My Germany

A Jewish Writer Returns to the World His Parents Escaped

Lev Raphael

The son of Holocaust survivors journeys to a poisoned land in this memoir about shaking off family ghosts.

"Raphael contemplates with stark honesty his changing attitude toward the nation that persecuted his parents...A cleansing, passionate memoir."- Kirkus Reviews

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TERRACE BOOKS

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Prologue

A Tale of Two Trains

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I am on a train heading into Magdeburg, in eastern Germany, about two hours southwest of Berlin. Sixty-one years ago my late mother was on a very different sort of train headed for Magdeburg. Hers didn't have a dining car or changing electronic displays updating the train's speed and distance from its next station. She was one of three hundred Jewish women internees being transported from the particularly brutal concentration camp of Stutthof, on the Baltic coast twenty-one miles from Danzig, in sealed and stinking cattle cars.

In Magdeburg she would be a slave laborer for over a year at Polte Fabrik, Germany's largest munitions plant. The factory was the scene of many accidents, and every night she would dream of her fingers being cut off. These dreams haunted her many years after her liberation.

They haunt me as I look down at my middle-aged hands. I'm coming to do a very different kind of work. I'm on a hectic two-week book tour, scheduled to speak about and read from my novel *The German Money,* the story of a Holocaust survivor's adult children, who are arguing about their dead mother's will.

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The title refers to German reparations paid to the survivor in the novel. Not all survivors did so, but my parents applied for reparations from the German government to Holocaust survivors. Because they were never well off, the monthly checks made some difference in their lives. Did they resent that? They never said, though my mother detested the word itself, *Wiedergutmachung*. How could you make things good again? I found it puzzling and even embarrassing that my parents took this money at all, given how they felt, and when those monthly checks came, I stared at the envelopes with repulsion and fascination. Those mixed feelings are at the dramatic core of *The German Money*.

As my train nears the station, it hits me that this entrance could not be more American. My mother was a slave, considered subhuman by the very people whose language she spoke so perfectly that it might have saved her life. She survived, immigrated to the United States, and bore me in the world's freest country. Now, I'm returning to the scene of her brutal imprisonment as a successful American author with two more books scheduled to be published in Germany after this one. And not just any American author, but a pioneer in writing about the children of Holocaust survivors who has been publishing on the subject longer than any other American writer: over thirty years. My mother was brought here to Magdeburg against her will, while I made the choice to come. To Germany—the country I had sworn never to visit.

It wasn't just a graveyard, it was a gigantic thieves' warehouse. I had read in Holocaust histories of the massive European-wide plunder of the Jewish people as they became enslaved and subsequently slaughtered. Nazis didn't merely confiscate shops, businesses, factories, apartments and homes; gold, jewels, money, and art. They also snatched up pianos, furniture, silver, fur coats, candelabras, household goods, mattresses, clothing—whatever they could, wherever it lay. Anywhere I turned in that country, I might face something that had belonged to a murdered relative.

It was likewise the country whose products I could never buy, the country that was so alien and radioactive that when I was a child I

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used to imagine maps of Europe without it—as if I were a superhero whose laser gaze could slice it away from the continent and sink it without a trace. Then Switzerland would have a seacoast. Austria, too.

And I would have revenge for the camps and killing squads that not only murdered dozens of my parents' relatives but also poisoned their memories. Poisoned mine. Talking about their lost parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles was so painful for my own parents that I have no family tree to climb in middle age, no names and professions and cities to study and explore. The Nazis certainly won that round—like a giant grinding his victim's bones to dust.

Yet here I am in Magdeburg, going over an introduction that a German-speaking friend helped me write. It seems only polite to break the ice with my audiences by speaking some German, and I am enjoying people's reactions as the tour progresses: surprise that an American would even attempt to speak German, and enjoyment that I have done so correctly, with a passable accent. I have come here in strength, not weakness. I feel anxious but prepared.

