Shewach Weiss

The Path of a Refugee and Emigrant

Living the life of a refugee, of an emigrant, is not easy. But on the other hand, it is often a certain means of self-liberation from a desperate situation. After Hitler rose to power, thousands of Jews tried to save themselves by fleeing from the Holocaust, but the world shut its doors to them, cutting off this path. They failed to become refugees, and so they instead became victims of fascism and were mostly killed.

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My family and I managed to survive WWII. Borysław, the Galician town where I had lived before the war broke out, and where I hid out in a basement during it, was a place where Ukrainians, Jews, and Poles had lived side-by-side – separately attending their synagogues and Catholic/Orthodox churches, yet united together in day-to-day poverty. When the borders of the Soviet republics were shifted and Polish Borysław became Boryslav, part of the Ukrainian People's Republic, my parents decided to stay in Poland, which meant moving westward. They felt a connection to Poland, or as my father used to say, they wanted to continue living among our neighbor Poles and neighbor Jews.

The goal of many Jews after the war was to return "to their own" – to their family, friends, acquaintances, and if all of them were gone, then at least to the culture, language, customs they were most familiar with. Before the war, Poland had been the homeland of many Jews; after the war, they still sought refuge in Poland. So my family followed Poland westwards. We went to Wałbrzych, because displaced persons from the east were usually directed to the "recovered lands" that had been ceded to Poland by Germany. We were sure that we would settle there quickly, that my father would get a job or maybe even open up his own shop, that we would soon indeed be living "among our own" – among people from Borysław, albeit within Poland's new borders.

Many people like us went to the south-west of Poland, to post-German cities. At that time it was not yet Gliwice but still Gleiwitz, not yet Wałbrzych but still Waldenburg, not yet Wrocław but still Breslau. We rode in an open carriage – perhaps one of those the Germans had used to transport Jews to the Holocaust? The same tracks, the same train, only a different conductor and a different destination. Our farewell to Borysław was a despondent affair. We had suffered a lot there, but there were also beautiful memories attached to this place. The hardest thing to leave was our day-to-day "little homeland": our house, the forests, the hodgepodge of languages, the walks to Truskawiec and picnics in the woods. We also left something else behind – graves. The graves of my grandmother and grandfather, of our other ancestors. I also left behind Bella: my 5-year-old friend, murdered by the Nazis; she remained buried there in some hole unknown to me.

The trip to Gliwice took 2 days, further delayed by each Russian train returning from Germany. We gave way to them, waiting on sidetracks for up to 8 hours at a time. Train cars piled high with looted pianos, clocks, and machinery passed us by, guarded by Soviet soldiers. One of them, with his sleeves rolled up, wore 8 watches on one arm, plus just as many on the other. After the war, whole factories were taken apart and transported piecemeal from Germany back to Russia.

We were assigned a well-furnished apartment in Gliwice, with paintings on the walls, a richly decorated sideboard in the kitchen and cabinets full of silverware, linens, tablecloths, and napkins. Never before had we possessed such expensive furniture or such sophisticated china. With no regrets, I sold off this legacy at the market near our townhouse. There, everyone sold everything to everyone, most often things that were not really theirs. I would sometimes come back for more goods twice or even three times in a day, sparing only the furniture that I could not carry. I disposed of the German property quickly, being unable to forget a scene when our house in Borysław had been robbed.

Personally, I took the most pleasure in an album full of postage stamps. I found it in the closet, tucked away among various small things that seemed to me to be of little use, but this one seemed simply priceless, containing a thousand old Prussian stamps. Before I had been a collector of decorative and shiny wrappers from pieces of candy I had eaten, but all of a sudden and unexpectedly I became a philatelist – straightaway quite a sophisticated one. Encouraged by the find, I searched for stamps everywhere: in ruins that smelled of gunpowder and dynamite, in abandoned houses, at market stalls and from black-marketeers – but rather unsuccessfully.

We had few friends in Gliwice. We encountered anti-Semitism, as did other Jews, and we treated the apartment there as a platform where we had only stopped for a moment, just a stepping-stone before moving onward. We were looking for a place where there were more Jews from Borysław. Father learned that there were supposedly quite a number of them in Wałbrzych, so he went together with his brother and sister to check, and if it proved to be true, to look for a new apartment for us.

