, Polish nationalists, to get off the sidewalk, and when one of them brandished a pistol, Leibl tore open his shirt and cried, "Go ahead, shoot!" The Endec was with difficulty restrained by his friends.

The high point of Leibl's political activism came at the request of Chaim S., a childhood friend from Bialystok and an affiliated Communist who planned to slip from Poland into Russia on a party mission carrying 200 rubles in cash. Leibl helped him raise the required sum, and organized the illegal crossing. The two boys hired an experienced border-guide, giving him a down payment and promising the rest upon his return to Vilna with a prearranged password that Chaim would give him once he was safe on the other side. The friends mischievously agreed on the word *k'mat*, Hebrew and Yiddish for "almost"—but, when misspelled, an acronym for the Yiddish *kush mir in tukhes*, or kiss my ass.

Their plan succeeded, up to a point. The guide delivered passenger and password and was paid in full, but Chaim was never heard from again. According to rumor, he had been seized as a Polish spy and deported into the Russian interior. For years afterward, Chaim's mother in Bialystok would hound my grandparents, threatening to denounce Leibl to the authorities, holding their son responsible for her son's death. Grandfather, who was by then completely blind, took to sleeping with a wad of rubles under his pillow for the moment he would have to buy off an arresting policeman. He dubbed Leibl "Fishke the Red," after the beggar-hero of the Yiddish romance *Fishke the Lame* whose tender sympathies exceed his practical abilities. Since Leibl had in fact developed a limp, thought to be caused by rheumatoid arthritis, the epithet exposed the political idealist as an incipient cripple in more than one respect.

To the extent that Leibl had ever "been a Communist," he soon ceased to be one. Trotsky's aura may not have faded all at once, but neither did that non-Jewish Jew become my father's hero. Trotsky's prosecution of revolutionary terror against the rebellious sailors of Kronstadt and other real and imagined enemies weighed on my father's conscience, since he felt he had delivered his friend Chaim into the hands of the bloody regime. Until he left Vilna in 1929 to take his first job as a junior engineer, Leibl warned his Communist friends against slipping into Russia, as many were doing to escape local conditions and in expectation of a finer life. He began to understand the Revolution through its consequences, Marxism through Trotsky's enforcement of it.

But unlike his earlier boyish exchange of Moses for Marx, the collapse of his faith in Communism left his moral yearnings unchanneled. The search for truth that brought him such satisfaction in the laboratory had no parallel in politics. His questions could never be answered: *must*

idealism, in its haste to perfect the species, become a murderous torrent that sweeps human beings away? If a man's good intentions bring evil consequences, is he still entitled to claim innocence? Might the Jews have been right after all to limit the human tendency to wickedness through a strict religious regimen, before aspiring to usher in a messianic age?

The ascetic habits Leibl had developed as a self-supporting student made him stricter than his father when it came to self-imposed discipline, but he lacked the advantage of his father's Sabbath days, which is to say the pleasure his father took in obeying God's law. In the years that I best remember him, my father's Sabbath mornings in Montreal were spent writing checks to charities, cultural projects, and individuals he helped to support. This might seem a decent substitute for the Jewish commandment of *tsedakah*, except that the checkbook does not sing out like a congregation of living Jews when a man is called up to the Torah to pledge his charity aloud.

FATHER'S life in Canada defied the dichotomies of success and failure, rich and poor. What do you call a man who forfeits the profession he loves? From the moment he arrived as a new immigrant, Leibl, now also Leo, tried to find work as an engineer in the Canadian rubber industry; but as it was not yet hiring Jews, he went to work instead in the textile factory his family had bought in Huntingdon, Quebec, about 60 miles south of Montreal.

He did not like textile production as he had adored experimenting with rubber, and having once managed a factory he himself had built, he could not have relished his new job as a small shareholder in the family business. Mother, who took it upon herself to voice his unspoken thoughts, always referred to his work as "slaving for his brothers." He spent most of the week at the mill, staying overnight in a room he shared with one of his brothers at the Huntingdon Chateau. This grand hotel had been built during Prohibition as a whiskey hole for thirsty Americans. Its empty grandeur gave a man the sense that they had both seen better times.

Leo was a good manager and a good negotiator. The mill turned a profit, and as long as my father represented management, there was never a strike. Back in the city, he brought the same negotiating skills to the board of the Jewish day school that his children attended. My father is credited with having led the fight for expanding this school to the upper grades, in appreciation of which the library of Bialik High sports on its wall his name and a picture of him smiling.

As the factory prospered, we moved in 1950 into a splendid old house where each of us (by then) four children had his own bedroom, with a sun porch and basement apartment to spare. Mother used the magnificent living room for literary receptions in support of Yiddish culture. Invitations to her soirées required the purchase of a recent Yiddish book by a local writer, selections from which the author would read as the evening's entertainment. It goes without saying that Father's subsidy had helped to pay the publisher.