The bookstore, affiliated with the Protestant cathedral a block away, is packed before I begin, with at least forty people looking interested and attentive. It's warm, and at times I feel compelled to do better than I've ever done before because not so far away my mother was an utterly expendable cog in the German war machine. My book is a challenge to that. People, insight, literature—all these things *count.*

The questions come slowly. And while I understand some of the German, at times a fog of incomprehension sweeps over me and I have to wait for the translation. Is it "German fatigue," too much time immersed in a language not my own, or something else that makes me feel dizzy?

The audience wants to know a great deal. How long did the book take to write? How much is autobiographical? Can I say more about my mother's experiences in Magdeburg? How much did my parents talk about their war years?

And then, this soft-voiced question: Is forgiveness possible?

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I start with my mother, who told me she never blamed all Germans, and that younger Germans surely had nothing to do with events before their birth. But that was her and only part of the story. What do *I* think?

"Forgiveness?" I ask. "Of course it's possible. If not, I wouldn't be here." I think I mean it when I say it, but the idea has never occurred to me before. I am not in Germany to forgive anyone, but to explore what has always been taboo and terrifying to me. To face my demons.

When the long evening ends with applause and some announcements, the effusive bookstore owner gifts me with a picture book about Magdeburg and two bottles of local liqueurs. Exhausted and humbled, all I can think of is the ending of William Faulkner's *Light in August*: "My, my. A body does get around."

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Part One

Haunted House

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1

Though I've always loved listening to, reading, and writing stories, I was never very interested in ghost stories as a child. That's because I grew up right in the middle of one. Like many children of Holocaust survivors, I lived in a haunted house. There were ghosts all around us, all the time. Some of them were gentle ghosts, the mournful shades, the ones who were barely present. These were all the relatives I would never know except by name or perhaps in rare cases a photograph. One might be captured casually by a street photographer, another more formally in front of a scenic backdrop. All of them were remote and insubstantial, even if I saw a family resemblance.

Their shadowy presence created a deep and immovable sadness that was all around us. It was the pause between words, the silence at the end of a sentence. That's where they lived; that's where you felt their presence most intensely. We were haunted by loss.

Who were these people—What had happened to them? The few photos, only a handful, were ghostly themselves, their existence and survival completely accidental. They were copies my parents' families had sent to American relatives before the war, without knowing

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they would be precious testimony not just of lost lives but of a whole vanished world.

The quintessential one is of my mother, her mother, and her younger brother, captured by a street photographer. On the right is Uncle Lev (Lyova or Lovka to his family), who escaped the Nazis but died in the battle of Stalingrad while fighting for the Russians. Lev is closest to the street, as a gentleman should be, looking as dapper as a matinee idol. He's holding his mother's arm and she is dressed to the nines with a chic feathered hat and what looks like fox furs draped over her coat. My mother is on her mother's right, looking coltish and sweet in a dark dress with a Peter Pan collar. What was their mood when the photo was taken? Annoyance? Weariness at being bothered once again by a street photographer who would press them to purchase his photo? Without this unknown man, I would have no idea what my mother's mother looked like: elegant, prosperous, with the hauteur of a small woman dressing to look taller. Her posture must have ingrained itself on my mother because *she* always carried herself with elegance, no matter what she wore or where she was. A Belgian woman who knew my mother testified that even right after the war "*elle avait du chien*" (she was chic). This was quite an accomplishment for someone who had survived more than one concentration camp.

Though my mother's parents spoke Yiddish—as did the majority of eastern European Jews—they were educated, multilingual members of the intelligentsia, as Westernized as Jews in Berlin or Paris, where my mother hoped to study someday at the Sorbonne. They were Bundists, members of the largest Jewish political party in Poland and Russia, the General Jewish Labor Union. Founded in Russia in 1897, the socialist Bund was anti-Bolshevik and fiercely anti-Zionist, believing that a secular, Yiddish-speaking Jewish life in Europe was not only possible but also essential. Bundists were a crucial force in transforming Yiddish, the language of the Jewish masses, into the medium of literature, art, and politics. And in Vilna, formerly renowned for its revered religious institutions and traditions, the Bund helped make the city a thriving, rich center of secular Jewish culture. It was even more significant than Warsaw because Vilna

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housed the Yiddish Scientific Institute (later renamed the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), a research center in the Jewish social sciences and humanities and a repository of Yiddish folklore. The city boasted many Jewish newspapers, a flourishing Yiddish theater, a network of Jewish schools in which my mother's father had a small role: a statistician for the health department, he taught economics to Jewish laborers at night.

