



## Zinovy Zinik History thieves

Coming from a thoroughly secular Soviet background, the Russian–British novelist Zinovy Zinik first became aware of his "Jewishness" when he emigrated to Israel in the 1970s. In this autobiographical essay, Zinik describes how an *unheimliche* experience in Berlin thirty years later led him to investigate the enigmatic and chequered past of his Russian–born grandfather. An exploration of "assumed identity" in twentieth–century Jewish experience.

### 1

*And* having arrived in Vilnius, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania", with my proclivity for playing the part of the emphatic nymph Echo everywhere I went, I was anxious to discover something in my family's history that would secure for me a place in this city's dramatic Jewish past. Unfortunately (or fortunately), I was born into a family that had been assimilated for at least three generations. At school we became well–versed in Ancient Greek mythology, but we never learned about Moses or Jesus.<sup>1</sup> I never heard a word of Yiddish or Hebrew spoken at home, never went to synagogue, never saw the Bible.<sup>2</sup> None of my close relatives perished in the Holocaust or in the Gulag. My Jewish origin was stated in my Soviet internal passport — a kind of ID card in Russia — but I was, evidently, too much of a conformist and therefore too reluctant to dig deep enough in search of my Jewish roots in fear of discovering that I am not like everyone else. Apart from an occasional exchange of nastiness in the playground, common amongst adolescent boys in every country, I had never heard an anti–Semitic remark directed at me personally, nor had I ever in my life and my career suffered from an anti–Semitic deed or gesture on the part of any organisation or institution in the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> In 1975, when I decided to apply for an exit visa to emigrate to Israel, the officials were trying, in many cases quite sincerely, to dissuade applicants from leaving the mother Russia. All in all, I left my Soviet fatherland with no regrets but also with no feelings of hatred: the Moscow of that era was for me the most entertaining prison in the world — I enjoyed staying there; but I also wanted to see what was happening outside the prison gates. The only way available to me (being of no–propaganda value to the Soviet authorities) was to emigrate. Since then I've written a few novels, arguing quite successfully why people like me succumbed to an urge as mad as to leave their own country for good. Now, I can only say that the urge to get out was stronger than my sense of attachment.

*And* the first most important change in my life (or so it seemed at the time) turned out to be an act of fabrication of my past.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union, under pressure from the United States, had decided to improve its human rights record by relaxing restrictions on travelling abroad for ordinary citizens. Members of a family, divided by the Iron Curtain after the war, were granted

the right to be reunited. You were allowed to emigrate from the Soviet Union, ostensibly in order to join your relatives abroad. So everyone who wanted to leave had to trace an uncle or aunty — real or semi-invented — beyond the Soviet borders. For a citizen of Jewish origin, this was not that difficult a task, thanks to the disparate geographical character of the Jewish Diaspora. In the cosmopolitan Moscow of the 1970s people joked that Jewishness became not an ethnic category but a means of transportation. The snag was that once the exit visa was granted, your Soviet citizenship was annulled and you could not return to the USSR. Dissidents of any kind would leave their mothers and fathers, spouses and children, oxen and donkeys on the rivers of the Soviet Babylon in order to embrace that Western freedom personified as a fictitious cousin.

*And* a relative abroad, therefore, had to be invented. Whatever I had heard accidentally about my family history was fragmented, anecdotal and highly unreliable. There was no proper archive to be looked into — all the family documents were strewn around in a disorderly fashion amongst my cousins and uncles, some of whom I had heard about but never met. Some of the relatives might also have emigrated to the West after the Bolshevik revolution.<sup>5</sup> As it turned out, the authorities didn't care much about the veracity of my personal story: for them, I was merely one of the nuts and bolts in the machine of trade agreements and peace treaties with the West, in which Jews and human rights were hard currency. My first forgery was successful. A Soviet official, a sturdy woman, took my red Soviet passport from me, cut it into pieces and dropped it into a dustbin; in its place, she shoved a pink piece of paper into my hands — my one-way ticket to the West, an exit visa to Israel via Vienna.

## 2

*And* my miniature exodus out of Russia was rapid and easy. Having landed in Vienna — a transit point — I joined a line of refugees waiting to be allocated in different western countries, according to the respective immigration quotas. I could have remained in Europe had I claimed political asylum. But right from the beginning of my life outside the USSR, I had decided that I would never settle down in any country unless I was properly invited there. Henceforth, I proceeded on my way to Israel, the country that had issued the initial invitation. The only moment of doubt about my final destination came when along with a group of other immigrants I was taken in the middle of the night from a Viennese refugee centre to the airport to be put on the El-Al flight to Israel. The minibus dropped us with our guide on the border of the airfield in front of a mesh wire fence with a watchtower. The steel gates opened and I saw the path brightly lit up by the blinding floodlights and lined with Austrian police, each with an Alsatian on a lead. The collective Jewish memory, so far successfully suppressed in my mind, was stirred disturbingly by their brief commands — "Hurry! Schnell!" — as we were rushed along the line towards the aeroplane which was waiting for us at a distance, luminescent in the darkness before the dawn, like some alien ship. At this moment, a thought quickly crossed my mind that I might have chosen the wrong way of being reunited with my fictitious uncle. Inside the aircraft, however, we were greeted by a very sexy Israeli stewardess who apologised for the inconvenience caused by the unusual way of boarding the plane: there had been a terrorist attack in Vienna around that time and the Austrian police had taken every possible precaution and security measure when transporting the Jewish immigrants to the airport.

And the first thing I saw the morning after my arrival in Jerusalem was a mosque on the top of a hill — like a snapshot from the window of my friend's house where I had stayed that night. I accepted the sight of this mosque as part of my new world, my new life, my newly-found freedom. Just as I accepted Hasidic Jews in their bizarre garb who fought each other over the different ways of tying their laces or brandishing their side locks, since these minute details might seriously delay the coming of the Messiah, and who, at the same time, denied the state of Israel the right to exist because the Messiah hadn't come yet. I accepted an Arab in his long white shirt (like that of a medieval psychiatric patient) who was letting his sheep graze on the manicured lawn of a luxurious hotel in the heart of Jerusalem. And a Moroccan Jew who swept streets and cooked strange Arabic dishes in a Jewish market. I also accepted my former compatriot, a Jew from Russia who was enthusiastically building yet another of many walls in Israel, to divide two peoples living on the same territory I hadn't yet realised then that somebody's invented past could clash with someone else's present. I accepted many more things that I should but won't mention here.