AND politics? By the end of the war, Communism should have lain buried along with fascism in their respective ruins. Certainly, where we lived in Montreal, the atrocities of the Soviet system were no secret. Many of the refugees who joined us in Montreal had spent the war in Russia; they spoke of Soviet commissars and victims, and of some of the former who had become some of the latter. A number of our acquaintances, sympathizers of the Jewish Bund, continued to mourn the execution by the Soviets of their beloved leaders, Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, despite many appeals from socialists around the world.

In 1945, Igor Gouzenko, a clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa, gave the Canadian government abundant evidence of Soviet spy rings operating right under its nose. Whether or not his disclosures triggered the cold war, as some historians think, they did lead to the conviction for treason of Fred Rose, a Communist member of the Canadian parliament from the largely Jewish district of Montreal-Cartier. Eventually deported to Poland, Rose did not become a martyr like the executed Rosenbergs in the United States; in particular, having betrayed his Montreal constituents as well as his country, he aroused little sympathy on the Jewish street.

I think I know what people mean when they describe the 1950's as a decade of complacency, lacking in idealism. They mean that the Left in general, and Communism in particular, were losing influence. At the beginning of the decade, in Korea, Communism suffered its first major defeat, challenging the belief that its expansion was historically determined and inevitable. Khrushchev's revelations at the 20th Soviet Communist party conference that under Stalin the dictatorship of the proletariat had been the dictatorship of a tyrant were followed almost immediately by the march of Soviet troops into Hungary, crushing hopes for the promised thaw in Russian politics. Memoirs seeped into the West, any one of which (try Gustav Herling's 1951 *A World Apart*) could have condemned an empire.

Yet even my father felt uncomfortable invoking "fascists and Communists" in a single phrase. He wanted to distinguish between an ideology of power that had realized itself in totalitarianism and (what he saw as) a positive ideology that had deteriorated into totalitarianism. I think he clung to this distinction less for the sake of his own battered beliefs than for the martyred Rosa Luxemburg, Chaim S., and many other friends who

had seemed to him pure of heart. He would have liked to condemn the historical consequences of Communism without damning splendid men and women who sacrificed their lives to it. He was not yet ready to give "idealism" a bad name.

Tenderness for the failed ideology was far more complicated within regular party circles. There was no counterpart north of the American border for the investigative mania of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and so Canadian Communists and fellow-travelers could not relish a sense of victimization as a substitute for confronting their political sins. Shortly after the death of Stalin, Montreal's United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), the Jewish Communist organization, faced a crisis when one of its leaders traveled to Moscow to see for himself why so many acquaintances had not been heard from; on his return he confirmed that most of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia had been murdered. Ironically, it had been the wartime visit to Canada of the Soviet theater director Solomon Mikhoels and the Yiddish Communist poet Itsik Feffer that had allowed UJPO to claim the moral high ground in the "united struggle against fascism." Stalin's execution of these men could not be written off as yet another necessary sacrifice on the road to socialism.

Yet neither could the UJPO's members easily disband an organization that had claimed all their loyalties and, in providing for their social needs, defined the circle of their friends. To keep the face of Communism smiling, the organization now adopted the kind of cultural programming that had characterized the Popular Front of the 1930's. It threw its energies into folk music. Long before rock impresarios took to marketing their clients as ambassadors of international good will, some of my Communist friends organized songfests, hootenannies, and festivals of youth, where by joining your voice to tens or hundreds of others you were invited to step into the great Brotherhood of Man.

When I was at college, it was a little galling to realize that I would never hear anyone like Trotsky, never meet anyone like Anna Vladimirova Rosenthal, never have to sleep on straw sacking as my father had done. Before I learned the word, I considered myself an epigone, descendant of a generation whose deprivation had been so much greater than mine that I could never test myself against the same standard of adversity. I would have been embarrassed to mention to my father the toothless Communism I discovered through folk music, and I was a little embarrassed myself to join the Folk Music Club that replaced the earlier Labor Progressive Party Club at McGill University. Still, I, like so many of my generation, was eager to experience at least some of the afterglow of that great revolutionary idealism that was said to have illumined our century.

In 1949, while on his way to Israel to work on a kibbutz, my brother had picked up a copy of *Youth Sings*, published that summer by the International Union of Students to coincide with the World Festival of Youth and Students in Budapest. When I took up the guitar, this was the hymnal I used to practice my chords. The book's preface, in vintage CP style, was irresistibly phony:

> There is no more pleasant or inspiring way in which to express friendship, international solidarity, and understanding, the deepest and most joyous feelings of young people, than through song. Folk songs, songs of work, student songs, songs of struggle, expressing the finest and best from the national culture of dozens of countries will . . . help to ensure that the spirit of the festival is carried to all the corners of the earth.

Only Pete Seeger ever recited such lines with conviction. Still, the knowledge that one is being manipulated by propaganda never prevented anyone from falling prey to it. Passionate youngsters had composed these songs on their way to creating a perfect world, or, as in Spain, on their way to defeating the black beast of fascism. Singing their music joined us to their faith in an unmediated bond of exaltation. Indeed, their faith was brighter than anything we ourselves had been offered, no one having taught us to pray or to sing on behalf of any other ultimate cause. The songs on those pages, some printed in the cyrillic alphabet, united us to the "Youth of the World," a more potent abstraction than "God of our Fathers."