My mother's family had a maid and a large apartment outside the traditionally Jewish part of the city and were comfortable, but it is only as an adult, reading about Vilna between the two world wars, that I learned of widespread, crushing poverty among Jews in the city that had been cut off from its historic roots in Russia and Lithuania when it became a Polish city in 1920. Every trade went into a precipitous, irreversible decline, heightened by Poles being urged to buy only from their own people. And that's when an anecdote my mother once told me clicked resolutely into place. Her family name was Kliatshko (Klaczko in the Polish spelling) and there were many Jews with this originally Ukrainian name in Vilna (Wilno in Polish; Vilnius in Lithuanian), a number of whom would often just happen to be passing by at dinnertime at my mother's apartment outside of the Jewish ghetto. "Of course we always invited them to stay if they said they were related somehow," she explained, though after the meal, when the uninvited guest had gone, nobody could quite figure out what the family connection really was—if it existed at all.

I thought this story was comical, unable to imagine something like that happening here in New York, and that was the shading my mother gave the tale. I had no idea it pointed to a darker reality, one my mother never shared with me. Despite the cultural, religious, and political richness of the city for Jews, many were hungry in her city, some living in soul-crushing Dickensian poverty in slums whose most unfortunate Jews lived in fetid cellars beneath other cellars. Writing in the late 1930s, British historian Israel Cohen reported that an estimated three-quarters of Vilna's Jews received assistance from local or foreign Jewish philanthropies, or from family abroad. He recalled sitting in a Vilna café for ten minutes and being

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approached six times "just for a piece of bread, by old men and women, by the middle-aged, and by children whose famished looks made a spoken appeal quite unnecessary."

Vilna was provincial and somewhat drab despite its romantic setting of hills and rivers, the paddle steamers and boats sculling on its river, and its picturesque medieval streets and many Baroque churches. American historian Lucy Dawidowicz studied there in 1938 and she painted a decidedly unglamorous portrait of a town riven by poverty and hobbled by anti-Semitism. My mother did talk of incidents at the university, like Jewish students being beaten with nail-studded boards, but despite that—and perhaps because Jewish Vilna had disappeared like Atlantis—her scant recollections bathed the city in more than its fair share of golden light.

After the war, my mother said she'd meet survivors who claimed to be from Vilna even though they were, in truth, from outlying towns. Such was the magnetism and cachet of that city, coming from there gave you *ichus* (Yiddish for status). Imagine: the city's Jews all but wiped out, Jewish life there crushed, and it still made a difference.

Vilna's Jews themselves regarded their home as a substantial metropolis, and some even grandiloquently dubbed it "the Jewish Switzerland" for its physical setting. Coming from New York, Dawidowicz found Vilna unimpressive. By comparison, Warsaw was livelier and more fashionable, Lodz hummed with more business activity, Cracow was more redolent of history. Half the streets in Vilna were unpaved, and there was no streetcar service because the Germans had destroyed trolley tracks during the occupation: "Vilna was a pedestrian's city. Everyone walked." Indeed, in a ten-minute film from the late thirties made by two Warsaw Jews profiling Poland's Jewish communities, there is constant pedestrian traffic on wide boulevards and narrow lanes, but few buses and even fewer cars.

So. My mother, grandmother, and uncle are well dressed on this unidentified street in Vilna, as much at ease as a Jew could be in Poland, I suppose. One historian has noted that between the two world wars "the Jews of Poland bore the earmarks of a conquered population, both in their social status and in their treatment."