Two weeks after their departure, my mother and I set off for Wałbrzych. It was cramped and crowded on the train; I only managed to squeeze my mother inside, then myself jumped onto the roof. It was not a safe place

for Jews. There were many Poles riding with me and I didn't know who else, I was afraid that they would recognize my Jewish background and push me off. Pogroms, racial murders – including for the most mundane reasons, and looting had become part of the post-war world. After the war, not only were the buildings all in ruins, but something much more valuable had also been destroyed: people's values, something it was not always possible to restore as quickly as the buildings. The Germans, by declaring war on the world, had in just six years transformed it for a long time to come. My mother admonished me to be careful: don't talk, because I'd betray myself for sure with my Jewish "r." I practiced, I wanted to correct my pronunciation, but nothing came of it and it has remained like that to this day. Besides, with such a face, that of a visibly sad Jewish child, I stood no chance of concealing myself for long, so I hid my face in a sweater and prayed that I would arrive together with my mother.

In Wałbrzych we again got a two-room post-German apartment. It may not have been as luxurious as the previous one, but it had a beautiful view over a forest. At that time it seemed to us that we would stay there for a long time. Together with some friends, my parents bought a grocery store in the center of the city, the first earnings began to flow into the family purse, life was stabilizing, and we thought that everything would be fine. It wasn't. Anti-Semitism was still trailing behind us – the kind we knew from Gliwice, but also even worse anti-Semitism, and there was no indication it would leave us alone anytime soon. Once I realized this, I wanted to go to Palestine.

Radical Zionists cite the example of Auschwitz as the cruelest symbol of the Holocaust, illustrating how dangerous it is to live outside Eretz Israel.[1] "Returning to one's own," to Eretz Israel, was supposed to be a response to the pogroms and the Holocaust. Those who wanted to live among a Jewish majority – so that the word "Jew" would not have a pejorative ring, as it often seemed to them in the Diaspora – chose Eretz Israel, while still others spread and scattered all over the world.

Zionism was a dream. Before the war, my father had belonged to a Zionist organization, but didn't take it too seriously. Like a typical Jew in the Diaspora, he was usually very cautious and vigilant; even if he wasn't convinced of the idea, he wanted to protect himself. So my father did take the option of emigrating to Eretz Israel into consideration, but generally as a last resort. He completed a driver's course, although in the whole town cars really were few and far between, there were scarcely any of them. Back in Borysław, the information had reached us that traders, speculators, were not really needed in Palestine, that the new state was meant to be one founded on the ethos of returning to the land, of physical strength and the proletariat, hence my father was forced to learn another profession besides the one he knew well – that of a salesman.

Soon after my brother Lonek found himself in Wałbrzych, he decided to go to a Zionist youth boarding school to study agriculture, Hebrew, and history. After a few weeks, I joined him there. In Głuszyca (formerly Wüstegiersdorf), eight kilometers from Wałbrzych, the Zionist organization ran a home for children, and I took up residence there.

We led a structured life, washing, working, studying, having a little fun. We were all "old" young people, with life experiences well beyond our years, so our activities and even entertainment were different from our peers from just a few years earlier. The education had a single objective: to prepare us for life in Palestine, which meant above all properly motivating us to move there. So Hebrew was taught, the history of Palestine, the history of the Jews in the Diaspora, usually reduced to pogroms and wrongs done against the Jewish people in the Diaspora, after which the necessity of *aliyah*[2] seemed obvious. The ideologization of our lives was further completed by the political orientation of the political party under whose supervision our Zionist education took place.

My concept of what Palestine must be like was primitive and built on the accounts from the Old Testament, which were quite unclear to a child. Mountains, sunshine, and sands, with Moses hanging about somewhere amidst all this. But why he didn't enter the Promised Land, I couldn't fathom. At the boarding school we were shown pictures of kibbutzim, we talked about the proletariat and physical strength, and in fact this is what connected me most to Zionism, purely non-religious considerations. Impressed with Zionist values, I gave up trading, even though as a 10-year-old child I could probably sell anything, and I traded with Soviet soldiers and the biggest wackos. I dreamed of becoming someone special in Eretz Israel, a farmer or a political leader.

