

# SERGIO LUZZATTO

## I BAMBINI DI MOSHE.

## GLI ORFANI DELLA SHOAH

## E LA NASCITA DI ISRAELE

*(Moshe's Children. Orphans of the Holocaust and the Birth of Israel)*

### A tale of redemption and illusions.

This is the story of the surprising number of children who escaped the Final Solution, some 700 youngsters taken in at Selvino, near Bergamo in northern Italy, to what was then the largest Jewish orphanage in Italy and one of the largest in Europe. It is also the story of Moshe Zeiri, who assumed responsibility for these orphans of the Holocaust, and created the conditions for them to have a second life in the Promised Land.

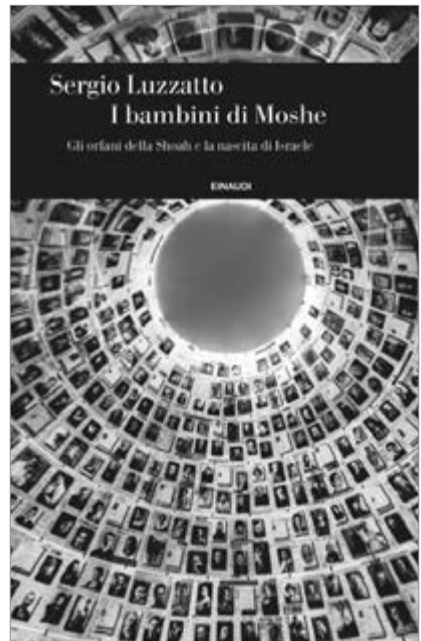
Moshe, trained as a carpenter, a man with a gift for the stage, belonged to a small group of young Zionists from Eastern and Central Europe who had emigrated to Palestine in the 1930s, and would return to Europe between 1943 and 1945 to fight as volunteers with the British forces driving up the Italian peninsula. After a dramatic meeting with some young survivors, Moshe built a sort of republic of orphans at Selvino.

The story of Moshe's children is above all a tale of redemption, but it's also a tale of illusions. After the war of independence of 1948, the Selvino kibbutz's utopian ideals would come in conflict with new (and brutal) forces in the nascent state of Israel.

With narrative verve and scholarly acumen, Sergio Luzzatto reconstructs a chapter of the Holocaust as picaresque as it was tragic, a story whose outlines are almost as broad as the master account of the Jews who were drowned and those who were saved.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sergio Luzzatto** teaches Modern History at the University of Turin. He is the author of *Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age* (Metropolitan Books, 2010), which won the prestigious Cundill Prize in History; of *The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini's Corpse and the Fortunes of Italy* (Metropolitan Books, 2005), and of *Primo Levi's Resistance. Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy* (Metropolitan Books, 2016), published in France by Gallimard (*Partigia*, 2016) and in Spain by Debate (*Partisanos*, 2015).



#### DETAILS

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**“Moshe had not abandoned his dream. He hoped to reunite all his children in the Promised Land, in a new community of survivors of the Final Solution, reborn as the builders of a new Israel.”**



## **Black box**

*Jerusalem, June 17, 2014*

Studying the map before we set out in the car, it looked straightforward. From the house, near the Damascus Gate, we would simply follow the tram line to Mount Herzl. And from there, Yad Vashem was only a few hundred meters away on the western slope. But as we were nearing the Jaffa Gate, heavy morning traffic led us away from the tram tracks and soon we were lost between one hill of modern Jerusalem and another. The GPS had been sitting in the glove compartment since we arrived in Israel, partly out of laziness, partly out of presumption, partly because Sara maintained that getting it up and working would make her car-sick. And so we took an unplanned tour of the city, more irritated than delighted to see the bridge designed by Santiago Calatrava (the usual bridge by the usual Calatrava), arriving at our destination half an hour late.

No problem. Nitza wasn't troubled, a half-hour delay wasn't going to ruin her day. She had come down specially from London with Martin, there are musical festival they'll take part in all across Israel. Today at Yad Vashem we're going to look into her father's story. Moshe Zeiri, born in Poland on June 15, 1914 would have been a century old two days ago, as old as the Great War. When he came to Palestine from the shtetl in Galizia--trained as a carpenter, a vocation for the stage--he was twenty. A decade later, he would be serving with the British Royal Engineers, first in 1943 in Egypt, then at Benghazi, in Libya, then in Naples in '44 and in Milan in '45. Moshe was an ordinary sapper among the thousands of Jewish volunteers who had finally persuaded the reluctant British Army to enrol them. So at least they could do something in Europe. Try to salvage the salvageable.

The hundreds of letters Moshe wrote regularly to his wife Yehudit throughout his service in the Royal Engineers 745<sup>th</sup> (Palestine) Company—she had remained on their kibbutz near Tel Aviv with the infant Nitza—make up an exceptional historical document. Day by day, 'live' as it were, they tell of a liberation that step by step would become a terrible knowledge: the knowledge that it was late, dreadfully late. And that there remained almost nothing left to salvage. But the letters also reveal a further, consoling knowledge. Some of Europe's Jews have survived the Final Solution, and among them there is not only a 'saved' Jew, but—Biblically speaking—a Jew who saves. Redeemed and a redeemer, this survivor. It was in this spirit that Moshe Zeiri stayed in Italy after the Liberation and settled in Selvino, in the mountains near Bergamo, in a former Fascist summer camp for children that the refugees would call the House of Mussolini. There, the youngest

survivors of Hitler's war would be transferred from the bloodlands. Dozens, hundreds of children to be reborn, and with whom to be reborn: these were Moshe's children, destined for perhaps Europe's most important post-war orphanage.

At Yad Vashem, while Sara and Martin visit the museum, Nitza and I will go to the International Institute for Holocaust Research. We have an appointment with the director, as friendly and unhurried as she is contagiously energetic. When I telephoned from Turin before leaving for Israel, the formalities had lasted but a few seconds; I introduced myself and said a few words about Moshe and his letters to Yehudit, and she had already invited us to Yad Vashem: "So come with Nitza, we must do absolutely do something about this!" Now she's taking us downstairs to the floor below the archive entrance; first she asked me to find Sara and Martin, she wanted us all together. An initiation rite awaits us—a surprisingly unqualified initiation.

We descend a flight of stairs, then another. Before us stands a steel-plated door, as in a bank vault. The director hands an ID card to the guard, who runs it past a barcode reader. The guard steps aside and we enter the anteroom of the archives proper, a windowless room. If the people murdered in the Final Solution were People of the Book par excellence, and Yad Vashem a shrine to commemorate that extermination, we are now at the heart of the shrine. Here, in various microclimates depending on the type of paper used, millions of documents relating to the extermination are preserved. Millions of photographs, letters, diaries, exhibits, testimony about the Final Solution: documents that together make up the Book of the Shoah.

The director takes a black box from a shelf, puts it on the table and opens it before us. We can see a tiny sheaf of yellowed pages, each in what looks like a clear plastic sleeve. She tells Nitza: "This is one of the many documents in the archive. They're all preserved like this. They're kept in boxes built to size and every sheet is placed inside an envelope made of special materials to further protect it. Your father's letters will be here too; this is where they belong. Here, they can be preserved forever." "And my mother's letters in reply?" Nitza asks. "Those too, certainly. In Israel, you know, we don't make distinctions between men and women," she says with a smile.

We leave the armored room and climb the stairs. The director's taking us to the department of digitalization. We're asked to keep our voices low so as not to disturb the scanners, a dozen young people. "Page by page the originals of Moshe and Yehudit's letters will pass through the scanning machines here, machines of the very latest generation. Once they've been scanned, your parents' letters will be placed in a black file. The scholars who come to Yad Vashem can read them in digital form. Back and forth, up and down, whenever and as often as they like. Only the family has access to the originals. Only you, Nitza, and your children, and their children, and so forth."

Written on the lightest of paper (because of war's penury plus the hard and fast rules of the Royal Mail), Moshe's letters sent to the kibbutz in British Palestine are very fragile documents indeed. If Nitza and her siblings decide to give them to Yad Vashem, they'll need to be restored before being placed in their black box. Therefore the director now takes us to the restoration lab, so that we can see how Moshe's letters will be treated when they enter this temple of memory.