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Are they headed for tea in some café? Their confident, relaxed steps seem tragic from my perspective, each one bringing them closer to the roiling madness of war—and for two of them death. They do not know what awaits them: bombings, terror, starvation, torture, death. And I know that when this picture was taken, they already lived in a country where many nationalistic Poles loathed them, subjecting Jews to state-sponsored discrimination and even violence. Jewish numbers were strictly limited in universities and public services, and Jews were denied positions in state schools and banks. But worse than that was the tide of savage violence aimed at driving Jews from Poland. Incited by the Nazis, radical nationalists waged a campaign of violence, targeting synagogues and cemeteries, and attacking Jews everywhere.

Vilna was not immune. A bomb exploded at a synagogue in 1935 and Vilna's university was the scene of anti-Jewish outrages. Jews were ordered to segregate themselves on benches on the left side of each classroom, but they refused, and instead stood at the back, defiantly. Nazi ideology permeated the faculty, and the only story my mother told me about her own classes was of a professor who called up a blond, blue-eyed male student to the front of the class as a model, expostulating at length on his magnificent Aryan cranium and other features. The young man turned out to be a Jew, of course.

Aside from her presence in the street photo—the only visual proof that she even existed—my maternal grandmother was little more than a name: Sarah Minikes. I knew that her family had lived in Vilna since the seventeenth century and that gravestones in the Jewish synagogue could attest to their presence in the city—that is, before they were uprooted by the Nazis (or was it the Soviets?) and used to pave a road or were simply paved over themselves. I knew that Sarah had attended university (in Saint Petersburg, possibly), and that she played the guitar, which was a startling instrument for me because I associated it with hippies and folk singers. But my mother told me little else about this woman. Years later I would find out why.

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My grandmother's name and others stare at me today from a piece of notebook paper on which I crudely sketched the draft of a school project when I was only about ten years old. "Build your family tree" was the assignment. The teacher had no idea that in my case, the tree had been chopped down, chopped up and burned. So many family names without resonance stare out mournfully from this scrap of paper: Lass, Amdursky, Lavarisheck, Solonovich. So many cousins—Gittel, Betsia, Celia—lost. And so many stories were off limits, unavailable. I see myself at our kitchen table, dutifully printing as neatly as I can, which isn't neat at all, because my penmanship is so awful I have to go to school early every morning and practice writing letters over and over. It is practice that had no effect whatsoever, in the long run.

The dark Washington Heights kitchen overlooking an airshaft was made darker still by these forays into the past that my mother could not complete because after a while it was too painful. In northern Manhattan is where I spent most of my time with her while she drank instant coffee and smoked and I talked about school

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and books. The table was echt-1950s, with curving aluminum legs and ribbed aluminum trim around the sides, topped by gray, patterned Formica, the poor man's marble. On a West Coast book tour many years later, I saw a table just like that in a Los Angeles antique shop, lit up as if it were a Merovingian relic at the Louvre, and wished my mother could see it and remember with me.

Though my mother spoke very little about the war dead—her war dead—she was happy to talk a little about grandparents and great grandparents, their professions (wood merchant, jeweler) and their quirks. Her mother's father, who was very strict, always believed that a tsar would return to Russia and had a chest of tsarist rubles that she and her two brothers always wanted to play with despite his anger.

"How much money was it?" I wanted to know, a little boy with images of a fairy-tale treasure chest.

"My parents told me it was enough to buy a good apartment building in Vilna's best neighborhood, one with an elevator."

The assessment fell flat for me, having grown up in New York, where I'd never been in a building *without* an elevator. But the picture of my mother playing with forbidden rubles (what did they look like?) drew a curtain back from a past I rarely got to see. It was of a piece with her stories of gentle pranks she and her Gymnasium friends would play, like all of them rushing to a shop window with nothing special in it, buzzing excitedly until a crowd started to gather, and then slipping off. Or staring up at the sky until other people did the same thing.

Silly, amusing. Not words I typically associated with my mother, whose figure emanated tragedy. It was in everything she did or said, the sense of having been ripped from a comfortable, privileged life and dumped into one made for someone very different.