Once I returned home and found my parents there frightened – our home had been robbed. Burglars had scattered things all over the apartment, searched everywhere for money, and taken all of it. My father had worked so hard and lost his possessions yet again. I asked them: Why do you stay here? After all, they hate you!

Not long after this incident, during a visit to Głuszyca, my mother said: we are leaving. After the Kielce pogrom, 90,000 Jews left Poland, abandoning their illusions: Poland would never be a home or a refuge for them. No one believed anymore in the idea of Poles and Jews being able to live as friendly neighbors. We were searching for place that would be a home for us. Theodor Herzl[3] had spoken that way about Palestine, James Balfour[4] too, and so we decided to see for ourselves. After the war, throngs of refugees could be found on the road, some of them returning back home, others, like my family, looking for a home. We knew where we had left and why, but we didn't exactly know where we were going.

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[1] *Eretz Israel* – the Land of Israel

[2] *aliyah* – Jewish emigration to Israel.

[3] Theodor Herzel – founder and chief ideologue of Zionism.

[4] British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour's declaration of 2 November 1917 spoke of Britain's support for the idea of establishing a Jewish national headquarters in Palestine.

With the help of Bricha,[5] father arranged for a car to transport us to near the Czech border. Onward from there was no road, only illegal paths. At night, we tried to cross the border on foot through the forest. We succeeded, we were safe, on a Czech farm beyond the forest we encountered hundreds of Jews from different places. We joined them and, over a glass of milk, we waited for the next transport. It came after a few hours, and we were taken to Bratislava. We were given a place to stay in a refugee transit camp, in a beautiful, huge school. On the walls were scrawled the kind of little notes so typical of the post-war time: we are this or that family, we have lost this person or that person, we're travelling from here to there. Such messages occupied every meter of the wall, and when there was not enough room at eye level, people climbed up onto chairs, ladders. Everyone wanted to capture the moment, to leave a trace behind. If someone had made a copy of that wall, it would have been an interesting sample of the complex map of Jewish emigration.

The Slovak-Austrian border was not easy to cross. Slovakia had been incorporated into communist Czechoslovakia, while Austria was divided into 4 occupation zones: Russian, French, American, and British. The shortest route would be to cross the latter, but it was also the most difficult. At the time, the British Mandate was uncomfortable with the smuggling of Jews to Palestine; any organized group aroused their concern.

Huddled together on the train, wearing Greek berets on our heads, we pretended to be Greek emigrants whispering in Yiddish. It worked, and we arrived in Vienna. None of us Galicians had ever expected, before the war, that we would see Franz Joseph's city. My father walked around Vienna, immediately after arriving, as if he were a regular visitor. From books he knew about even the smallest streets, and he enjoyed those places that had survived. I, on the contrary, enjoyed each one that had been destroyed. After what I had experienced during the war, I couldn't enjoy myself in Vienna. I was well aware by then that the Austrians were worse than the Germans, that Hitler had been Austrian and that 60,000 Gestapo men had come from there. I no longer had such strongly negative feelings when later, as Speaker of the Knesset, I returned to Vienna in 1995 and walked its streets together with Austrian President Thomas Klestil. I met many young people who were born already after the war; it was not fitting to blame them for the Nazi crimes. At most their parents, and not all of them. People of my generation have a habit in such situations of wondering about what this or that particular German and his family had been up to during the war.

In Vienna we felt a bit lost. We didn't know what was in store for us next; all we knew was that we found ourselves in the realm of German culture and language that my father had appreciated so highly before the war. The culture of Arthur Schopenhauer, of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, but also of Albert Einstein, Theodor Herzl, and Ludwig Mendelson, a culture that also owed a great deal to Jews and to the Yiddish language.

In Vienna, we stayed at the Rothschild Hospital. Theodor Herzel, the founder of the Zionist idea, had died there in 1904, as had Hayim Nahman Bialik, a pioneer of Hebrew poetry, in 1934. In 1946 it was a transit camp for thousands of Jewish emigrants and refugees. When visiting again in the mid-1990s, I found a new wave of emigration there, this time of Russian Jews.