The restorers are five or six technicians in white smocks, under the direction of a supervisor who speaks perfect English. "You're in luck today," she says smiling. "We have a document recently donated to the archive, right here, that we've worked on like crazy." In another black box, again made to size, are several rather large sheets, each in its transparent envelope. These are the remains of a diary kept in the Warsaw ghetto sometime between 1941 and 1943. A woman in her white smock shows us a photo of this diary in the conditions in which the lab first saw it. A small, dirty, shapeless object. Like a tormented *Konvolut* that was once a Hellenistic papyrus. Or a ball of rags washed up on a beach in Brazil.

"The diary was first flooded with water, then burned in the ghetto," we are told. Seventy years later, however, the team was able to separate the pages and restore them to legibility. "But without the assistance of our colleagues at the Shrine of the Book, the department of the Israel Museum where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls are preserved, I doubt we'd have succeeded." So now they are legible, these pages saved from the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto? "Strange as it may seem, we still don't know in what language they are written." Most of the diary appears to be in Polish, and also in Yiddish, written in the Latin alphabet. With extemporaneous remarks here and there in German and in Russian. "It's quite frustrating to get this far and still be unable to make out the sense," says the lab director. She hasn't declared defeat, however. As we leave, she tells us confidently that "sooner or later we'll get there. Someone, sooner or later, will find the key." A crumpled-up Rosetta stone, the Warsaw diary awaits its Champollion in Jerusalem.

Moshe's letters need no Champollion. Written entirely in Hebrew, they are perfectly legible. They were translated by Chiara Camarda, a scholar born in Trapani, Sicily whose passion for Jewish Studies led her to Venice and a PhD, then to Jerusalem, and from there, who knows? Nitza's younger sister Tali, from a kibbutz at Erez near the Gaza Strip, patiently deciphered her father's handwriting where it was hard to read, producing an essential file that could be turned over to Chiara. Even before I first touched the Moshe's correspondence at Erez, those letters so neatly inscribed on pages bearing a Palestine Company letterhead, I had already read and reread the Italian translations. I knew Moshe's still-private correspondence without ever having seen it.

It reminds me of Amos Oz's epistolary novel, *Black Box*, although the book has nothing to do with Yad Vashem or with documents to decipher. And it makes me think of a passage in *Jews*

*and Words*, written by Oz and his daughter Fania, a professional historian: “We are not about stones, clans or chromosomes. You don’t have to be an archaeologist, an anthropologist or a geneticist to trace and substantiate the Jewish continuum. You don’t have to be an observant Jew. You don’t have to be a Jew. Or for that matter, an anti-Semite. All you have to be is a reader.”

## Chapter One: Far from where?

### *The Kleiners*

The photograph says a lot about them. It was taken in Kopychyntsi, around 1925. Moshe is eleven or twelve, his sister Rivka, seven years older. The whole family has posed in what is very likely the only photographer's studio in the shtetl. The same to which the Kleiner children go each year for the class photo (I recognize it from the backdrop with its painted landscape of birch trees, the same in every photograph I've seen from Moshe's childhood).

David Kleiner looks like a man who is weary, listless, nearing his end: the embodiment of the eastern Jew who has barely survived the disappearance of his world, a pre-war *Galicia felix*. By now it is his wife Zippora who supports the family. Unlettered Zippora, just able to turn the pages of her prayer book in time with the sabbath service, unable to speak any language but Yiddish. But determined and strong willed, if her firm gaze toward the camera is any proof. Busy from morning until night trafficking in the shtetl's minute commerce: boiled eggs and corn cobs, goose feathers, old carpets. To get by, allow the children to study, and make up for her much older husband's fatigue. Some time ago David gave up his livelihood trading in animal feed and now only livens up when he boards the cart to visit the rabbi and his Hasidic court. Yes, the photo says just about everything there is to say, it reveals Rivka's self-consciousness about those parents so visibly antiquated, almost primitive, in any case, irremediably shtetl dwellers. Rivka, forever first in her class at the Polish school. And it hints at Moshe's personality, different from that of his sister, less embarrassed. At ease, maybe even slightly pleased with himself. Proud of his aging father with his wild beard, his black kaftan and velvet hat. Proud of his mother: her piercing eyes, her backbone, her resolve.

Moshe's childhood in Galicia was not an easy one. The transfer from a private Jewish school to the Polish public system at seven was traumatic, in part because only Yiddish was spoken at home, in part because this huge new school next to the Catholic church was anxiety-provoking even in its dimensions. Years later, Moshe could still recall vividly how every morning outside class he silently prayed that the teacher wouldn't call on him. Ever. Even half a question was too much for him--anything spoken in Polish was incomprehensible. "I swore that if this miracle were realized, I'd be a good boy at home. I would obey my parents down to the last detail. I would respect all the Commandments and say my prayers." Like the *melamed*, his old instructor at the Jewish school, this new Polish teacher kept a ruler close to hand, and didn't hesitate to raise it high

and smack the fingers of the dullest students. Moshe, even after he learned Polish, was never one of the bright ones. Singing—he had a melodious voice—was the only subject he excelled in.

Beyond family and school, there were other factors that made his childhood difficult, above all the calamity that befell the villages of eastern Galicia during the Great War and the years immediately thereafter. No historian's tome has more vividly depicted that calamity than does the prose of a novice writer who travelled the length and breadth of the region in 1920 as a war correspondent with the Red Army: the unbridled, salty prose of a Jew from Odessa, Isaak Babel, in his *Red Cavalry*. For a century and a half after the partition of Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the “kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria” belonged to the Habsburg empire along with (the maps that hung on imperial walls explained) the “Grand Duchy of Cracow” and the “duchies of Auschwitz and Zator”. And the kingdom had known a sort of greatness—economic prominence due to prosperous border contraband, trade in grain and wood, and the new business of oil extraction. It enjoyed cultural prominence, too, with the literary and scientific flowering of the city of Lwow (today Lviv, in the Ukraine). But with the First World War--then the Russian Revolution of 1917, the 1918-19 war between a reborn Poland and the infant republic of Ukraine, then war in 1920 between Poland and Soviet Russia--eastern Galicia declined with the end of Habsburg rule. And misfortune came to the Jews who inhabited not just sparkling Lwow, but the sleepy countryside and towns and hamlets around it.

It's almost too easy to imagine the child Moshe—born in Kopychyntsi in the fateful year of 1914—in that landscape, material and intangible, that Babel depicts. A world of demolished churches and crucifixes, of decapitated wooden synagogues, of abandoned wheat fields and rectilinear roads that no longer go to the fair. A Jewish population grown “battered, worthless, insignificant”. Peasant women selling pears for notes no longer in circulation, money lenders in green stockings and dressing gowns, bony-faced men wearing “tragic yellow beards” who swayed slowly back and forth at the crossroads or paused in their doorways, shoulders out “like bedraggled birds.” Perhaps we had better amend this rather dramatic picture with some slightly less colourful pages from historians, to have a more measured vision of the situation of the Jews of Galicia during the Twenties. On the one hand, life had become more precarious in a new geopolitical context, where being a Jew in the ultra-Catholic, nationalist republic of Poland was often a step backward from the tolerant Habsburg empire. On the other, life had grown more dynamic due to the arrival, both in city and country, of a fresh, lively and contagious new element, Zionist propaganda.

There on the road toward the Carpathians that went from Tarnopol to Czortków, Kopychyntsi was as like other shtetls of eastern Galicia as a drop of water. Towns that in the very years when Moshe was a child, were asserting their literary dignity thanks to a writer from

Buchach, a day's cart ride away from Kopychyntsi: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the future Nobel Prize winner. Like any shtetl worthy of the name, Kopychyntsi's streets teemed with geese running free and the barefoot children of the poor. The shtetl was above all a creature of odors, beginning with market smells: cabbage, onions, pickled herrings. During the winter, even in Kopychyntsi the shops of the Jews along the main road filled up with merchandise to sell for *their* holidays, those of the Gentiles. Cinnamon, ginger, sultana raisins. Eau de vie and cognac for the better-off clients, the Polish and Ukrainian landowners who stepped down from their carriages wrapped in bear and wolf coats, trailing their retinues of high-handed accountants and fat-bellied estate bosses.