Like any child, there was something delightful and bizarre for me in imagining a parent as a child herself, but the distance between those years and the years in which my mother spoke in her husky chain smoker's voice was far more unbridgeable than normal, because "the war" was the great dividing line. There was, in effect, a

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personal Berlin Wall in our house, and what was on the other side was dangerous, rebarbative, perpetually off limits. Facts, memories, and stories from the past escaped over that wall unexpectedly. She delighted in telling me how the family used to drive out into the woods for a family picnic and the children used an idiosyncratic euphemism for having to stop and go to the toilet in some bushes: "Seeing Madame Sezhoo" (*Ya sezhoo* is "I sit" in Russian).

But this image of a festive drive was the exception. Any change of scene for my mother was always violent or tragic, starting in her infancy. Her father had been a Menshevik, and when the Bolsheviks took over in Petrograd, her parents fled with her to Vilna, where they had family ties on both sides.

When I was growing up, my mother used to marvel that her father had apparently been important enough to have been followed on his flight, or at least monitored, for when the Soviets seized Vilna in June 1940, he was interrogated by the NKVD (Soviet secret police), who seemed to know every stop this little family had made en route to safety with relatives. My grandfather couldn't remember all the names of towns thrown at him and returned unharmed but puzzled, asking his wife, "Did we really stop there—and *there*?" As if to confirm his importance, my mother claimed that he had even merited a mention at some point in the official Soviet encyclopedia, but perhaps this was just bragging. And how could anyone prove this, given that entries changed based on the latest purge?

As if to make me grateful that I lived in America, a stable, free country, my mother more than once related a history of Vilna's occupations in the 1900s. The city was captured by the Germans during World War I, was briefly independent, then changed hands among Lithuanians, Poles, and Soviet Russians until it was finally seized by Poland, thus experiencing nine different governments from 1915 to 1922. In 1939 it became Russian, then Lithuanian, then Russian again, only to be conquered by the Germans for the second time in a little over thirty years. No wonder I was fascinated from a very early age by European history books that bristled with maps, poring over the ones that charted countries disappearing and regions

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changing hands due to dynastic marriages or war from one page to the next, dotted lines and different colors ebbing and flowing.

There was an intimate family parallel to the shifting fortunes of Vilna. My mother's birth name was Lia Helena but Lia disappeared in Poland, apparently, and in Brussels she was first Hela and then Hélène, only to be reduced to the dowdy "Helen" when she arrived in the United States, a name stripped of euphony and grace, especially when pronounced in a New York accent (which my mother always thought sounded like people talking with a mouth full of mashed potatoes). And only after she died would I discover more changes wrung on her name.

My father's transformations also proved that names were not a constant in one's life. In the United States he's Alex, but he was born Schlomo (Yiddish for Solomon), a name with history and grandeur (unlike the nickname Schloimy), connected to the Jewish past. In a time when Nazis and their minions destroyed the Jewish present and past and savaged its future by burning people, books, and towns, his name was lost. Enslaved by the Hungarians, who seized the mountainous part of eastern Czechoslovakia, the Carpatho-Ukraine, in March 1939, he officially became Szandor—or at least that's what he said when I was growing up. Like a flooded valley where the towns lie ghostly beneath the brand-new lake, however, he was still Schloimy—to himself. In Brussels his documents listed him as Alexandre, shortened in some places to Aleks. These many shifts struck me as arcane magic tricks when I was a child. How could they happen, and what did they mean? It was as if the reality of my parents was a shimmering mirage and further proof that they weren't entirely *there*.

When the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union on Sunday, 22 June 1941, sending over three million troops into battle, my mother and her family were on the front line, as were all the rest of Vilna's fifty-seven thousand Jews who made up a quarter of the city's population. Some of these Jews were refugees from elsewhere in Poland, and my mother long resented people who "slept on our floor," as she put it

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bitterly, but after the war, in America, did little to help her and my father who had next to nothing when they landed in New York.