We went from camp to camp until we reached the American zone, Linz, a place with many huge barracks. There were maybe 70 of them, each belonging to a different Zionist party, together forming a kind of campus. During the war, the Wehrmacht had been stationed there; after the war ended, Jewish refugees on their way to Palestine organized pre-statehood life in the barracks. Artists from Palestine visited us, giving us hope for a very different way of life in a Jewish state. In the evening there were bonfires and restaurants teeming with nightlife – of course they were quite primitive, but at the time it was enough for us. It was fun, new energy was being generated, and this is how the state of Israel was born. We had *geshefts* going again,[6] someone was running a café, another had set up a barbershop, and everyone earned money from one another.

I didn't feel comfortable in the barracks, they made me think of Auschwitz. When we had been travelling from Borysław to Gliwice, the train stopped near the death camp for 8 hours, so I had enough time to take in the crematorium and the barracks. In Auschwitz, life was being destroyed in such barracks, whereas here in Linz, the first post-war babies were being born. The Jewish people were recovering, but even so, it was hard to escape the memories.

I was relieved when I went on a trip organized by Bricha, together with a group of Jewish children, to Saalfelden in the Alps, near Innsbruck. We stayed in a beautiful green and yellow house with a reddish-brown roof, probably a kindergarten. We had a rich cultural life there, there were many intellectuals, doctors, and lawyers among us. One of us, Shimon, a handsome young man, had a beautiful voice. He used to give us concerts of Jewish songs on Friday evenings, and he sang like a cantor. I can still remember today him singing "Rachele…, Rachele… a beautiful girl. The Gestapo came and took beautiful Rachele away, and now she's dead...". Long afterwards, in Israel, as the trial of Adolf Eichman was being broadcast day and night, I heard the name of the most important witness: Shimon Srebrnik, It was him, our Shimon, the singer I knew well from Innsbruck. The song "Rachele" was, it turned out, the story of his sister. The Germans burned his entire family in the furnaces, he was the only one who survived thanks to his extraordinary vocal talent, with which he captivated the Gestapo men. His daily job was to pull bodies out of the gas chambers, and one day he had to pull the corpse of his own sister, Rachele, out of it.

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[5] Bricha – "escape," the name of an organization whose purpose was to help Jews in war-stricken Europe. Its assistance primarily involved helping Jews across borders, usually on the way to Palestine.

[6] *gesheft* – Yiddish for business dealings

In declaring war on the world, Germany had also declared war on human values. In 1985 I traveled by train from Bonn to Frankfurt, watching the houses go by for several hours. Each of them was a villa, and behind its doors a Joseph Goebbels or Hermann Göring could have been born. The houses were surrounded by aesthetic, beautiful, clean natural environs, and yet this is where the most brutal system – fascism – had emerged. Everything had happened in such a beautiful pastoral atmosphere. How misleading nature can be! This is such a terrible recollection. I had no romantic sense there, I could not admire the beautiful houses, I longed for our wooden house in Borysław, for the houses of my burned cousins, for the scent of kerosene and ordinary laborers from the Drohobycz area. They may not have had a sense of aesthetics, but they did have human solidarity.

We all wanted to get to Palestine as quickly as possible – we knew what we were fleeing from and why. We spent about three weeks in Saalfelden. We went hiking in the mountains every day, practicing in preparation for crossing the Austrian-Italian border. Bricha agents took us to Innsbruck in November 1946. We stayed for a day and a half at an agricultural school; there were already other Jews there waiting to be smuggled to Italy. We were all transported in cars to near the border, and then we hiked across the Alps in the snow, on icy paths. My sister felt very tired, I did everything I could to keep dragging her behind me, so that we'd get there together. I was responsible for Mila, although I was less than 11 years old. We walked all night, and by the morning we were standing on Italian soil. We stuck a Jewish-Zionist flag in a rock and danced the Hora.[7] Someone from the Jewish agency recorded a video, and so years later I had the chance to see myself then, as a little boy with a flat cap on my head, looking so pleased.