Zinovy Zinik in Jerusalem, 1979

And what I couldn't understand at all was what I, a Soviet boy, had to do with all of this? The same question, as far as I know, was asked by Viennese Jews (don't forget: I arrived in Israel via Vienna!) when they, the *crème de la crème* of European sophistication, had heard Theodor Herzl urging them to settle in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> I had nothing to do with the past that had been imposed on me in Israel (where, by the way, I was addressed in a casual manner as a Russian — in a reference to the country of my ancestors). This past was invented for me by the founders of the state of Israel who, in constant search for new recruits, had transformed the Jewish longing for home into a political dogma, wrapped in the shiny cellophane of Biblical vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> There were ardent Stalinist among the Zionists, too, some of them still alive.<sup>8</sup> But, for some inexplicable reason, I fell in love with the country, despite — or perhaps because of — these contradictory tendencies.

And I learned Hebrew with miraculous speed. I had the good fortune of being introduced to the great Biblical scholar Nehama Leibovitch, with whom I began studying the Bible.<sup>9</sup> In her commentaries she attacked the main body of the text from different angles, sometimes from contradictory points of view, in order to divest it of its obscure meaning, expose its varied facets and then to dress it up again with new significance, changing our understanding of it beyond recognition.

And it was Nehama Leibovich who told me why certain Jewish sects in Jerusalem still dressed in such an eccentric manner, as if transported into our time from another age. They all came from a region in Poland where one of the chief rabbis sent his emissaries to Paris every year, so that his flock could keep up with the current French fashion. This habit had lasted until the rabbi's death sometime in the middle of the seventeenth century. According to the Talmudic interpretation of the law, a Jew should follow strictly his father's way of life, death, and dress. Therefore, the Parisian fashion of black hats trimmed with fur, silky caftans and white stockings, which had been all the rage a few centuries ago, had been preserved unchanged by subsequent generations up to now — with some modifications between the different sects.<sup>10</sup> To put it in a less Talmudic manner, these Jews couldn't forget the way they had lived in

Poland before they were exiled to Palestine. The same way, Odessan Jews in Brighton Beach, New York, couldn't forget their Soviet Russian past, which was reduced in their minds to the basics that their stomachs felt nostalgic about. On the distant shores of the river Hudson, they recreated the staple Slavic diet they had been used to in their previous lives — pickled cucumbers and salted herring, bagels, rye bread and boiled potatoes.<sup>11</sup>

This ordinary Russian food, smuggled from Russia by the waves of Jewish immigrants into the West, has become known in the USA and Europe as Jewish. It is one of many instances when, just as with Hasidic fashion, the plagiarised tradition is taken for the original.<sup>12</sup>

*And* the moment you change your life by adopting some "new" past, the "old" abandoned present acquires a nostalgic patina of a complete and profound past experience. It reads like a compelling novel.<sup>13</sup> This novelistic integrity of the "lived-for-real" past clashes with the utopian past manufactured for you as the ideology of your new life, of your "new" present. However, the vivid memory of the "real" past and the sense of guilt for betraying those who were left behind, entrapped in the past life that you abandoned, can paralyse us forever and eventually destroy us. When I attempted to depict this clash of contradictory attitudes to the past in my first novella (*The Notification*, 1975), I was accused of anti-Zionism and pornography (I denied the first charge). As a result of the turmoil in the émigré press, I got a good publisher in Paris. It was while I was in Paris that the BBC invited me to come to London. Ten years later I became a British citizen.

### 3

And I found myself in a strange civilization of left-hand traffic,<sup>14</sup> three-thronged plugs and no central heating. I woke up every morning to the cry of seagulls. I was on an island and, like Robinson Crusoe, was trying to re-create a semblance of home out of the shipwreck of my past voyages.<sup>15</sup> I began to dream a serial dream, in weekly instalments, which lasted for many years. I know that nothing is more boring than somebody else's dreams, with their idiosyncrasies and illogicality, which fascinate only the dreamer himself (and his psychoanalyst). But what I'm describing here is not a dream but rather the dream-like image of a house. The house was evidently my family home, which — in my dream — I had once lost but then regained.

*And* it was an old-fashioned house, with a nice and familiar air. There were parquet floors everywhere, high ceilings, wainscot panels and pieces of old furniture. Some rooms, though, had to be reclaimed from neighbours with whom we had to share the house: they were squatters but we couldn't get rid of them because they had been residents of the place for too long, from even before we had arrived to repossess our ancestral property.<sup>16</sup> In order to get to some of our rooms, we had to circumnavigate their territory without provoking their anger. But in my dreams that inconvenience was compensated for by the occasional discovery of odd neglected rooms, some of them packed with abandoned treasures — a bright French window, a comfortable leather chair or a nice old oak table. These images changed from dream to dream.

*And* every episode of this serial dream contained, like a logo, the image of the house as seen from the outside. It was a big two century-old three-storey building, slightly dilapidated, with stucco exterior walls painted dark red with white windowsills, a tiled roof, and the walls partly covered with ivy. It stood on the bank of a river, the Thames I presumed, and the nearby bridge was

glimpsed occasionally. It was, no doubt, a very desirable location in the centre of town (I was at the time renting accommodation in a London suburb); funnily enough, it couldn't have been my home for real- my family have never lived on a river. But each visit to that place in my dreams during my first seven years in London was like a homecoming.