Germany's Army Group North had Leningrad as its ultimate destination when it launched an assault on the Baltic states. It was a lovely day as bombs fell from a cloudless sky at noon on Vilna and its suburbs, with increasing intensity as the day wore on. The families of Communist Party officials began their panicky flight, though they were not so terrified as to leave furniture behind, which they hustled onto trucks. With government offices closed, the city lacked hard information. War had obviously broken out between Germany and the Soviet Union—which had divided up Poland between them in 1939—but how close were the troops?

The Soviets used trucks and cars to flee, but many citizens without cars headed off on foot, taking whatever they could carry. Thousands of Jews and others sought escape at the train station. Jewish memoirists differ as to whether one or two trains left the city on 23 June, when bombing had recommenced, but my mother said that her father had managed to get them onto the last train out of the city before the Germans seized it. Comprised of dozens of overcrowded cars filled with fleeing Communist Party officials and Red Army soldiers and their families, teachers, journalists, writers, and Communist activists, the train took forty hours to make a journey of some 160 miles because of German sorties, which forced the train to stop and people to flee into the surrounding fields to avoid death. Those trying to escape into the Soviet Union by car or on foot were also at risk of being strafed or bombed.

Movie scenes of panicky refugees—whether in France, Rwanda, the American South during the Civil War, or even in the context of science fiction—always hit me with the intensity of lived experience, though I've never been through anything remotely similar. It's the paradox of the Second Generation (the name given to children of Holocaust survivors) to feel shaped and burdened by terrible events that happened elsewhere, to others, but feel as intimate as cancer. The bombs falling at the opening of *The Pianist*—though the scene is actually Warsaw and it's only a film, after all—seem to have my

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name written on them. In London at a meeting of children of Holocaust survivors in the early 1990s, we were all asked to introduce ourselves, and, almost without exception, we told the others who we were and then instantly reeled off our parents' "pedigrees"—where they had suffered during the war (and sometimes what)—as if our identities were totally subsumed by their wartime ordeals.

Descriptions of my mother's train ride are unfortunately scant. It was so crammed with children, old people, and luggage that some passengers hung onto the exterior of cars as the train made its hesitant progress through fields of wheat and lush forests. In her stunning memoir *Them* Francine du Plessix Gray describes the afternoon when she and her parents escaped Madrid (after fleeing Paris) on what was likely the last train to Lisbon. Though it wasn't bombed, its story has strong parallels: a babble of languages, suffocating crowds, crying lost children, and no comfort whatsoever amid a "shouting mass of humanity." Those who made it onto the train were all lucky, however. *They* escaped.

On Wednesday, 24 June, the train from Vilna was stopped only a few miles past the old Polish-Soviet border, at Radozkowicze, twenty-two miles northwest of Minsk, where the Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians had signed a treaty ending their savage war in 1921. Ironically, the main thoroughfare of the town, with only six hundred families, was called Vilna Street. Radozkowicze was already nearly abandoned and reaching this point for my Russian-speaking family was not the answer to their prayers. The Soviets would allow nobody to travel onward unless they had party membership cards or official permits to cross into the Soviet Union. Bureaucracy? Anti-Semitism? Probably both.

My mother, her parents, and her two younger brothers, Lev and Wolf, were forced to leave the train. "They threw off the Jews" was how she put it. As the train pulled away, her brothers ran along the back side, as did others capable of the effort, and they jumped aboard, calling out to my mother, "Run!" But she couldn't leave her parents behind. Had she been paralyzed enough to stay in Radozkowicze, the fast-moving German army would have swept them up

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on 25 June when they arrived at dusk, or they might have died when the Russians counterattacked in the next forty-eight hours, destroying half the town.

Like most of the thousands of other desperate and despairing Jews turned back from the border that was quickly becoming sealed off by fast-moving German tanks, my mother and her parents did the only thing they could—or thought they could. They returned to Nazi-occupied Vilna, on foot, through the forests, dodging bombs and anti-Semitic peasants. For some, the journey took almost three weeks.