We were in Italy for almost a year, first in Milan, then in Rome. I lived in the Italian capital, together with other Jewish children from Poland, in the three-story private villa of Mussolini's tailor. We had our dining room in the lobby and our bedrooms in the rooms, most of them six-bedded. From the roof we could see all of Rome. A decade and a half later, already in Israel, I found out that there had been something much more interesting than just the view. An illegal Haganah station was operating on that roof. It was while there that I heard the news of the establishment of the Jewish state. We listened by radio to the UN vote of 29 November 1947, counting up every vote in favor of the Jews, and after the final one – confident that we did indeed have somewhere to go and a reason to go there – we set off to join our colleagues living in another villa, one that had been used by Göring when he came to Rome. Then we all went together to the Roman Forum, to beneath the Arch of Titus. Centuries ago the Emperor Titus had demolished our Second Temple, and now a new one was being built, and it was up to those of us rescued from the Holocaust to build it.

We enjoyed Rome until the end of November 1947. We received the first papers allowing us to enter Palestine. A lottery was held and I was lucky, seven other children and I were chosen to go first. Unfortunately, Mila had to stay behind in Rome, whereas my parents were back in Austria as my father was still unwell, and Lonek was in a refugee camp in Cyprus after not being allowed into Palestine.

Aboard the ship "Transylvania", plying the route Constanța – Naples – Haifa, we traveled to Eretz Israel on false papers, under changed names. I was given the surname Leider, and in order to lend further credence to our cover story I was assigned to a certain family, as one of their children. Today I don't remember the name of my guardians, but I do remember that they didn't let me say a word as they argued with each other the entire trip. I breathed a sigh of relief when we arrived at the port of Haifa on Saturday, 4 December 1947. However, we stayed on the ship, as the port worked strictly according to Jewish rules and was closed on the Sabbath. I looked upon my nearby homeland from aboard that ship, probably like Moses did, except that he never entered it, whereas I was already walking around it come Sunday morning. That was the first time I ever saw muscular Jews, working in the port. I also knew that it would be a very different life than in the Diaspora, and I was not wrong. I was home.

They took us to Helen Keller Street, on Mt. Carmel, from where we were then disembarked to the Jewish colony of Kfar Saba. We were to spend a month and a half there. Temporary stays had become a part of our lives, only this time we were meant to wait until the agency found places for us in boarding schools. Around our houses stretched *pardes* (orchards of orange trees). For us European expatriates, the trees offered the hope of cooler shade. The temperature reached more than 30 degrees. We were accustomed to the shade and coolness of the Polish forests, and so the sun in Palestine was killing us. The memory of the natural surroundings is part of the identity of almost all Central and Eastern European emigrants, including mine.

Our boarding school was called *Onim* (strength), and that's how we felt. In the Zionist ideology, everything took on a new meaning, placenames, people's first names and surnames were then associated with Zionism, maximally mobilized to indoctrinate our private lives.

After a month we went to Hadassim. Located near the sea, with huge *pardes*, it seemed even nicer than Kfar Saba. The Hadassim campus consisted of three buildings. In a small Arab old house lived our guard Josef, who to my great surprise rode a horse. Tall, valiant with his rifle and on horseback, he seemed truly menacing, giving us a sense of physical security. As for our mental fears, each of us fought with them as they could, alone.

The other two houses were home to new *olim* (new immigrants) like me. The Jewish agency had bought only 10% of the boarding school spots for us. The rest belonged to children from wealthy families, the so-called *sabra* – those born in Israel. We lived in 3- and 4-bed rooms. Hadassim was the first stable home in my wandering, I was there longer than at the others, and longer than for "just a while" – I lived there for 7 years. It was in Hadassim that I hung a painting on the wall for the first time; it seemed to me that it would be a good omen and I would stay

[7] Hora – a traditional Jewish dance, danced in a large, closed circle.

there longer. I bought a bookshelf for the first time, and I put the first books I ever bought on it. For the first time I bought clothes with money I had earned on my own: pants, a shirt, which I could hang up in my own private closet.

The sense of temporariness subsided, we grew more and more connected to the land, if only by planting trees. Piece by piece, this foreign land became more familiar, closer. It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when it became mine. It seems to have been when, as a child of the Holocaust, I recognized that the Jewish state was capable of defending me. For many that was the Six-Day War, the most spectacular success of the Israeli Army, for me it had been the War of Independence, when, as Israel's first President Chaim Weitzman said, we were not given our state on a silver platter. In any case, planting trees was a method of tying new *olim* to the land. Today Hadassim is barely visible through all the trees, and I visit several times a year to see the ones I personally planted.