#### 4

*And* years had passed and I'd forgotten about that dream. It came back to life, so to speak, in March last year in Berlin. I first went to Berlin nine years ago: to find out for BBC World Service how clearly Berliners remembered the geographical division of the city, how imperceptible had the separation between East and West become ten years after the Wall's collapse? <sup>17</sup> I was hypnotised by Berlin. As a Soviet citizen I had been envious of East Germans: if they emigrated to West Germany, they were able to divest themselves of the Soviet outfit while remaining German, speaking the language they had spoken all their lives. The more I learnt that the reunification of Germany's two pasts was not so straightforward — that the former East Germans in the western half of the reunited Berlin felt like smugglers who had brought some forbidden contraband with them to a new shore — the more this doubleness, this duplicity fascinated me. Last year, having inherited some money after my father's death, I started thinking of buying a studio in Berlin.

*And* during my recent trip in search of a suitable property, I stayed in a tiny and gloomy rented apartment in a modern block, opposite an imposing building — of brutal modernist architecture — across the canal (Friedrichsgracht). Ironically, this huge building turned out to be none other than Erich Honecker's administrative quarters, while the block of apartments in which I was staying had been used to accommodate his administration's servants — drivers, cleaners, typists. It felt eerie being accidentally transported into someone else's political geography as a temporary resident. (We shouldn't forget that Honecker became an exile at the end of his life, too.) On the other hand, that is what Berlin is all about: just as in Jerusalem, you step to the side and find yourself entrapped in someone else's history.

*And* the rented apartment was quite depressing in its miniature sanitised meanness, so despite the terrible weather I ventured out to see a place I'd never visited before: Monbijoupark in Mitte. At that time, I was writing about Adalbert von Chamisso — a French émigré from the eighteenth century, whose aristocratic parents had escaped Revolutionary France and settled down in Germany. Chamisso made German his second language and wrote a book that I have known since childhood — a tale about a man who lost his shadow by selling it to the devil: a perfect metaphor for a bilingual exile who has lost his sense of belonging (people without shadows are, of course, those without past).<sup>18</sup>

*And* this part of the river Spree, with its locks and rail bridges, is still used by rusty old barges overloaded with goods. The further you progress towards Monbijoubücke, with the Museum island to your right, the stronger the contrast between the imperial architecture on the right hand side and the semi-industrial landscape with warehouses, garages and shut-down factories on the left, the remains and ruins of East Berlin's neglected past. The stormy weather blurred the contours of the buildings around, so that columns and arches could be confused with the cranes and winches on the barges, while museum buildings under scaffolding looked like the carcasses of sailing ships. The raging rain swallowed the borders between sky and earth and hit

pedestrians from unexpected directions with squalls of wind as if from a riot policeman's water cannon. I couldn't feel the ground under my feet, as if suspended in a heavy cloud of water drops. I experienced a similar feeling once on a little boat that takes tourists as close as possible to the gigantic splash of the Niagara Falls.<sup>19</sup>

*And* when I reached the pedestrian Monbijoubrücke the rain suddenly stopped. To my right was the gigantic squatting dome of the Bode Collection, oppressive in its semi-Byzantium decorum, housing antiquities of the ancient world. There was something Soviet about this museum building, shrouded in a didactic aura of knowledge and tradition. I suddenly felt a slight shift in my perception of time and space, as if I'd lost my sense of location not only in geography but in history, too, which often happens in cities whose past is overcrowded with competing historical forces. But the heavy rain clouds that were hanging in the sky, like wet washing on the line, broke up and ran astray. Suddenly the sun shone everywhere.



The house on the river, Berlin

*And* I looked to the left and was instantly frozen by the shock of recognition. On the banks of the river stood the exact replica of the house that I saw in my dreams twenty years ago. A slightly dilapidated building, with a tiled roof and stucco walls, painted dark red, covered with ivy here and there. How did it get there?

It felt like this dream image had been lifted from my mind, reproduced in brick and mortar as if on a Hollywood set and placed on the banks of the river Spree. *And* I said to my companion (I was not alone on this walk): "I know this house."

*And* we went through the gates and into the yard and approached the main porch at the back of the building. Strangely enough, it looked like the entrance to an official institution. *Humboldt Universität zu Berlin* read the plaque next to the doorway, and with my rudimentary German I deciphered that it housed the department of blood transfusions and immunology. I stood there, totally baffled. Besides the symbolic link with the notion of blood — everyone's family past — this building's function had nothing to do with the warm sentimental feelings I associated with the house of my London dreams that it outwardly resembled. The building was clearly just a part of Humboldt University's medical faculty. What did it have to do with the family past of my dreams?

## 5

*And*, as it turned out, it had a lot to do with it. In one of the episodes of my serial dream, I happen to enter a room I have never been before. Most of the *Lebensraum* there is occupied by a huge bed with a carved headboard. In it, propped up by many a pillow, lies my grandma; she is feeling unwell and remains in bed, but is immaculately dressed, her hair carefully coiffured; she is

reading — there is a book in her hands. The rest of the wall behind the bed is covered in bookshelves from the floor to ceiling, packed with precious old volumes *in folio*, bound in leather. Why have I never used this beautiful library, I ask myself. I pick up one of the tomes from the shelves and start leafing through it. To my great disappointment, I discover that not only this one, but all of the volumes in the home library are in Latin and all of them are on the subject of medicine. They are of no use to me. They are medical books. They belonged to my grandfather. Both he and my grandmother were doctors.

*And* throughout my childhood I felt more at home with my grandparents than with my mum and dad. As long as I can remember, my parents would quarrel daily, even physically attacking each other in my presence. In the heat of a row they would put me in front of them and ask: who would I choose to stay with if they divorced? Or else, they would try to rid themselves of my presence in the dreary communal apartment at any given opportunity, as was the habit of the most Soviet parents in the harsh reality of post-war Russia. I had spent most of my earlier childhood with my grandparents (before I was old enough to be sent to pioneer camps and to other state funded institutions such as the all-day local school). My grandfather (my mother's father) was a local doctor in the small mining township of Bobrik–Donskoy, about a hundred kilometres from Moscow. The little hamlet where they had their house was surrounded by countryside. The years after the war were not the most prosperous in the history of Russia, so local peasants would pay their doctor by barter for medical services provided. They would bring eggs and dairy produce, game and meat cuts, seasonal fruit and vegetables. Every corner of the big (or what I remembered as big) house was packed with this agricultural bribery.