The Kleiner house was near the river. A house built of wood, of recent construction, but small. There were two rooms and two beds: one for Zipporah and Rivka, one for David and Moshe. Of iron stoves to gather around on winter evenings while the potatoes grilled on the coals, there was just one. When Moshe went out to the courtyard to play games with his friends, he had only Rivka's old coat to wear, the lining naughtily hanging down from the hem, getting soaked in the snow. For that matter, even the weeping willows along the Nichlavka hung down from the river banks. "When I was a child," wrote Moshe, "I always thought the river was made from the tears of the willows." Daily life in the shtetl probably stirred less poetic memories in Moshe. A few photographs of Kopychyntsi taken by Alter Kacyzne, a reporter from Warsaw with a sociologist's eye as well as the gifts of a writer, have somehow survived the death of the small Jewish settlement. Two spinners, father and son, hoping to sell their miserable stock of rope. An old orthodox Jew who haunts the market square from dawn to dusk, ready to do any job going.

The Kleiner elders didn't hesitate to raise a hand against Moshe. It was enough that he missed his afternoon prayers, or played games on Saturday, or slept without his kippah. But the memories of domestic blows weren't so powerful they drove out even more powerful memories of family holiday celebrations. David and Zipporah were observant Jews, outside the home as inside. Zipporah was in charge of abiding by the dietary laws, her cooking rigorously kosher. David took care of the rest, raising Moshe in the religion of his forebears. "I can still see my father going out" (to the synagogue; there were no less than six in Kopychyntsi for a Jewish population of 2,500), "his prayer shawl under his arm, and me behind him, and my mother at the door, blessing us." At Rosh Hashanah the temple echoed with the melancholy songs sung by David Kleiner and the other cantors, with Abraham Yaakov, Yehuda Yakar and Avrami Peled sounding the shofar. On Yom Kippur, Zippora seemed another person when she came back from her place in the women's gallery where, "having wept floods of tears, she felt better." At Pesach, the children got new clothes. Once a year, Moshe could feel proud to look in the mirror.



Alter Kacyzne also photographed Czortków, where the Hassidic court that David Kleiner favored was located. A court well known far beyond eastern Galicia, as far as Volhynia and Podolia, as far even as Hungary and Russia. The disciples of the Friedman court had been gathering there for more than a century, and the entire town of Chortkov revolved around the charismatic rabbi's presence. We can't say whether Moshe's father, once he reached Chortkov, half a day's ride on the back of a donkey, confined his attention to the venerable rabbi, or whether he was curious about the many-colored human crush of pilgrims, middlemen, cripples and beggars without which a Hassidic court would not be a court. Family legend has retained the memory of the old hay merchant returning to the shtetl and taking to his bed for days on end, ill with excitement and consumption after his mystical encounter with the rabbi. The family also cherished the memory of a visit Moshe himself made to the rabbi, and sang for him in his fine voice. The rabbi blessed him and predicted that "Perhaps one day you'll sing with the Levites in the Temple at Jerusalem."

### *Photo albums*

We will never hear the young Moshe's voice. Not even the tiniest scrap of a written record from the time he lived in Poland remains in the family. As for those fragments of memory, as evocative as they are, they always risk falsifying the picture, and all the more so in the case of the shtetl, not just a world that's been lost, but a world that has been utterly destroyed. And so we must rely on photographs to restore something of Moshe's childhood. They are, quite simply, survivors of the Shoah, since the Final Solution not only set out to annihilate people, but things, including those very special things that are images of people. And thus a history of the destruction of the European Jews that also hopes, as this one does, to trace their salvation and redemption, cannot but also be a history of photographs. Especially when from each of these photos, a cry of despair escapes, like the one that tormented W.G. Sebald's protagonist Austerlitz in the novel of the same name.

How many reached adulthood, of the children from the Jewish school of Probizhna, a shtetl near Moshe's, photographed with their young teacher Rivka Kleiner in 1928? And how many among those in a group photo with Moshe also taken sometime in the late 1920s? To find photographs of Galician Jewish childhoods and youths between the two world wars that are not just a long cry of despair, we must look at the albums of those who got away in time. And specifically at in the albums of those who considered emigration an opportunity and not merely a necessity, the militant Zionists.

In their shtetl, young Rivka and Moshe Kleiner had the good fortune to bond with the brothers and sisters Lubianiker, a family that was destined to count in the story of Zionism. Rivka knew Pinchas, the youngest of them, well. She was often invited home, to an orthodox Jewish

family that was also quite middle class, with a large house of many rooms and a grand piano in the drawing room. Pinchas, born in 1904, was just three years older than Rivka. While she was getting her diploma as a teacher and beginning in the classroom at Probizhna, Pinchas Lubianiker was not only getting a degree in Law from the University of Lwow, he was busy founding the Zionist movement Gordonia with his brother Zelig and his sister Eva. Some of the photos taken then and later carried far away with Rivka toward her second life, tell the story of a young woman's sentimental education as her connection with the Lubianiker family begins to profoundly change her existence, and shape her brother Moshe's destiny as well.

It began with the theatre. The Lubianaker children had founded an amateur company to which Rivka belonged. They were a dozen young men and women, touring the province of Tarnopol in the style of the itinerant companies, offering a popular crowd typical Yiddish theatre fare: a mixture of acting and singing, of highbrow and low, of light-hearted and profound, wandering and settled, classical and experimental, sacred and profane. It was that odd combination of Hassidic tradition with modernism in the Stanislavskij mould that in 1911 had dazzled an insurance claims officer in Prague named Franz Kafka. He found in it a manner unknown to him, a natural and spontaneous way of being a Jew. It pushed him to investigate the existential condition of those *Ostjuden* who were so badly treated by the West, made him want to be reborn as that "eastern European Jewish kid in the corner of the hall, who's afraid of nothing."

The eastern European Jewish kid in the corner of the hall, Moshe watched enchanted, as the members of the Lubianiker family and sister Rivka did their rehearsals with the company. And when that merry brigade of amateur actors took off to stage some Romanian or Russian work in one of the other shtetls in the area, Moshe would always find a way to come along with them--a problematic little brother in a group of young men and women enjoying, along with that Yiddish repertory, a freedom of movement and a casual mixing of the sexes completely unknown to their parents, and presumably frowned upon. Moshe's passion for the stage was such that the fearless Jewish kid found a place for himself--sometimes right up on the stage--even in the shows of the professional traveling Jewish companies that came to the shtetl. Where they would perform in the stable of an inn out on the main road, an inn that Alter Kaczyne didn't fail to photograph.

For theatre was an essential part of Zionism. Theodor Herzl and his followers saw an evening of performances both a way to bring culture to the masses, and an opportunity to do other things on the side. Advertise a Zionist congress in Basel. Take collections on behalf of the Jewish National Fund. Do publicity for Tarbut, a new cultural organization that had been founded in Vienna in 1922, whose mission was to spread instruction in modern Hebrew to the four corners of Poland. In eastern Galicia, Tarbut was so successful that you could meet children playing on the dirt

roads of the shtetl speaking Hebrew among themselves. In Probizhna, kindergarten teacher Rivka Kleiner was among the local animators of Tarbut, and can be seen in a group photo of the kind the Zionists never missed an occasion to have made. It's not just a souvenir photo, it's the laying of the first stone. A collective identity card.

Today these photos that survived the Holocaust of Things show us how youthful the Zionist movement was, and also how thoroughly the genders were intermixed. It was not just males and females together, it was young people without fathers and mothers. Because it was only by leaving their parents behind, parents seen as obsolete, passive, short-sighted, it was only by choosing to become orphans, so to speak, by abandoning not only the family but the shtetl, that the Zionists could transform Herzl's dream—mass emigration to Palestine and the founding of a Jewish state—from giddy fantasy into arduous reality.