Britain:
The people's flag is deepest red
It shrouded oft our martyr'd dead,
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold
Their hearts blood dyed its every fold.
Then raise the scarlet standard high
Within its shade we'll live and die!
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flying here!

Germany:
Spanish heavens spread their brilliant starlight
High above our trenches in the plain;
From the distance morning comes to greet us,
Calling us to battle once again.
Far off is our land,
Yet ready we stand.
We're fighting and winning for you,
Freiheit!

Ireland:
Come Workers sing a rebel song,
A song of love and hate;
Of love unto the lowly
And of hatred to the great.
The great who trod our fathers down,
Who steal our children's bread.
Whose hands of greed are stretched to rob
The living and the dead.

Spain:
Viva la Quince Brigada
Rumbala, rumbala, rumbala
Viva la Quince Brigada,
Rumbala, rumbala, rumbala.
Que seha cubierto de gloria
Ay Carmela, Ay Carmela . . .

USSR:
Through the winter's cold and famine,
From the fields and from the towns;
At the call of Comrade Lenin
There arose the Partisans.

Battle-scarred and faded banners
Fluttered bravely on before;
But far deeper was the crimson
Of the recent wounds they bore.

United States of America:
Gwine to lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside,
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside.
Gwine to study war no more.

Among the questions that did not occur to us to ask at the time: why should Russians be drenched in fighters' blood even as Americans were swearing off war? Why did Russians sing patriotically of "Moscow" and "Motherland" while Americans rejoiced in "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" and rehearsed the sins of Jim Crow? How strange that the most powerful message of all—"Freedom!"—should be coming to us in German, while Canadians warbled "*L'Alouette*" and amused themselves with "*Nous nous amusons tous, tous, tous, / Nous nous amusons tous.*"

We did not think ourselves naive. We made fun of some of the cloying phrases as we sang them, mimicking foreign accents, composing our own parodies. All the same, when I plucked my guitar at the folk-music club, or sang along to my Folkway records, I could have sworn that the banks of *my* country were made of marble with a guard at every door, and the vaults stuffed with silver that the workers sweated for. In defying my manufacturer-father, I began to feel like my revolutionary father's daughter.

IN HIS own way, it was my father who rescued me from this sentimental Communism, just as he had saved my life once before.

One day in my final year of college we were sitting together in the living room, with time to spare before the arrival of guests. I think the family was gathering that evening in celebration of Hanukkah. The snow had been falling for hours, and apart from vague concern for the safety of our visitors in their cars, it brought me an uncommon feeling of security. My mother would soon seat herself at the piano, and sing her favorite medley of winter songs: "*un do in heym iz freylakh reyn / on kelt fargessen mir.*" Just as the lyrics said, our home *was* joyously clean, the cold banished from our minds. I was happy to be alone with my father.

The doorbell rang, too early to be guests. Father and I both went to answer it. At the door stood a man with a shovel. He was not one of those professionals with a truck and a plow, but a man on foot, in a worn windbreaker and wool cap, with weary eyes. He asked my father if he could clear our path for a dollar fifty.

The path needed clearing. The professional with the plow had come and gone several hours earlier. In fact, I had been thinking that I ought to go out and do the job myself, but had kept putting it off because it was so sweet inside. Now I was sorry. I prayed that my father would simply hand this man his dollar fifty, saying, "That's all right, my friend. We'll manage the job ourselves." But Father accepted the man's offer, told him to ring the bell when he was through, and closed the door behind him.

When we returned to the living room, everything had changed. I could hear the sound of the shovel, like a fist on my conscience, striking blow after blow. Out there was a poor man working, and here, overprivileged, sat I inside. I wanted to protest; I would happily change places and do the work in the man's stead. I was angry at the unspoken accusation being leveled against me, and said to my father that he ought to have given the man the money, and let me shovel the walk.

Father looked genuinely surprised. "What does it have to do with you? If a man asks for work, and I have the work to give him, he is lucky and so am I. If he sets a reasonable price on his work, I pay him what he earns." That put an end to our conversation, but not to the questions it raised for me. Why should I have put my guilt ahead of another man's pride? Why did I prefer my father's charity to the thought of him as an employer? Was it compassion for the shoveler that made me want to fob him off with a donation, or tender feelings for myself? Wasn't it Father's greatest achievement to have given employment to so many workers over a lifetime?

It is hard to negotiate the inequalities that—next to the common fate that awaits us all—are the most characteristic feature of the human condition. Our passion for equality may be so great that we cannot bear to employ a man, lest it remind us of the *in*equality that remains whether we employ him or not. My father, who had known inequality from both sides, was not afraid of the responsibility of being someone's boss. As for me, I would soon enough look for shelter in the academy, where someone else hires, someone else fires, and in the still air of delightful study, the artifice of idealism can be kept alive.