*And* the smell of fresh apples (laid out everywhere in the house and left to ripen — on the shelves and even under the beds) was prevailing. In the storage room next to the kitchen stood a row of wooden barrels — each with a different type of pickle: cucumbers in salt and brine, marinated red and green tomatoes, cabbage pickled with carrots and apples, and last but not least — a barrel with pickled apples.<sup>20</sup> The household was run smoothly by grandma and her helping hands recruited from amongst the locals — a charwoman and a cook — whom no one would call servants. The most memorable thing for me was the breakfast, with its steady ritual of eating a boiled egg (and hot bagels with jam and tea), as I had been taught by my grandfather — cutting the top of the egg off rather than smashing it with a spoon, as everyone else did in Russia. This procedure was supervised by grandpa himself at the head of the table, always clean shaven and immaculately dressed in a white shirt with cufflinks and waistcoat, ready to put on his black jacket to go to the clinic. Each time I felt distraught at having odd bits of crumbled eggshell in my mouth in my spoonful of egg, grandfather would calm me down by saying that eggshell contains potassium that was good for my bones which were, in his medical opinion, too weak. (His diagnostics proved perfectly right, as my later scoliosis has shown.) In short, the most minute aspects of my daily routine were taken care of by my grandparents, only enhancing my sensation of this house as being Paradise.

*And* I experienced fear in this household only once. One day, left to my own devices, I was wandering around the house, playing hide-and-seek with myself and opening the doors of the wall cupboards at random. Inside one of them next to the kitchen, the body of a skinned hare<sup>21</sup> hung from a large hook, rotting slightly as game should before being cooked: its bloody skinless flesh, complete with the mutilated head, looked like the pilloried victim of some horrible execution. This was the only incident, as far as I can remember, which

seriously stained in my mind the otherwise immaculately bright picture of sheer bliss.

*And* the question is: was the house that I dreamt about in London inspired by this image of my grandfather's house? Ostensibly, the dream house looked totally different. It had the foreign look of a solid big town house in one of the European capitals. My grandparents, in contrast to that dream, lived in a cheap mid-terrace house, the front of which was plastered dusty yellowish and grey, with a tin and tarpaulin roof and no ivy. There was no river to speak of nearby either, apart from a pathetic brook which was used as a sewage duct, overgrown with bushes of elderberries and wolf berries, nettles and cowslips. In short, the house I had dreamt about was clearly an idealised fictional past that I had constructed in my mind; but, perhaps, it was a fanciful projection of the real place — a radically improved past — of my grandparents' home, where I had spent, for real, so many happy days, and where — so I believed — love and care ruled supreme.<sup>22</sup>

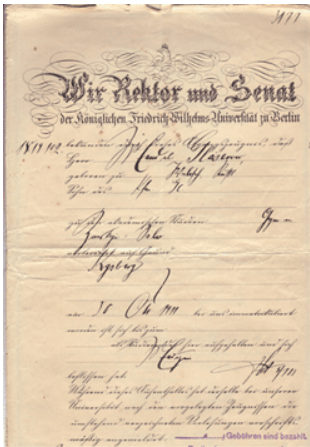
## 6

*And* at this point I decided to look into the family papers. I did it reluctantly, because dealing with old documents always makes me feel, paradoxically, even more desolate, rootless, less linked to my present: a past disturbs the present with unexpected links to something which is very difficult to identify with your life as you used to know it. Look at that photo of me as a five year-old child watching my granddad shaving himself. How could I recognise in this blond little boy with a turned-up nose myself as I am now — with my grizzly grey hair, my flabby wrinkled face and protruding Jewish proboscis? Was it really me?<sup>23</sup>



Shaving

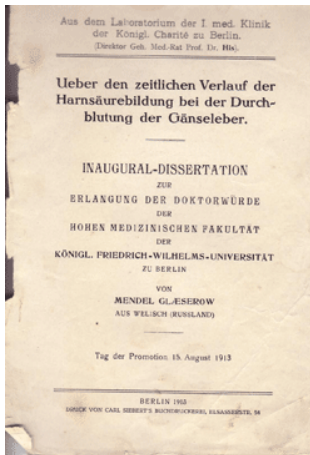
*And* as I was looking now at the little boy in the faded old photo, I noticed that he was staring not at his grandpa, a gentlemen having his morning shave, but at his old fashioned razor blade. Is the boy scared of this long sharp instrument? Does he connect it with the horrifying image of the naked flesh hanging from the hook in the cupboard under the stairs? Is he trembling at the thought that his fate might be similar to that of a skinned hare?<sup>24</sup> All these are questions for psychoanalysts to answer. But if you follow the boy's gaze in the photo closely, you will realise that he is fascinated, even hypnotised, not by the razor but by the way the old man is wiping the soap foam from the blade. The grandpa is using brown wrapping paper to do so — we see heaps of it in front of him on the table. I don't know why didn't he use an ordinary towel, a napkin or a piece of old clothe instead — like barbers used to? Was it the post-war era of austerity? Or, had he been landed with an unexpected surplus of wrapping paper, that came, perhaps, from local hospital deliveries, and was not to be wasted? Of this whole scene I still remember most vividly and sharply the physical sound of the blade being pressed and moved in between the folds of the harsh, matt brown wrapping paper to be cleaned. I am still allergic to this sound and shudder slightly at the memory of it.<sup>25</sup>



Mendel Glaezerow's diploma, 1913

And it was in envelopes made of this brown paper that some of the documents from my family archive were kept: old photographs, some letters, notes and certificates, records of employment, drafts of wills and even an unfinished poem by my grandma. The most important find were two diplomas on crumbling velum foolscap paper. In the Gothic lettering the documents ceremoniously announced that *Mendel Glaezerow* had studied medicine at the *Universität zu Königsberg* from 1908 until 1911 and then graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1913 at the *Friedrich Wilhelms Universität zu Berlin*. It clicked:

Berlin! *Die ganze Welt* was not to be conquered yet, but at least I had made the first step on the path to Berlin. It was a great disappointment, though, that the university my grandfather had studied was not Humboldt University, to which the building I had recognised in Berlin belonged.