### *Gordonia*

To compensate for the poverty of sources on Moshe's youth, literature comes to our aid. It's necessary, in fact. For there is no aspect of a coming of age like that of Moshe Kleiner that can't be found in a novel by I. J. Singer, in reportage by Joseph Roth, or a story by Bruno Schulz. The mercantile drabness of the shtetl, the mounting incomprehension between parents and children, the mysterious enzyme released by Hassidic tradition, the life force of the Zionist movement, the novel alliance between brothers and sisters, the latent tension between Yiddish and Hebrew, the experience training on a planned agricultural settlement, the impatient wait for an emigration permit: if young Moshe's historical voice is today impossible to recover, the voices of those around him—if not the ideas stirring in his mind and the passions in his heart—all resound from the shelves of any good bookstore.

The reporter from Warsaw, Alter Kacyzne, who visited Kopychyntsi in the 1920s and captured with his camera those two rope merchants, the idle odd-jobs man, and the stable of an inn converted to a theatre, was probably the most sensitive interpreter of the two sides of Jewish Poland. On the one hand, there was the shtetl, pictured in hundreds of shots that Kacyzne sent to New York for publication in *The Forward*, the Jewish magazine of New York, and therefore preserved from the Holocaust of Things. This was the same Poland that Kacyzne described in appealing dispatches—pen and ink, not photos--sketches from the provinces that *The Forward*, however, decided not to publish. On the other side was the city, described by Kacyzne in *The Strong and the Weak*. For the modest horizon of the shtetl was far from the entire existential landscape of three million Polish Jews. Most lived in large cities, Warsaw or Lodz, Poznan, Lublin, Vilnius or Lwow. And the ones who didn't (for half the Polish Jewish population was under 20

years of age) could not wait to move there. And then discover, once they settled into an urban setting, the other side of the coin.

It is from literature that we learn about the combination of attraction and repulsion that the city exercised on young people raised in the shtetl. And not just the city of Warsaw, with its infinite number of different angles and human types, its disorderly sum of communities with businessmen and Talmudic scholars, secular and its Orthodox, men of the Bund and the Zionists, that metropolis of Jews who Kacyzne (himself a migrant from outside the city) called a “shadow people”: proofreaders converted to brokers, long-winded labor unionists, tireless tailors, visionary publishers, impoverished widows of country cantors, cynical wood merchants, sickly editors of revolutionary rags. There was Lwow, too, as it was called then, the city chosen by Moshe Kleiner one day in 1929 or 1930 when at fifteen or sixteen. Lwow, which the Jewish-Galician intelligentsia was so proud of, with its distinguished university, its Babel-like throngs of languages spoken on the Ringplatz, the Viennese cafés of Karola Ludwika Street, its Hassidic orators, haute bourgeois neighborhoods, boulevards on the hills. It was the coming political capital, a breeding ground for the various strains of Zionism. As well as an economic capital in crisis. Where Jewish shopkeepers, traditionally in charge of wholesale and retail, were having trouble making ends meet, and 50,000 of the 100,000 resident Jews were on the public dole. Proof, then, that Poland-- not only provincial, rural Poland but also urban Poland—was a precarious world, on the verge of bankruptcy now that it could no longer rely on the Russian imperial market.

As the family recalls it, Moshe left Kopychyntsi for Lwow just after his father died. He waited to be a genuine orphan (at least by half) before taking Zionism’s road of voluntary orphanhood. Fifteen years later he would recall how he had found a place to live in Lwow at the Hechaluz headquarters, the Jewish association that prepared young people to emigrate to Palestine. “I lived there with the pioneers preparing to make their *aliyah*,” Hebrew for “ascent” to Israel. “It was a long, narrow room lined with beds facing each other. I hid out at the very end of the room where there was only one other roommate nearby.” Moshe took a course at ORT, the international Jewish organization giving professional training to workers, to learn carpentry. It’s unclear whether he went on to get a diploma. We do know that in Poland at the time, learning a manual skill was an integral part of a Zionist education. As Polish state law on crafts and trades grew ever more similar to outright antisemitism, mastery of a trade offered young Jews a guarantee for the future—far away in Eretz Israel.

Gordonia, the movement founded by the Lubianikers in 1923, owed its name to A. D. Gordon, who had left for Palestine at the turn of the century and advocated a kind of Tolstoian religion of work within the budding kibbutz community. Unlike other strands of Zionism, Gordonia

was not particularly imbued with socialism, and Marxism, even less. Its political slant was equivalent to nationalism, and the conquest of labor was interpreted as conquest of the soil. For Pinchas Lubianiker, the brains of the original family in Kopychyntsi, the founding principle of the Jewish state to come wasn't meant to be the class struggle, but the occupation of territory. That territory for which another Lubianiker brother, Zvi, had taken up arms during the Great War when he enlisted in the Jewish Legion of the British Army and fought under General Allenby to free Palestine from Ottoman rule.

By the time Moshe Kleiner moved into the last bed at the end of the corridor at Hechaluz in Lwow, Pinchas Lubianiker had already left Poland and joined Zvi in British mandate Palestine. In Galicia and across Poland, however, the family could count on an ample number of Gordonia activists. One of these was Moshe. Very likely—if you knew where to find them in Polish or Israeli archives—you would turn up traces of his proselytizing, along with that of the other Gordonia apostles going from city to city and to the countryside to preach *aliyah*, to convince as many young women and men as possible, if not their parents, that the best thing for Polish Jews was to prepare to emigrate to Israel. Whatever the Orthodox were saying on the streets of the shtetl and in the schools where they studied the Talmud. The Orthodox believed that emigration was a scandal, that it would be the blackest impiety to cut short the biblical term of Exile and return to the Promised Land before the Messiah arrived.

We see Moshe back in Kopychyntsi, at work with a couple of his male comrades and 15 female ones in a spartan agricultural settlement started by Hechaluz. The girls, who have stopped working for an instant to accommodate the photographer, are processing some foodstuff I'm unable to identify. Seeds of some plant? Whatever the case, these young Galicians are conscious they'll be planting seeds in their future life. In letters, their friends settled in Palestine tell them over and over again that the Promised Land is arid and inhospitable, and competence working the fields (something Polish Jews didn't excel at) will be necessary to survival. And it wasn't just a question of planting trees, as Herzl the prophet had enjoined them during one mythic trip in Palestine. They would have to redeem soil that 2,000 years of Christian, Arab and Ottoman neglect had turned into a semi-desert. It would be one of the accomplishments of those pioneers of the kibbutz movement: heroes of the battle against malaria, inventors of drip irrigation for crops like wheat and barley, cultivators of sparkling citrus groves on the coast.

Moshe, when he had to travel from Kopychyntsi to Lwow for Hechaluz meetings, didn't have the money to pay for the train from Tarnopol, or to take the Carl Ludwig Bahn built under the Habsburgs, a railway for the rich. He had to do the 100 and some km by cart, praying that the scrawny horse would make it to their destination. "I'm quite content to hate a bumpy road," he said

teasingly years later. “I had my fill of those in my youth when I was traveling from town to city to Galician town on Hechalutz business.” He was tireless, Moshe. Even then. At times his mother would steal up on him to bring him dinner, a real *yiddishe mame*, worried that he wouldn’t eat. But Zipporah couldn’t always look after her boy. On the back of one photo in the album is written, “Following a meeting at Rovno.” Beyond Galicia, that is, at a place today known as Rivne, in Volhynia. A bit too far even for a solicitous mother to follow.

### *Adela and Inda*

We don’t have any childhood photos of Adela or Inda. Not even one survived the Holocaust of Things. We can only imagine them, sisters to all appearances fortunate, in Rovno during the 1930s.