What did they eat? Who helped them?

My mother never said how long this dreadful retreat took, perhaps because soon after her father, a statistician/accountant with Poland's Krankenkasse (health department), was dragged off by the Germans to the forest of Ponar (also known as Ponary or Panerai) and shot with other Jewish intellectuals, teachers, and bureaucrats. Thirty-five thousand Jews would be murdered there before the war was over. The site was chosen for its isolation and the handy fuel-storage pits left by the Soviets, but in a grim irony it was an area where many victims had likely picnicked and vacationed before the war amid the sylvan landscape of spruce, fir, pine, and alder.

Lithuanian gangs had been murdering Jews in Vilna itself and at Ponar as soon as the Russians fled, but starting on 4 July 1941, scant days after my mother and her parents returned to Vilna, the Germans stepped in and started taking men off to Ponar in groups ranging from one hundred to one thousand. Quite recently, my father, now in his late eighties, disgorged a wild story: my mother claimed that soon after her return to Vilna from the doomed train ride, she was sent on a secret mission by the Bund to warn Jews in Riga, roughly two hundred miles away, about what was happening to Vilna's Jews. Not only that, but she was accompanied by her boyfriend, Boris, and the two young people had to pretend they were married, which meant sleeping in the same bed. "You'll do it for the Bund," her father had instructed her (this was before he was taken off to Ponar). The Germans seized Riga on 1 July 1941 and began

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killing Jews immediately, so there would only have been about a week in which this secret mission could have taken place. I have been unable to verify this spy tale in any way whatsoever, or even whether my mother actually had a boyfriend named Boris. Perhaps this was a waking dream, a last dramatic contact with her father that sustained her for his terrible loss. Or perhaps whatever happened to Boris was so horrible she kept the story locked away.

At Ponar, forced to strip, the Jews would be shot ten at a time at the edge of a pit, their bodies falling in. Tens of thousands were slaughtered this way before the end of the year, and Jews all over Lithuania and the other Baltic states were being killed by the mobile killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, with the enthusiastic assistance of Lithuanian volunteers, whose help sped up the orgy of murder—and plunder. Saul Friedlander's new Holocaust history quotes a German report from 13 July 1941 with the following tally: "About 500 Jews . . . are liquidated daily. About 460,000 rubles in cash, as well as many valuables belonging to Jews who were subject to special treatment [*Sonderbehandlung*], were confiscated as property belonging to enemies of the Reich." On a homelier note, the Lithuanians at Ponar saw victims in terms of the numbers of pants and boots they could amass. Imagining these piles of clothing calls to mind "We Are the Shoes," the poem of Yiddish poet Moses Schulstein, now immortalized at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., where it is emblazoned over an enormous display of shoes brought from Auschwitz. The shoes lament their murdered owners, having themselves avoided "Hellfire" because they were "only made of fabric and leather."

My mother used to dream that her father was still alive, and somehow this wish transferred itself to my unconscious, too. In grade school I used to take the public bus home down Broadway and at one stop I often saw an elderly man waiting. He never got on the bus; he just smiled at it and the driver, seeming harmless and somewhat at sea. What if that was my grandfather? What if the Nazis hadn't killed him in Ponar near Vilna? What if somehow he had escaped, as you read that some people did who had been left half-dead and managed to crawl out of pits filled with bodies when the killers had gone for

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the night? What if he had lost his memory and had miraculously wended his way to America, to New York, to a neighborhood not so far from ours?

On my first visit to the Holocaust Museum I learned from a curator that the archives held photos taken at Ponar by German soldiers involved in massacring some of the thirty-five thousand Jews. I ascended to a reading room where I sat for what seemed like hours poring over one photo after another, desperate, despite the slim chance, to find my grandfather's face—which I knew from only one portrait photo—desperate to see him there, to feel some connection with him at that unbelievable, horrific time. It was an impossible effort, and yet if I didn't see him or know that I saw him, wasn't he there anyway, whether I could identify him or not? Weren't all of these men my grandfathers?

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