Mendel Glaezerow's dissertation, 1913

And as a last ditch attempt I turned to the biggest depot of ancestral memory — Google. I googled *Friedrich–Wilhelms Universität* and came up with the revelation that it was none other than the former name of what has been known since 1949 as *Humboldt University*. The medical school of that university was located at the same place in Berlin in my grandfather's time as it is now: off Monbijoubrücke, on the river Spree. The title of his doctoral dissertation was *Über den zeitlichen Verlauf der Harnsäurebildung bei der Durchblutung der Gänseleber. Berlin 1913* ("The temporal stages of the formation of uric acid through the blood circulation in goose liver"). That is, he

was indeed involved in blood research — the subject studied at the medical school near Monbijoubrücke, as was stated on the plaque at the entrance.<sup>26</sup>

And there could be quite a few mystical links connecting the image of the house in my dreams with the real building in Berlin. One may share a Wittgensteinian belief that everything which the human mind can possibly conceive will eventually be materialised; or a Platonic concept of dreams as ideas being the prime movers behind material objects' existence; that is, the real world is a mere shadow of the Dream. Or, in reverse fashion, a real object in the past might, under certain circumstances and weather conditions, resurface as a ghost or a dream in the mind of a particularly sensitive person, thus inducing a link with his past. The most fanciful hypothesis would be to suggest that every Jew has access to a common ancestral reservoir of memory — a collective consciousness (Google was developed by a Russian Jew), so that a grandson would be able to remember the things his grandfather had experienced. (If true, this would serve as powerful pro-Zionist proof of the existence of links between modern Jews and the land of the Bible).

And there is also a rational explanation, though it's no less difficult to prove. There might have been a photograph of this Berlin medical school on my grandpa's desk or in a family photo album. I must have seen it and had it

imprinted on my brain's convolutions. Many years later it was re-activated in the form of an ideal family past, a house in my dreams, my "private Zion". Whatever the explanation, the fact is that a made-up past, fictionalised from my dreams, turned out to be rooted in a firm reality. More than that, this reality was loaded with the political history of the time, which would affect my own future.

## 7

*And* Mendel Glaeserow must have been proud of his medical education, first as a pharmacist and eventually as a doctor. Not only had this profession liberated him from all the restrictions and quotas imposed on a Jew wishing to move beyond the pale of settlement. It had also allowed him to marry my grandma. According to the family legend, my grandmother's father, Abram Ginsburg, from the prosperous town of Mogilyov, was one of the richest men of Belorussia.<sup>27</sup> He was a timber merchant and rented a huge Russian estate in the area, which he ran with pomp and panache; a four-horse carriage was always at his disposal, dinner parties and charity balls for the local gentry were held regularly in the huge house. He must have looked down on his daughter's choice of Mendel Glaeserow, one of five brothers in the family who were carpenters for many generations in the little township of Velizh.<sup>28</sup> Although one of my grandfather's brothers had done the woodcarving for one of the Tsar's palaces, as a boy Mendel Glaeserow, according to his short autobiography, had to do manual work to save up for schooling in order to become a pharmacist's assistant. So Mendel's asking for the hand of Ginsburg's beloved daughter Blyuma was met with initial refusal. It was only the fear of dispossession in the face of the first Russian revolution in February 1905 and the abdication of the Tsar that made Ginsburg accept a carpenter's son's marriage proposal. It looks like it was my grandmother's marriage dowry that enabled Mendel to go to Konigsberg<sup>29</sup> to study and then to Berlin. Blyuma (whose official Russian name was Lyubov', which means Love), a graduate of the First Women Gymnasium in St Petersburg, was herself a dentist with a degree. She had her own clinic in Berlin and it was her money that allowed her husband to study medicine at Humboldt University. But pregnant with their first child, she went back to Russia.

*And* this is not the place to tell the full story of my grandpa's peregrinations. Mendel's letters from Berlin to Moscow reveal the character of a dexterous, ambitious and hard-working young man, who was trying to live up to the expectations of his rich and beautiful young wife, a student with modest means but with a huge appetite for the social and artistic life of the German capital city. Back in Russia a year later, his German doctorate in medicine was confirmed by the University of Moscow. According to his short autobiography, during the First World War he was sent to the front line as a military doctor under the command of the general Wrangel. He took part in the Great Russian Revolution as a doctor in the little Ukrainian town of Shpola, where he was arrested as a Red Army collaborator and threatened with execution by a White Army officer; he worked in Uzbekistan where he was active in building a brave new and healthy Soviet society; was evacuated to beyond the Urals before settling down, after the Second World War, in Bobrik-Donskoy, where he took care of teaching me how to eat a soft boiled egg. Two and a half pages of his autobiography were clearly written for the Soviet authorities to show his revolutionary credentials in the horrific 1949, the year of a renewed wave of Stalinist executions and an ideological campaign against cosmopolitanism. The autobiography ends with the obligatory Soviet pledge: "I have never been a member of any anti-Soviet organisation, never been under criminal

investigation or imprisoned by the Soviet authorities, and have no relatives abroad". It was my turn, a quarter of a century later, to falsify my past in search of non-existent relatives abroad.

*And* it was very difficult to say now to what extent he had falsified his past as a proletarian revolutionary. He had always been away on some business assignment. And then, there was an enigmatic period in the 1930s when he hadn't lived at home for many years. In the little book that records the places of his employment year by year, there is a blank space for the most of the 1930s. My mother once told me (when I was searching for a relative abroad to support my exit visa application) that there was a period when my grandpa lived abroad permanently. With regular intervals, once every few months, a black limousine would pull up unexpectedly at our apartment block. Grandfather would appear in his three-piece suit, spend an hour or so with the family, drink tea, kiss his beloved children and would be driven away again to an unknown destination.