They came from a shtetl so imposing it resembled a real city, and was the economic powerhouse of all Volhynia. Forty thousand inhabitants, more than half of them Jews. A city of trade and industry where the Liberman parents settled after they finished university at Kiev, where they had met around the time of the First World War. Meir and Feige Liberman were pharmacists, and after the girls were born— in 1926, Inda in 1928—they were able to bring them up in comfort, without having to worry about money. The pharmacy became prosperous, and besides selling medicines, they gradually began to distribute their products throughout the entire province. The girls at Spółdzielcza number 5 grew up like daughters of the proper middle class. They went to a private school. Early on they began to study piano and take dancing lessons.

Once again, literature comes to our aid. If there’s a shtetl we can imagine without studying its history, Rovno is it, for that is where Fania Mussman, Amos Oz’s mother, was born and raised with her sisters before emigrating to Palestine in the mid-1930s. In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz brings his mother’s birthplace back to life, relying on the stories he heard as a child right from the source, before his mother took her life. “The cinema in Rovno was owned by a German named Brandt. One of the pharmacists was a Czech by the name of Mahacek. The chief surgeon at the hospital was a Jew called Dr. Segal, whose rivals nicknamed him Mad Segal. A colleague of his at the hospital was the orthopedic surgeon Dr. Joseph Kopejka, who was a keen Revisionist Zionist. Moshe Rotenberg and Simcha-Hertz Majafit were the town’s rabbis. Jews dealt in timber and grain, milled flour, worked in textiles and household goods, gold and silver work, hides, printing, clothing, grocery, haberdashery, trade, and banking. Some young Jews were driven by their social conscience to join the proletariat as print workers, apprentices, and day laborers. The Pisiuk family had a brewery. The Twischor family were well-known craftsmen. The Strauch family made soap. The Gendelberg family leased forests. The Steinberg family owned a match factory.”

Somewhat more than a decade after Fania Mussman, Adela and Inda Liberman followed some of her steps. They attended a Jewish school in Rovno. They took part in Tarbut. They were familiar with local Zionist circles from a tender age because their mother Feige was vice president of WIZO, the international organization of Zionist women. Before the Second World War broke out, Adela attended the same Jewish gymnasium where Fania studied. At school one day in January 1939, Adela heard a writer visiting from Palestine tell a story she would not forget. A legend, actually. A popular legend common to folk cultures all over the world that a Jewish poet from right there in Volhynia—the delightful Haim Nahman Bialik—had recently adapted to Zionist purposes.

It was the story of King David in his cave. The King wasn't really dead, he had simply fallen asleep in a cave. He was just waiting for someone to wake him so he could return to the scene and save the Chosen People. One day, two young men of good will decided to search for that secret place, and after confronting many dangers, they managed to find it. When the entrance opened before them, they were struck dumb by what they saw. In a room with walls panelled in gold, David slept on a golden bed. His spear and a bottle of water from the Garden of Eden lay near his head. A golden candle burned at his feet. His gold-plated harp hung on the wall, his crown and sceptre, encrusted with diamonds, sat on a golden table. Just then, David stretched out his arms toward the youths to allow them to pour holy water from the bottle on his hands. But the two were so dumbfounded they fail to act in good time, and King David folded up his arms again. A fierce storm broke out and the two young men were swept out of the cave and driven far away to an unknown land. Although they searched and searched, they never found the cave again.

### *Avraham*

Five hundred km north of Rovno near where Poland borders Lithuania, Avraham, too—a child a bit younger than Adela, just Inda's age—also fell under Bialik's spell. In his case, it was one of the poet's verses written when he was an orphan of not yet 20 years old, a Talmudic scholar in Lithuania, already impatient for new horizons and experiences. It was among the first poems written by the future national poet of the new Israel. Though his group of young Zionists, Avraham Lipkuński discovered the poem, "To the Bird".

Greetings! Peace to you, returning  
Lovely bird, unto my window, from a warmer clime  
How my soul for songs was yearning  
When my dwelling you deserted in the wintertime!

What could a Jewish kid from Eastern Europe learn from a bird returning north from a warm and wonderful land, the land of Zion? What news could the bird bring of those Jewish brothers who had reached the banks of the River Jordan, the valleys of Judea, the hills of Galilee? Had the God of the Book taken pity on the people of Israel at last? Did the brothers elevated to Palestine push their plows with joy, did dates and almonds fall into their arms from the trees? And what did those brothers know of all the trials that still befell diaspora Jews? Certainly that bird that had reappeared at the window of a house in the north would want to migrate again, to fly off toward the mountains and desert of the south. “Be happy you have left my home/Winged creature, had you stayed with me/You would regret my fate so bitterly.”

Like his older brother Pinchas, Avraham was studying the Talmud in a school at Raduń. Still a child, Avraham nevertheless experienced the spiritual climate of that part of Poland bordering Lithuania, where the shtetls brought forth revered rabbinical dynasties and Yiddish culture was particularly informed. The Lipkuński family lived at Dugalishok, not even a shtetl, just a handful of houses on the road between Raduń and Eishyshok. It was a place renowned for its beautiful pine forest, which Pinchas and Avraham, under their father’s instruction, knew tree by tree, glade by glade. The famous Israel Meir Kagan, rabbi of the great yeshiva of Raduń, known as “the Hafetz Haim,” spent his summers at Dugalishok with his entourage. The two Lipkuński brothers (their younger brother Yekutiel was still too small ) attended the minor yeshiva. Especially on the maternal side, the Rakowski family, Avraham’s people were scrupulously Orthodox, and had links with the most erudite rabbis of Eishyshok. One of them, Yankl the cembalist, was related to Sara Mina Rakowski.

The Lipkuńskis had been there for generations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they had even been something like the lords of Dugalishok, where they owned nearly all the small plots. But the new century did not bring good fortune. Some members of the extended family, along with many other Jewish subjects of the Tsar of Russia, emigrated overseas. In 1917 Gussie Lipman of Turner Falls, Massachusetts, was in a position to send some money back to “Moses Lipkunsky” of “Dugalishok near Radun, district of Lida, governorate of Vilnius”, that is, none other than Moshe David Lipkuński, future father of Avraham. A dozen years later, after he had married Sara Mina and there were three children to look after, Moshe David and his brother Yaakov Leib also embarked for the Americas—Argentina. A surviving photograph depicts them on the deck of the ocean liner *Andes* that ran from Southampton to Buenos Aires. On the life preserver, a sign in Polish indicates “Third Class Passengers”.

A photograph of the Lipkuńskis at home also survived the Holocaust of Things because it was sent to Moshe David in Argentina as well as to relatives in North America. The older brothers



Pinchas and Avraham don't wear *payot*—sidecurls—which weren't the custom among Lithuanian Hassidic Jews. But we see them in buttoned-up white shirts, the mark of the little Talmud scholar. While little Yekutiel's sailor suit served to reassure the faraway father that economic circumstances still permitted him to wear middle class fashion. Sara Mina is dressed in the modest clothing befitting a Jewish mother (Orthodox, but not to the point that she donned the traditional wig worn after marriage). Her long dress is in its sober way, slightly flirtatious. The long, chaste sleeves are balanced by an elegant collar that leaves her neck rather exposed.

She had good reason, Sara Mina, to face the camera in that photographer's studio in Raduń with self-assurance—anything but the image of a dependent wife waiting for a money order from abroad. Shtetl mothers tended to be hard workers; they compensated for those unproductive husbands dedicated to studying the Torah and the Talmud. In the case of Sara Mina, her husband was not one of those souls lost among Bible verses and Kabbalah mysteries. But he had left the country. And no matter how much money he sent, it was never enough. Especially with two children already boarding out to attend yeshiva in Raduń. Sara never stopped working. Morning to evening and often at night as well, she would be at her sewing machine, the Singer of her dowry. Like many other women in the district, she was a seamstress. Eternally at work, always in competition, hoping to satisfy the tastes of an ever-less provincial clientele that now followed the latest city fashions. Twice a week she'd also bake bread and sweets to sell around the district on Shabbat. Sometimes she had to pawn her wedding ring or silver to get by.