The system of teaching and upbringing at the boarding school drew upon Janusz Korczak's methods. In his view, like any other human being, a child should have full rights, and dialogue should be the basis of communication. In the upbringing of a young person, all coercion was also to be abandoned, and charisma was to replace all means of persuasion. And so there was no hierarchical structure. Korczak had visited Palestine in 1928, lived on a kibbutz, and his educational methods were adopted and popularized in Israel long after his death.

While I felt my life was stabilizing, the Palestinians, on the other hand, were beginning to live as refugees. Even before the creation of the state of Israel, the War of Independence (1948) began, Jews and Arabs were fighting over the right to land. The UN declaration spoke of the creation of two states, Jewish and Palestinian, but there was no agreement among Arabs on this. Arab houses were becoming empty, their inhabitants having either fled or were expelled. The empty Arab houses resembled the situation I had experienced in Gliwice.

Those apartments abandoned by the Germans in Poland's "recovered lands" had also stood empty, waiting for anyone who wanted to just walk in and live there. The one we were assigned was on the ground floor. We went inside, stopped in a cramped corridor and noticed a woman in the process of packing. She was hurriedly stuffing the most necessary things into suitcases. A boy about my age was standing next to her and crying, and I cried with him. I understood that this German family was being kicked out. Less than a few days earlier, we had also experienced such a separation from our home in Borysław; the feelings were too fresh not to understand. In that apartment in Gliwice, no one rejoiced, we did not feel any delight in taking revenge, my sad parents just remained silent. Similarly, subsequent Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir recalled that she had felt no satisfaction when she came to Haifa during the War of Independence and in one of the Arab buildings met an old Arab woman with bundled-up things on the stairs, ready to leave the house she had lived in her whole life.[8] The same kind of experience is captured well in a memorable scene from a certain novel, where a Jewish woman recalls: "In 1948 we demolished an Arab village not far from us. These were the houses of our neighbors. This is what happened during the War of Independence. Today they long for their village, and I long for them. But this is now our home. My grandchildren want to us to become neighbors again, but I just want things to be peaceful. This is my home, although I know it was once theirs. There are trees here that I personally planted, but there are also olive groves that they planted."[9]

There was a Bedouin village near Hadassim, and within a day of the War of Independence they left their tents and mud houses, took their camels and left. They passed by our boarding school as a procession of 300-400 people. They were afraid of us, though we had not given them the slightest reason to be.

What was life like in Israel for other expatriates from Europe? My mother's brother Shaya got an apartment in Haifa in the Arab neighborhood of Wadi Salib, close to the port, at 26 Nurit Street. He moved into one of the buildings, on the second floor, opposite an Arab family, who were probably Christian, because Christian Arabs had usually collaborated with the Jews during the War of Independence, so Abba Hushi, the mayor of Haifa, allowed them to stay. Another family, Jews from Morocco, lived in the third house left behind by expelled Arabs. My uncle's house and the two others formed a unit, around a common Arab-Jewish courtyard.

I used to visit my uncle on my days off from classes, and I also spent summer vacations with him. The wealthy Israeli children went off to their expensive homes; for me, a cramped corner in Uncle Shaya's apartment was enough. With three small rooms, the apartment was dark, low, and furnished with richly decorated oriental furniture. The furniture was taken from the street, the Arabs had left it in their homes, the Jews just walked in, took what they needed, and left. The culture and ethics of refugees often have nothing to do with the principles that govern life in an organized state, as widespread anarchy supplants the sense of shame and human decency.

My uncle worked at the railroad station, as foreman for a group of Sepharadis.[10] That always puzzled me because, knowing Yiddish, some Polish, a little Hebrew, he was not really able to communicate very well with his workers in any language. As an Ashkenazi,[11] in spite of his obvious linguistic ignorance, he had a far better chance of getting a good job than many a well-educated Sephardis, but that was something I didn't understand until later. Jews from Iraq or Tunisia often came very well educated, not only with knowledge of languages, but also with very good professions, medicine and law, yet because of their origins they ranked at the bottom of the social

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[8] Eshel, Zadok. *The Haganah Battles in Haifa* (in Hebrew). Tel Aviv, Ministry of Defense Press, 1978, p. 377.

[9] Lazar, Hadara. *Mekomiyim* [The Local], Tel-Aviv, Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2007, p. 92.