*And* now I know what this destination was. His brief autobiography states it clearly: from the year 1931 and until 1938 he was employed by NKVD. It transpires that he was told to open a clinic in Kovno (now Kaunas), Lithuania. He had to file regular reports on the changing mood of the local population in that divided country, torn between conflicting and aggressive claims on its territory by Russia, Germany, and Poland, which was at that time occupying part of Lithuania, including Vilnius. Kaunas, therefore, assumed the status of the national capital in which pro-Russian tendencies in politics had to be taken seriously.<sup>30</sup> My grandfather, therefore, was laying down the foundation for the building of the future Soviet empire. He was creating a present for me, from which I, forty years later, tried (and succeeded) in escaping.<sup>31</sup>

## 8

*And* what and whom was Mendel Glaeserow trying to avoid when he moved around from one end of the Russian empire to another, from one exotic employment to the next, from Uzbekistan to Kaunas?<sup>32</sup> The possible answer is provided by the note my grandmother wrote before she died. There, on a ruled page torn out of a school exercise book she listed in her shaky handwriting all that her children had to know about her funeral's arrangements, including a detailed description of how she should be dressed for the occasion: how to do her hair, which fabric for the frock and what kind of underwear to choose — she even insisted that the colour of her shoes should match that of the coffin. A lot was left for children's imagination — for example, the choice of the cemetery. The list of instructions, though, ends with a very firm plea: "under no condition am I to be buried in the same grave as my husband".



Zinovy Zinik with his grandmother, 1950s

*And* when, a few months ago, I came across this note, the bright picture of my ideal childhood in my grandparents' house had suddenly darkened. The prelapsarian abundance of pickled cucumbers and unconditional love has been lost for me forever. In the same batch of documents I discovered a short poem that my grandma wrote on my grandfather's return from Berlin. "I've been pining away, waiting for you, but instead of amorous rapture, I drank a cup of poison!" There was, clearly, another woman in Berlin.<sup>33</sup> The complicated course of Mendel Glaeserow's life

could be explained by the numerous love affairs he had had in different parts of the world. Bobrik–Donskoy was the last stop. Then, on a miserable state pension, ageing and ailing, he had had no choice but to move back to Moscow. This old–fashioned gentleman with impeccable manners, this globe trotter and immaculately dressed doctor was to die in a crummy old Soviet apartment which he had once owned but was now forced to share with his hapless children and their rapidly growing families.

*And* despite their hatred of each other over forty years, my grandparents had to share the same bed: the space was scarce. (I was born in a room twelve metres

square that I shared with my parents and my stepsister.) But when my grandpa was dying, he wouldn't allow his wife, my beautiful grandma Blyuma, to touch his ailing body. At the last stages of his illness he suffered terrible pains — he was seemingly dying of cancer of the bladder — and I remember his loud shrieks and shouts. It was not his wife, my grandma, but his daughter who helped him when he needed to use the urine bottle.<sup>34</sup>

*And* he was the first human being whom I saw laid in a coffin. The dead person in the box was as frighteningly immobile as the skinned hare in the cupboard.

*And* now I can vividly recollect the room in our apartment which my uncle's family occupied and in which my grandpa's last days were spent. In my mind's eye I see, behind the glass doors of the sideboard and on top of the upright piano, an amazing collection, exhibited as if in an antique shop, of porcelain figurines of animals and fairies, of vases and dishes painted over with magical images. In the centre of this heap of treasures stood a huge clock made of porcelain, with angels and cupids guarding the face of the clock with chimes. Each time a guest at the house would marvel at this miracle (in the midst of grim Stalinist Moscow), my uncle would explain — with an assumed indifference and a wave of the hand that masked his pride at his achievements: "That's the trophies." These *tropheinoye dobro* [goodies] were, of course, what Soviet officers had brought back to Russia from Germany. I wonder what my grandfather felt looking at those relics of his adopted German past, of his Berlin years, now exhibited as the spoils of war, as items of the state-sanctioned looting from which his son had benefited.

## 9

*And* yet, all these facts that have exposed the illusory aspects of my childhood cannot destroy the unshakable sensation of bliss I feel each time I think of the years I spent in my grandparents' house. There exists in our heads the obstinate reality of a dream which is impossible to eradicate from the memory and which we are reluctant to denounce as an illusion. Should I discount this "elevating deception" (in Pushkin's words) as a delusion, discard it as pure fiction? What if the building that I discovered on my walks around Berlin, where my grandfather had studied medicine, didn't resemble the house I had dreamt of after all? Even if I insisted that it did, who would be able to prove their identical appearance? And how could I be certain myself that this resemblance was not a fanciful delusion — a desire to link my Soviet past to my present, associated with Berlin, to my presence in Vilnius where I gave a talk this year on the falsification of the past?<sup>35</sup>

*And* my answer is: all these provocative questions about the semblance, resemblance or dissemblance as regards the link between my dream house and the one I saw in Berlin are irrelevant. We are obsessed with checking the veracity of facts and the identity of the objects we deal with. But I exist — with my dreams and my guts — regardless of what others think of me, regardless of what identity card is put into my breast pocket. My experience teaches me that we can achieve truth not only by way of discarding false facts and exposing fake identities. The act of recognition is a quicker and more reliable guide to the truth: we momentarily recognise a familiar face in a crowded room and find our way home by recognising familiar corners. Something clicked in my mind when I saw a house on the banks of the river Spree. Unexpectedly, in it I recognised the house that I was already familiar with, God knows how. And that house turned out to be the medical school that my grandfather graduated from. I recognised something in a foreign reality —

in the solid history of another nation — something that was directly linked to my family's past.<sup>36</sup>

*And* it was this recognition that was the miracle. The rest was story telling.