Things improved after Moshe David came back from Argentina in 1935 and resumed working as a blacksmith and ironmonger at Dugalishok, with some success. When Pinchas and Avraham came back home from the yeshiva for a few days with the family, it was a source of pride to see how much respect the Christian peasants along the road had for their father. Sometimes one of them would actually offer them a lift on a cart or sled. But beginning that very year of 1935, after the death of Józef Piłsudski--the man steadying the helm of the Polish Republic born following the First War--the overall situation of Polish Jews began to decline badly. A number of measures to sabotage Jewish businesses were passed by the Diet, with the intent of forcing Jews to emigrate. Just as in Germany of the Nuremberg Laws, the interests of the anti-Semites and those of the Zionists were paradoxically convergent: both considered mass emigration the only possible solution to the "Jewish problem." At the same time, 1935 marked the resurgence in Poland of an endemic fever: the pogrom. Outbreaks of violence against Jews multiplied in every province of the Polish Republic. Civil authorities looked the other way and the Catholic Church remained silent.

Organized Judaism reacted somewhat weakly. The one exception was the revisionist Zionist movement led by the controversial Ze'ev Jabotinsky, whose prized military experience was

matched by a somewhat sinister admiration for Mussolini's Italy. Jabotinsky drew up an "evacuation plan" for mass emigration of Jews to Israel, some million and a half of them. It included Polish Jews, also Rumanian, Hungarian, Austrian, Baltic, German—all the Jews of Europe he thought had reason to feel threatened by a broad wave of anti-Semitism. At the same time, the ranks of Betar, the paramilitary youth organization that Jabotinsky had founded in 1923, were rapidly expanding; its militants of a distinctly younger generation than the leader, young men fond of rallying in Polish cities wearing Fascist-style black shirts. His recruits were readier than Jabotinsky to see political violence as an essential element in the Zionist struggle.

Avraham Lipkuński, too young to bear arms, belonged to the juvenile section of Betar. And it was there—wearing miniature uniforms and shooting toy weapons—that the yeshiva boy of Raduń came across Bialek's "To the Bird"—and rapidly committed it to memory.

### *Dov and Adam*

Before they took part in Betar proper, Shaya and Yosef—the older brothers of Dov and Adam Wexler—also belonged to the juvenile section. What's left today of a portrait of those little boys, taken by an itinerant photographer who visited Janowo around 1932, shows Dov and Adam between mother Mindel and brother Yosef, who's looking proud in his paramilitary uniform. Dov wears the buttoned-up white shirt of the Talmud scholar, and Adam, apparently, hasn't yet reached the age of three when he'll be admitted to the Jewish kindergarten.

Like Dugalishok, the village of Janowo was less than a shtetl. Once the Jews had been numerous there, but slowly the community declined until it numbered no more than a few dozen. The other were Gentiles, *goyim*. Peasants, and mostly poor ones. Between the provinces of Masuria and Mazovia in northern Poland, Janowo's stingy soil didn't produce much for its inhabitants. Still, it was a village of some importance compared to the tiny hamlets that surrounded it. Janowo had a police station and a fire house. There was mail service and a telephone line. Also a public office that recorded births and deaths, two bakeries and a grocery store run by a Jewish family. The hospital, however, was thirty km south at Mława in the direction of Warsaw. Carts were almost the only vehicles. Better-off residents would take the coach run by Laypshe, a distant cousin of Mindel Wexler. So Adam recalled. Laypshe, the only Jew in Janowo who wore glasses, led the services at the synagogue on holidays.

Synagogue? The synagogue was gone, destroyed by fire during the Great War. But there was a Beit Midrash, a study hall, just visible beyond the outlying farms. Nothing comparable to the Catholic church of course, which dominated the local countryside with its red bricks and big black cross atop the bell tower. Still, better than nothing. Henoah Wexler, on his return from prison in

Germany (Shaya was then ten, Yosef five or six, and the younger boys not yet born) had taken it upon himself to prepare the place. He'd been raised in a Hassidic family and couldn't tolerate the absence of a place of worship. The study hall was divided in two: one side was devoted to prayer, on the other (when the pipes brought water) was a sauna, perhaps even a *mikvah*, a ritual bath.

Until the First World War broke out, Janowo stood at the eastern extreme of Tsarist Russia at the frontier with the Prussian Empire. During the war Henoah Wexler, along with hundreds of thousands of the Tsar's soldiers, was imprisoned by the Germans. Captured near Janowo, he was interned in eastern Prussia. When the Germans learned he spoke good Yiddish they used him as an interpreter to communicate with other Russian prisoners of Jewish origin. Perhaps this had something to do with why, when he came back from Germany after the war's end, he had a reputation as a Bolshevik. In I.J. Singer's novel *Steel and Iron*, Benjamin Lerner has something of the same experience. Not exactly a communist, but someone who'd been in that Babel of the German Imperial prisoner of war camps for Russians, and whose eyes had been opened about the need to accomplish something, in that upside-down world. And not simply, as Orthodox Jews had been inclined, to simply submit, and pray and chant.

Like just about every other house in Janowo, Henoah and Mindel Wexler's home was built of wood. It had been a spacious house, but when money problems arose, part of it had been sold to Christian peasants. Mindel worked as a seamstress, and she was mainly the one who kept the ship afloat, another example of the economic importance of mothers in Hassidic families. For if Henoah had once been stirred by the sacred fire of industry, the fever had subsided quickly after the war. He didn't do much more than set out from time to time to a nearby village, where he would pocket a few zloty notes (without any official investiture from a rabbi) slaughtering animals according to kosher law. Otherwise Henoah didn't stray from Janowo and its study hall. He lingered over the Talmud. He read the newspapers. He played chess. His passion for chess he bequeathed to his two younger boys. Many years later Adam would remember chess games played as a boy, as a tiny boy, in fact. "I played with my brother Dov. Usually, I lost--and I cried."

Adam and Dov's first school was old-fashioned, tough and severe, conducted by the village *melamed*. To imagine Adam as a young student, we rely once again on the photos sent by Alter Kacyzne to *The Forward* in New York. One of them is titled "Son of the Ritual Slaughterer". A young boy sits on a wooden bench, his child's prayer shawl wrapped around him. And, elbow resting on a book that's larger than he is, aims two large, tired, questioning eyes at the reporter from Warsaw. Jewish learning for tiny children in its alfa and omega, the millennia-old labor of making sense of the Book when one has barely learned to speak, and the millenarian promise of redemption that will come to all the sons of Israel who master the alphabet. After school, Dov and Adam did all

they could to get to play with their Christian contemporaries, to be accepted by them. In order to go shrimp fishing with the Małkowskis from the banks of the Orzyc, they even conquered their squeamishness about handling the tiny, slimy frogs they used as bait. But sooner or later, the time came when one of these friends would remind the boys they were just two Jews. They should stop giving people a hard time and just take off for Palestine.

Even worse problems would come to the Wexlers with the new laws on ritual slaughter that began to be issued in 1936. Formally, these were intended to spare animals undue suffering and guarantee minimum standards of hygiene. In reality, the regulations were imbued with the anti-Semitism that was spreading across the society of the Polish Republic. The example came from Nazi Germany, where new restrictive measures on ritual slaughter had been one of first acts of the Nazis in power. In small villages like Janowo, ritual slaughter was outlawed completely, forcing non-standard workers like Henoch Wexler into unemployment or illegality. Adam and Dov's father chose the latter. With the help of some farmers and Christian butchers, he supplied under-the-counter kosher meat to his fellow Jews in the district. When he was caught, he was confined for a few weeks in the jail cell at the police station. It wasn't so bad, and he even became friendly with one of the guards. When the man later visited the Wexlers one Shabbat "He stared at the candles, the white tablecloth, the freshly made challah, very evidently wondering how was it possible to be Jewish."