[10] Sephardis – Jews living in Spain until the end of the 15th century; after being expelled from it in 1492, they settled in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and – in Europe – in Italy, England, and the Netherlands.

[11] Ashkenazis – the Jewish population residing in East Central and partly Western Europe.

pyramid. Looking at the mutual relations between Ashkenazis and Sephardis, it is safe to say that we have one state, but being Jewish is not yet enough in common for us all to form one nation.

Uncle Shaya loved to listen to Jewish cantors. In his spare time, he would set up a gramophone, usually with a record by Józef Rosenblat, one of the best cantors in the world. On a Saturday things would be calm, with 30-32°C heat in the closed, stuffy, dirty, messy courtyard, and amidst it all, the songs of a Jewish cantor would intermingle with the oriental music of Arabs and Jews from Morocco. Three families, three windows, with different music wafting out of each. This sonic mishmash was also symbolic of the beginning of the multiculturalism that is still present in Israel today.

Uncle Herman lived nearby. He had come to Palestine with a wife he had met in Russia and a tiny child. In Wadi Salib, under the stairs of one of the Arab houses, he made a dwelling. Herman was one of those people able to make something out of nothing. His poor little residence became more modern day by day, as he coopted more and more space. Adding a brick there, a bit of clay there, creating a completely new spatial reality. The place was still a hovel, but it was better than others. I enjoyed visiting it. Despite his efforts, it was completely dirty, cramped, and rat-infested. A nuisance to many, rats actually brought my uncle his first money. He made cages for trapping rats, up to 30 of them a day. I helped him, sold them in the port, on the streets, wherever I saw dumpy houses similar to Uncle Herman's. It paid off, my uncle made enough money to switch into the plumbing business. And once he earned money from that as well, he moved to Canada, and there became a wealthy man.

My father's cousin, Mundek Weiss, returned from the USSR to Borysław after the war. He served in the Soviet Army, and there he met his wife Genia. She was a captain, he was a sergeant. They came to Israel and settled in Jaffo. Jaffo was an Arab city, one of the oldest in the world; after the War of Independence it was annexed into Tel-Aviv, and now it is one of the city's neighborhoods, a suburb. I knew that my uncle lived in Jaffo, but I didn't know exactly where. Because my uncle and his wife were two communists suffering from a constant lack of money, I was sure that they bought their groceries on a credit system, so some grocery store must be keeping a running tab under their name. I went from shop to shop and asked if they perhaps kept a tab for the Weisses. I was right, in one store I was told that yes, the Weiss lady would soon be coming in for her milk, and sure enough, in she came. Even as I was walking with Aunt Genia back to their home, I couldn't help but marvel at how people could live in such clay houses, in such a dirty and neglected neighborhood. There were no streets in the neighborhood, only paths, bushes, and hills. Those who settled in Jaffo were new immigrants, mostly from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Hungary. Here Jews from all over the world occupied small houses left behind by Arab refugees or expellees. Among these mud abodes, one could hear all the languages of the world being spoken. And amidst these expatriates there lived two communist Zionists, vibrantly debating the most theoretical issues and the communist utopia in highbrow Polish. Their home was a Bedouin cottage: with two rooms, a few beds, a neglected kitchen, and communist newspapers lying about everywhere. On the one hand, all this created the impression of incredible clutter, yet on the other, it introduced a sense of intellectualism and contempt for any values, order, or structure. Much the same could be said for communism: it was meant to institute order, equality, and justice, yet apart from destruction (something I only understood later) and Jacobinism, the only thing it created was chaos.

Sometimes, emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe were more fortunate. For example, Uncle Josel, my mother's eldest brother, who was tall and always elegant. I don't know what he did, but he always had money and was clever, or I would even say crafty. Uncle Josel had a beautiful and large Arab house with an orchard of orange trees. As if that wasn't enough, he was also given a barn.

Immigrants' standard of living, whether they lived in poverty or not, was a function of how long they had been in Israel, and which party they affiliated themselves with. The various homes were like hotels, just meant to serve for a while, as temporary places to live, everyone was on the move, soon off to better places or in search of their loved ones. Everyone tried to set themselves up as best they could, taking advantage of the post-war chaos. The lives of emigrants, indeed my own life and those of my immediate family, were just some of many examples of the typical-atypical experiences of the Jewish population after the war.