*Based on a speech delivered at the 22nd European Meeting of Cultural Journals, Vilnius 8–11 May 2009*

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- <sup>1</sup> Later, I found out that Stalin was very fond of Ancient Greece; his favourite bedtime reading was a book called "What Ancient Greeks Thought of Their Gods and Heroes".
  - <sup>2</sup> When I eventually saw the full Jewish edition of the Bible, I was first and foremost struck by the layout of its pages: each passage of the Biblical narrative occupied a smaller space on the page because it was surrounded by numerous commentaries. I have adopted the same style here. According to the Jewish tradition, the meaning of the Biblical text is inseparable from its commentaries. You can also read these commentaries as a separate text or ignore them altogether, as Christians did when they plagiarised the Old Testament.
  - <sup>3</sup> This is true only in a limited sense. Throughout my life in the Soviet Union I was reluctant to reveal my ethnic origin to strangers. As for my double-barrelled surname Gluzberg–Zinik, as it is printed in my British passport, I was always more inclined to be called Zinik than Gluzberg, which sounded far too German–Jewish for the Slavic ear. This fear of exposing your origins shows how unwelcome the outside world felt like to me, a Jew. And I had always been aware of the quota system for Jews at the University of Moscow in my time. I pretended that this was applied to everyone of any origin from the Soviet Union's ethnic melting pot.
  - <sup>4</sup> Jewish history is always somebody else's history. Those who are disillusioned with their own present are in search of a fictional past that explains and vindicates their current troubles. We are familiar with people who steal someone else's past, his or her life story, by falsifying their passports or forging birth certificates: they are commonly known as swindlers and crooks; they commit these acts of fraud either to evade justice, or to get rich by illegal means. It seems that Jews do it for no pecuniary purpose; they do it because they sincerely believe in someone else's past as if it were their own, although stepping into someone else's shoes is frequently wrought with undesirable consequences. Their quest is the search for a new sense belonging. The aims are different, but the methods — a deception or self-delusion — are familiar to any outlaw. This is why perhaps Jews — history thieves — attract those who are fascinated by any kind of criminality.
  - <sup>5</sup> I grew up without being aware of any past traceable to my family history or religion. Our young Soviet pioneer minds remained free of any link to the pre-Revolutionary past. I lived inside a time capsule — in a circle of close friends, partners and lovers (ethnically a motley crew), in which the network of almost tribal relationships created a separate universe — it was not an underground or dissident force, it was a parallel world which was, of course, included in the Soviet universe but refused to be a part of it. And since I had begun hating this particular geography of belonging, I had no choice but to look for someone else's past. At such instances we usually turn to our ancestors, but most Jews do not know their family history beyond their great grandfather's generation. After this point in the family tree there grows the branch of uncertainty upon which Adam and Eve sat in Paradise.
  - <sup>6</sup> This is exactly the question that the insolent son from the Talmudic tale asks his father when the festive rituals of Passover — celebrating the Exodus from Egypt — are being performed. This cheeky young Jew is exposed as a duty dodger, a denier of Jewish suffering. But to be accused of denying your past, you have to have a past recognised as your own.
  - <sup>7</sup> Ideology, based on the myths of the past, is more durable because, unlike utopian promises of a radiant future, its veracity will not be tested as time goes by. It will never be exposed as a false prophecy, and there is no need to adjust it. That is why fascism in its many modern manifestations is still alive and kicking, while communism is dead and buried.
  - <sup>8</sup> We shouldn't forget that it was Stalin's vote at the 1948 United Nation session which was crucial for the establishment of the state of Israel as we know it. My theory is that he voted that way because he regarded Israel as the only country he could have escaped to if in need of political asylum; his background as a student at a religious academy also played its role in his fondness for Palestine. Stalin's notorious anti-Semitic "Fight against cosmopolitanism" was not necessarily in contradiction with his pro-Zionist voting at the UN: the worst enemies of Zionism are cosmopolitan Jews. It is appropriation of individual suffering by the collective will that turns a noble longing for nationhood into hideous state propaganda. It took the ideological revolution of the 1960s in Israel and the collapse of the Soviet Union in

the 1990s to expose the falsity of this Soviet version of the dream of Zion.

- <sup>9</sup> I was introduced to Nehama Leibovitch by Leonid Ioffe, a poet and close friend from Moscow, who at a certain stage in his life, in the 1970s, had decided to eradicate his Russian spiritual roots and transplant himself onto parched Israeli soil. Paradoxically, this had not affected his loyalty to Russian poetry, as if it was safely detached from his ancestral Jewish legacy. I was so fascinated by this evident clash of loyalties that it swayed my decision to join him in Palestine in order to fully understand this conundrum.
- <sup>10</sup> One of the first recorded and most well-remembered instances of assumed past or stolen identity, when someone else's clothing is used deceptively as a literal cover-up, is the story of Jacob, prompted by his mother to steal his father Isaac's blessing and the first-born's rights from his brother Esau — by dressing up in his furs. Conversely, Adam and Eve were naked in the Garden of Eden and were not aware of it because they had nothing to hide: they had no past to tell of. According to Nehama Leibovitch's commentary, they saw that they were naked only after having eaten an apple, not because they were blind before, but because afterwards they were left without any law to be obedient to — they were "naked" before the law (since they broke the only one they had — to not eat from the apple tree).
- <sup>11</sup> "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions; and the garlick. But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes." [Numbers 11:5] It was for this nostalgic lament that the Jews were condemned by the Almighty to wander in the desert for the next forty years. This cry and lament for the past lost in Egypt is almost identical to the Russian émigrés' complaint that German rye bread is too sticky while the Polish one is too puffy and "they" pickle cucumbers in vinegar and not in brine as they should. Perhaps the Jews sensed the loss of their immediate past lives in the countries from which they were expelled much more acutely than the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. (At least, that was Gerhard Scholem's opinion when he described the sense of catastrophic loss that the Jews had felt when exiled from medieval Spain.) Perhaps the Jews sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon because they knew that one day they would be told by the Persian king to go back to Jerusalem?
- <sup>12</sup> The parallel example of lost originality is the Mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square. It is regarded as a uniquely Soviet symbol of the Great Russian Revolution. In fact, it looks like a Babylonian ziggurat or, rather, an Egyptian pyramid: the period when it was devised was associated with the discovery in 1922 by Howard Carter of Tutankhamen's tomb. The discovery received worldwide press coverage and sparked renewed public interest in, and fashion inspired by, ancient Egypt. The link to the Egyptian past is even more symbolic because of Freud's hypothesis that Moses was an Egyptian (at the time of Tutankhamen) who converted the Jews of Egypt to monotheism — the religion of Tutankhamen's dissident uncle. The image of Lenin as a Bolshevik Moses, entombed in the Mausoleum, is not far-fetched, given the prophet-like iconography of the father of the Russian Revolution (which was turned into this revolution's mummy).
- <sup>13</sup> See my essay "Emigration as Literary Device" (*Syntaxis*, 11/1983, Paris.) It seems that two motifs prevail in Judaism: that of the exodus from Egypt and the return to Jerusalem. The exodus is a liberation from slavery. The return to Jerusalem is linked to the anticipation of the Messiah. But every Jewish exodus is tied in with an upsurge of nostalgia for the land left behind, while every attempt at returning to Jerusalem is wrought with tragedy and bloodshed, and so it's constantly postponed.
- <sup>14</sup> Driving on the left was linked in my mind to the Hebrew way of writing from right to left.
- <sup>15</sup> An enthusiastic newcomer, I had to adapt myself to the native habits and once again change my style of dress, manner of speaking and food preferences. This mimicry of outward behaviour eventually affects our mode of thinking, too: not vice versa. By the way, Jacob's transformation into Esau in the eyes of the blind Isaac consists of four stages: Jacob puts on Esau's "raiment"; he then places "the skins of the kids of the goats" [Genesis 27:16] on his hands in imitation of Esau's hirsute body; Jacob gives his father a stew made of "the kids of the goats" instead of venison (an allusion to the angel's provision of the ram that Abraham sacrificed in place of his son Isaac in the previous generational confrontation); and, eventually, Jacob imitates Esau's accent when his father asks his identity.
- <sup>16</sup> This is clearly a sublimated reflection on the Arab-Israeli territorial dispute over the Holy Land.
- <sup>17</sup> This reason for my first ever visit to Berlin is only partially true. I, a married man, used this BBC assignment as a cover-up for meeting with a German woman with whom I had fallen deeply in love. She was born in the GDR, I was born in the USSR, and before we had met I thought — little as I knew about the Holocaust — that I would never in my life set foot on that soil soaked with Jewish blood. It took some time for my romantic mind to acknowledge that the mass-murder of the Jews hadn't taken place on "German soil" and — what was more essential — that my lover's generation was no more complicit in their