Now the Yiddish newspaper that came three times a week by mail from Warsaw offered ever-more alarming news. The Danzig Corridor was just a few dozen km away, and eastern Prussia only a few dozen meters. Soon the Hitlerjugend, with their brown shirts and daggers began to parade by the Janowo customs house. One day Dov, by now studying at the Polish school, was punished for bad conduct by Miss Jarzembowska. He was told to kneel in the corner of the classroom, just as all the other students had to do when punished. But Dov refused, and the teacher sent him to the principal. The matter couldn't be resolved, and Białek the priest was also brought in. But Dov, rather than kneel like a Christian in church, decided to leave the school. Another time, Adam, the first time he had travelled in his life, had a worse experience. With his mother and Shaya, he had gone to Łódź for an aunt's wedding. On the return trip, at Mława when they had already boarded Laypshe's coach, they were attacked with stones and clubs by a band of delinquent boys. Luckily for them, they were rescued by Mariusz the grocer, a Christian nicknamed "Half-Portion." Weighing in at just under 100 pounds, he managed to chase the whole gang away.

Shaya had now reached the age of military service. And he did nothing to evade it. The instructors at Betar insisted that any military experience might one day prove useful to the Revisionist Zionists. "The entire house rang with the name of Jabotinsky, whose every word was

revered as if it had been uttered by a god.” At least that was how Shaya and Yosef felt. The two were increasingly at odds with Henoah, who had other plans for them, certainly not Zionism, the “evacuation plan” and *aliyah* to Palestine. Yosef, for example, wouldn’t he make a proper cantor, with that fine voice of his? He wasn’t at all interested, however. First he worked as an apprentice in a carpenter’s shop, Rakowski, a Christian. Then he left Janowo and moved to Łódź, where his uncle David lived, and became a salesman. There, too, he continued his connection with Betar.

Dov and Adam were full of admiration for their older brothers. There was Shaya, so impressive when he came home on leave wearing the genuine uniform of the real Polish army. And Yosef, whom they heard was becoming a real militant of Betar. They’d even heard that when Jabotinsky came to Poland and visited Łódź, Yosef had been chosen to serve as a body guard.

### *Suti*

In all of eastern Europe there was only one country where the name Jabotinsky wasn’t known to every Jew, whether as the hero of the story, or the villain. That country was Hungary. In general Hungary was the only country in the east that did not prove fertile soil for Zionism—and this as early as the days of Herzl, despite the fact he’d been born right there in Pest. Like the German Jews, Hungarian Jews tended to feel they fully belonged to their relative societies. They shared its culture, even Magyar patriotism. Or at least they shared it up to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the cataclysm that came after. First came the communist revolution of Bela Kun, and then the anti-communist reaction. Jews became the target of both sides in the struggle. For the revolutionaries, Jews were capitalists. For the reactionaries, they were Bolsheviks.

The town of Nagyszőlös, in Ruthenia, had been Hungarian for centuries. Ruthenia or Transcarpathia, if you like: in any case, on the Danubian side of the Carpathians. Between the world wars, it was a Czech possession named Sevlus. Fifteen thousand people lived there, a third of them Jews, the other two thirds made up of Magyars, Ruthenians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Romanians, Germans, Bulgarians and the Roma. It was a perfect sample of Mitteleuropa, a dense concentrate of diversity. Many of the Jews of Nagyszőlös knew Yiddish but preferred—even at home—to speak Hungarian. For them, the Treaty of Trianon after World War I had been an amputation of Hungary’s historic lands, when Ruthenia was assigned to the new-born Czechoslovakia. Young Jewish fathers were veterans of the trenches who had fought the Great War under the sign of the double-headed eagle. Their childhood songs, the ones taught to the little ones on winter nights, were Magyar songs. The newspapers they read were Magyar papers that came in on the Budapest train. And the Perényi, the local barons around whose interests the economy of Nagyszőlös ran and had always run, were one hundred percent Magyar.

The Weisz lived next to the distillery. Only the park stood between them and the grand Perényi palace, up against the slopes of the Black Mountain where the Carpathians trailed off into vineyards and a vast plain opened out. Sándor's parents had been there since 1924, when Vilmos became the Perényi's factor and manager of the distillery. At Nagyszőlős, everything belonged to the Perényi. The potatoes harvested in summer by the Ruthenian peasants from fields that stretched as far as the eye could see, belonged to the Perényi. The melons belonged to the Perényi. The grapes, the cherries, the strawberries, to the Perényi. The tobacco works, to the Perényi. The fruits and the herbs processed at the distillery over the winter, to the Perényi. All this naturally contributed to the local reputation of Vilmos and Terez Weisz. They and their five children shone with reflected light, their nearness to the baron making them the Jewish nobility of the town, as it were. Sandor—called Suti—was the fourth of the five children. There was Bandi, his older brother, his sisters Aliz and Hedi, and then the youngest, sister Icuka.

Apart from the fact it was a nuisance to have to go to the Czech school when they considered themselves Hungarian, the Weisz children had everything they could want in life. Okay, sometimes at school recess or at the park, they had to listen to some nasty crack about Jews and Palestine. But beyond that, you would have been hard-pressed to point to a happier and more carefree Jewish childhood anywhere in eastern Europe during the 1930s. Swimming in the Tibisco in the summer, a postcard of a river. Picking mushrooms and gobbling up raspberries. Winter sled contests on the Black Mountain. Autumn and spring along Weborczy, the best street for a long stroll. The cinema on Sundays. Vilmos singing popular songs, playing the violin accompaniment. Hedi's piano lessons, at the convent where the nuns lived. Suti's stamp collection, envied by all his classmates. Dressing up in costume for Purim (the only holiday they celebrated in the family besides Hanukkah). Hebrew studied almost for fun, while taking private math lessons. And a smattering of Zionism they picked up because Aliz's fiancé was a militant with Betar.

Everything is so extraordinarily right in the Weisz family portrait. Just the candid way the parents and children look at the camera is reassuring, faces shining with comfortable middle-class confidence. It all seems to confirm those very words Suti will pronounce in his old age: "I had a wonderful childhood."

### *Running in a field*

Rivka was the first to go, in 1932, or perhaps 1933. Once again the historian has to rely on particles of information, shreds of family memories. I couldn't even determine what path Rivka took from Galicia to Palestine. Most likely she took the most common route from Poland among those making *aliyah*: to the Black Sea via Romania, through Cernauti, Iasi, Galata. Probably not alone but with a

group of Zionists. They came to Palestine as if they were simple visitors, with tourist visas, in order to get around the limits on immigration the British administration had imposed. Did kindergarten teacher Rivka Kleiner travel toward the Black Sea by train, like wealthy immigrants, or in a horse-drawn cart, as the poor did? Either way, they all boarded the ship in Costanța. Through the Narrows, the Bosphorus, the Aegean, and across the open sea to the sacred shores of Eretz Israel.

A few years previously, Shmuel Yosef Agnon had written about a voyage like that of Rivka's in *In the Heart of the Seas*, both the physical travel and the spiritual journey. There was Biblical passion, because "if a man wishes to ascend to Israel and does not go, his soul will suddenly abandon that body that hasn't departed and that sits there, inert as a stone." But also Biblical terror: "The whole city came out to wish them farewell, except for the rabbi. The rabbi always said: Jews who leave for the Promised Land before the coming of the Messiah are like those children scampering around before the betrothed couple long before the wedding ceremony has even taken place." There was also, Agnon suggested, that unconquerable mistrust that diaspora Jews, after 2,000 years on land, felt about the sea. Fear of drowning. Fear of dying without a burial.

Rivka first lived in Tel Aviv, in the home of the Lubianikers, drawn by home-town solidarity and the common memory of the shtetl, of amateur theatre and Gordonia. In the meantime Pinchas Lubianiker had moved up. Just three or four years after arriving he had already risen up the ranks of Mapai, the new political party—the largest among the Jewish community in Palestine—headed by David Ben-Gurion. In addition, Lubianiker was a high-ranking official in Histadrut, the Zionist confederation of labor, of which Ben-Gurion was also secretary general. Histadrut was much more than a union, it was the backbone of the project for Jewish nationhood, a powerful combination of monopolistic enterprise, social service provision and patronage. Lubianiker's had further worked to plant Gordonia in Palestine, investing his energies in the kibbutz movement. He was among the founders (or re-founders) of Kibbutz Hulda on the central plain along the Jaffa-Jerusalem rail line. He also managed to plant a contingent of Gordonia sympathizers in the legendary Kibbutz Degania near the Sea of Galilee.