In the various homes where I lived, I became familiar with Polish, Ukrainian, German, Italian, and Arabic cultures. The idea of a Polish home makes me think of chicken broth, warmth, and family. A German home, I associate with coldness, sterility, and no smell at all. The children's home in Głuszyca had the smell of backpacks and suitcases. The camp near Linz smelled awful, like a toilet. Uncle Josel's villa had the sweet smell of oranges and lemons. In Wadi Salib, I smelled the presence of mice and rats. Hadassim had the nice scent of the oriental trees we had planted ourselves.

Traditions and holidays are something cultivated at home. Even if this is done by the very same people, albeit in a different place, it is not the same. In Borysław on Shabbat there was always *cholent*,[12] dumplings, and bean soup. For Passover[13] my mother would bake matzah, my grandmother would bring kosher chickens, a special Passover candle was lit in the house, and only dishes special for this occasion were used for the meal. Grandfather and father would go to the synagogue, while we children and the women of the family would wait for them until they returned in the evening, and when they did, mother would put a kerchief on her head, close her eyes and pray. When she was done, we would approach grandfather, who would kiss his grandchildren, and then we would all sit

[12] *cholent* – a slow-cooked stew, made from kosher meat, beans, onions, and barley or groats, eaten on the Sabbath.

[13] Passover – Jewish holiday commemorating the liberation of Jews from Egyptian slavery.

together at the table and eat Jewish carp and chicken broth and gossip. Pesach – the most beautiful evening in the Jewish tradition, full of prayers, including one, the Haggadah, which takes 3-4 hours to read out – I associate with the unforgettable family atmosphere of our house in Borysław. Later, while hiding the basement, we lost all track of time and identity; only the threat of death reminded us quite effectively that we were Jews. I also do not remember Jewish Fridays sitting at the post-German tables, in Gliwice and Wałbrzych. At the children's home in Głuszyca we did celebrate Fridays, but they were different from those in Borysław. We children gathered for prayer and sang religious songs, recited poems and the Bible, but also a passage from Theodor Herzl's book. There were not many religious points of reference in our lives; Zionism was becoming our new secular idea.

Who nowadays lives in our house in Borysław (now Boryslav)? A Ukrainian family. Who lives in "our" house in Wałbrzych? Surely some Polish family. In Gliwice, there lives a Polish woman of German descent. At Hadassim, we used to sing in Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish, then Russian emigrants came to sing, and now there are Ethiopians there.

What about the Arabs of Jaffo? Some of them have probably died, but their children are waiting with keys around their necks, to drive out those who came after them.

The emigration of Jews to Israel has been constitutive for the very nature of the Jewish state. Demographics have dictated various political decisions, laws, and peace processes for 50 years now. Nevertheless, every war (and we are constantly experiencing them) weakens the Zionist movement. Fewer and fewer Jews are deciding to move to Eretz Israel, with more and more instead seeking better alternatives outside of it. The lights in many houses are only turned on from time to time, and the forests that were burned after the latest Lebanon war are not being replanted by anyone.

* * *

Emigration, deciding to leave a familiar place – the place where one was born and raised – may sometimes, for a variety of reasons, be a better alternative than trying to preserve the *status quo*. Emigrants embarking on this path do not always face an unpleasant fate; indeed they often find interesting lives and opportunities for furthering their careers.

Emigration can also sometimes be a form of protest. Prof. Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, a former Polish Foreign Minister and Auschwitz survivor, declared before the 21 October 2007 elections that if the political situation in the country did not change, he planned to emigrate away from Poland, because he did not want to die in a "Fourth Polish Republic." Migration can thus sometimes be a way not only to seek a good life, but also to seek a peaceful death.

Emigration can likewise be a way of objecting to deteriorating living conditions. For instance, if talented scientists cannot see interesting prospects for pursuing their careers in their own country, they will surely find other countries glad to take them in. Freedom, globalization, and liberalization have forced countries to compete, especially economically, including in terms of scientific research.

In the world of globalization and the Internet, borders are losing importance, emigration is becoming a natural format, and a free individual has the right to choose the best home for himself or herself.

From the Jewish point of view, my emigration from Poland to Israel was a path of "returning to my own."

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