The Kibbutz Ayelet Hashahar, where Rivka was hired as a teacher a few months after she arrived in Palestine, was in Galilee too. She was technically an external operative, not a kibbutz member, and thus obtained wages above the average, so that she could take some Palestinian pounds to the post office and buy a money order to send back to the shtetl for her mother Zipporah. Thus Rivka began her second life at the same job she'd done before: kindergarten teacher. But with even greater motivation, that extra incentive that came from knowing how decisive was the role of the kindergarten teacher in building the upcoming Jewish state. First of all because she would be teaching Hebrew to children whose mother tongue was Polish or Yiddish, German or Russian. And

also because she would be transmitting the fundamentals—thoroughly Zionist—of the history of the Middle East and Palestine.

“If there is any country, any corner of the world, where a child can hope to gain honest knowledge of our hopes and fears, our secret desires and our wounds, that country must be Palestine. Where a monument to the unknown orphan should be built. And so when you see a child there, running in a field under a real sky, then try to imagine him living in Lwow or Warsaw. That child whose hand you just shook might live at 17 Pawia Street, apartment 58, or at 30 Franciszkańska, apartment 90. He might be one of fifty students closed up in a foul-smelling classroom on Grzybowska street. You see, I haven’t resigned my hopes of spending my last years in Palestine, feeling nostalgia for Poland.” Rivka could not have known the words of Janusz Korczak--the paediatrician who founded a famous orphanage in Warsaw, an educator who all enlightened teachers in Poland venerated as a prophet, teller of stories and fairy tales that have long delighted Polish children, both Jewish and Christian—words addressed in a letter to one of his young disciples who had gone to Palestine. However it’s reasonable to think that she might have heard news, from Kibbutz Ein Harod forty miles south of Kibbutz Ayelet Hashahar, that in 1934 Janusz Korczak was about to make his first visit to Israel.

It must mean something if, at 56 years of age the mythical “Pan Doktor”, who had never publicly called himself a Zionist, and if anything denied it, had decided to visit the Jewish settlers in Palestine. A three-week visit, part of July, part of August. During the period when the children at the orphanage were out of Warsaw at summer camp. When it wasn’t necessary to be on hand 24 hours a day--strict but also judicious, kind--in that children’s republic that the Korczak Orphanage on Krochmalna street had been striving to be for twenty years. A place for children with its own youth (self)governing institutions, its own plan for job rotation, its model methods of peer-based education. It must mean something if Korczak had finally come to Eretz Israel after so much insistence back in Warsaw on a very different path: a humanism too secular, so bonded to the Enlightenment it could not recognize itself in Jewish humanism. It must mean that even the distinguished Dr Korczak had resigned himself. It was time to go. Poland was no longer a country for the Jews.

### *A new life*

In Moshe’s case too, we’re unsure of his precise date of departure or just when he arrived in Palestine. It was 1935, it seems. In any case it was cold outside when he left; the shtetl was white with snow that day. This I know because a letter of his from a few years later has survived, telling of his departure from Kopychyntsi in detail. In particular he writes about leaving his mother,



Zipporah. “I can still see her as she was when I went back to say goodbye before making *aliyah*. The house, covered with snow and ice, sparkled as if set with diamonds and precious stones. I wasn’t sad, but enraged. Enraged at myself, at rabbi Shaya, at the entire world, for the injustice of it all...I didn’t want to leave, but I couldn’t not go. The truth was that if I’d stayed, I would have been just one more worry for her. She was always so concerned about us; she would give us the food from her own plate in order to feed us. And yet despite all that, I knew that if I stayed a bit longer it would make her happy. She was so proud of me. I remember her sitting in the front row, that last evening at my farewell concert. I had practiced the songs especially for her.”

We don’t know what Moshe sang that last evening, most likely the Hassidic melodies he had learned in the synagogue from his father and other cantors. Melodies, sung in that lovely voice that had earned him the approval of the rabbi of Czortków, who hoped he would one day sing with the Levites in the Temple of Jerusalem. We do know that Moshe packed his bags at a time when a large number of other Polish Jews were also leaving for Palestine. Between 1930 and ’33, there were 17,000 emigrants. From 1934-37, the number swelled to 50,000. They were driven away by the grave economic depression afflicting Poland, by the popular tendency to attribute economic woes to the Jews, by the openly anti-Semitic climate perceptible in the Diet. Moshe Kleiner was among those who felt enough was enough. Yes, angry at themselves, the rabbi, the entire world, but for the true Zionist, the time had come to make a break. There was no alternative but to plunge into the sea and push on to the Promised Land.

Did Rivka go to meet him at the port of Jaffa? If this were a novel, she, the elder sister who had the courage to leave first, would go to meet her younger brother—and discover the two of them no longer seemed to be siblings. Rivka, sun-burnt, wearing light new clothing, confident, almost cocky; her brother pale, over-dressed and hesitant. Meanwhile the Arab porters—the first Arabs he’d ever seen—are grabbing his bags, shouting in their language, haggling over the cost, while on the dock under the sun, the heat is strange and unfamiliar, the light of Palestine sharp and cutting like nothing he’s ever seen, too much. However, Rivka probably didn’t come to Jaffa port but stayed in Kibbutz Ayelet Hashashar, and it was his Zionist comrades from Gordonia who came to meet him. And not only him but a whole expedition of pioneers. One thing we do know that Moshe arrived with his wife Chava.

A wife? According to family memory, Moshe, as he was about to depart, had taken a false bride in order to allow a second person to take advantage of the legal privilege his immigration certificate afforded. Once again, we’re in literary territory. Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote an entire novel, *The Certificate*, about the turmoil of a young Polish man who has the chance to embark for Palestine with a wife of convenience but cannot make up his mind between a humble working

woman, a decadent bourgeois lady and an uninhibited communist. Moshe's case was more pragmatic; he married a comrade in Gordonia, Chava Schuminer, who came from the shtetl of Sambor and was actually the companion of another Zionist militant.

Shortly before he left, Moshe had also decided to change his name. It was something many Jews did when making *aliyah*. A new life, a new name. Moshe decided to call himself Ben-David, "son of David." But not long after his arrival in Palestine (the precise date escapes us), he had another change of heart, as can be seen from his identity card issued by the British authorities in Tel Aviv. At last, we have some documentary evidence, the first evidence of Moshe's existence that is more than a photograph.

Moshe is no longer Kleiner, and he is not Ben-David. He's Moshe Ze'iry, soon to become Moshe Zeiri in Mandate administrative records. No flights of poetic fancy in his new identity: in Hebrew, the adjective *zair* means "small" like *klein* in German. But there is something uplifting in Moshe's intense, magnetic, compelling gaze. Although he's just over twenty years old, his brow is surprisingly lined, as if he's been marked by too many precocious thoughts and burdens. Curiously, the British Mandate government identity card does not provide a space to give the bearer's date of birth, almost as if even in the eyes of the bureaucrats in London, those who arrive in Palestine have been reborn. As for the date the document was issued, it's readable only in part: December 11, in a year we can't make out.

Moshe Zeiri was 5 ft. 6 inches tall. His eyes were brown, his hair (long in the photograph, bohemian) brown. His body type, medium. "Race", Jewish; profession, laborer. He corresponded to the prototype of the Zionist who had studied his trade before leaving Europe: to be reborn in Palestine almost by definition meant to know to handle a pick and shovel, so as to redeem the sacred soil. Moshe Zeiri's place of work would be the same as his residence, the Kvutzah-Shiller. A *kvutzah*, strictly speaking, meant a group of workers united in an agricultural coop; in fact it was a kibbutz in all but name, merely somewhat smaller. Moshe's new home was "near Rehovot" on the coastal plain south of Tel Aviv. There, with the port of Jaffa nearby for easy transport and the blessing of a particularly favorable microclimate, the new settlers were at work cultivating miraculous citrus groves. Immigrants from Germany skilled in agronomic science, Jews from Poland with a talent for commerce, and a labor force of indigenous Arabs: soon they will make the Jaffa orange a brand known around the world.