compatriots' Nazi crimes than I was in Soviet atrocities; and that she had grown up under the Soviet regime which was imposed on her not without some help from my Soviet compatriots. Perhaps I am writing this story in order to discover, or invent, a past that is common to both of us — in the way that lovers are so fond of doing.

- 18 To minimise his contact with mankind, Chamisso's hero (whose Jewish name Schlemiel means awkward and clumsy) becomes an explorer in the most remote parts of the world. The author emulated his hero's fate and later became a renowned anthropologist himself who took part in a round-the-world trip on the Russian ship *Rurick*. (See my essay "Anyone at home?")
- 19 This storm of Biblical proportions can be read as a reference to either the Book of Exodus, when the Red Sea parted to let the Hebrews flee the Egyptian army; or to the Book of Jonah. Jonah's trials and tribulations, including his disastrous trip during the sea storm, were caused by his refusal to do what he was told to do by God: to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah was avoiding this duty because he didn't want to be regarded as a false prophet: he knew that God would have pity on the people of Nineveh and that the city would not be destroyed even after his dutiful prophesying.
- 20 These apples return us to the motif of innocence in the Garden of Eden. But since the apples in this instance are pickled, we are speaking here of a Russian way of treating temptation: just pickle it!
- 21 Skinning is the ultimate punishment: it deprives the victim of any trace of identity. The creature is not only dead — it is nobody. (The Greek God Apollo was fond of skinning his competitors in the arts.) That's what Esau most probably wanted to do to Isaac: skin him. This total nakedness is also crucial in the treatment of prisoners or army recruits. You must remove all your clothes before you are given a new uniform. Naked, the person is like a manikin, ready to be dressed up in accordance to somebody else's design, your new uniform of life tailored for you.
- 22 The little hamlet in which my grandparents' house stood was not as idyllic as it had once seemed to me. I now recollect a scene which as a boy I would see out of my window with repetitive regularity: a local lad, totally drunk, would become unhinged and chase his mother around the courtyard with an axe in his hand, shouting: "I will kill you." She would try to run away from him as fast as possible, circling the yard without abandoning him altogether, and shout back: "Mind the blade, sonny, don't cut your hands, sweetheart!" This for me was the first encounter with unconditional love.
- 23 Perhaps we shouldn't connect these two bodies at all — me as the boy and me as the ageing man? Perhaps they are linked, but not through degradation of the flesh or transmutation of personality traits. Siamese twins are linked in both space and time, and yet they remain totally separate individuals. We — our younger and older selves — may have a common ancestor and mutual body, but we are not directly connected with one another. I feel similarly at a loss when someone is trying to establish a link between me and the Russia of Ivan the Terrible or the Israel of King David.
- 24 I didn't know at that time of the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac — Abraham's attempt at sacrificing Isaac to God. Was it pre-installed in the hard disk of my ancestral memory? Had the skinned hare — a surrogate of the holy lamb that had prevented human sacrifice — triggered this memory? In any case, I should not have been scared of my grandfather — grandfathers are always in cahoots with grandchildren against fathers — as the story of Isaac, his father Abraham and the grandfather God shows.
- 25 The use of such brown paper was always associated in my mind with the officialdom of state bureaucracy. You notice this paper and you are transported into suffocating, badly lit and badly painted corridors of some state institution or other, in which an unwashed human crowd is queuing for an uncertain answer to an unasked question. Bad news comes through your letterbox in those very envelopes, even in England, even now. This brown paper is an international emblem of unhappiness.
- 26 I should also note that goose liver pate was a staple delicacy in my grandparents' household.
- 27 Where did all the millions of Jews in Eastern Europe come from? Most European Jews do not know their ancestors beyond their great-grandfathers' generation. The suggestion that they were the descendants of those dispersed from the land of Israel by ancient Romans cannot be supported by any data on birth rates among European Jews.
- 28 It was in Velizh that in 1823 the first trial for ritual murder took place in Russia. Some local Jews were accused of killing a Christian child and draining his blood to be used in the celebration of Passover (Exodus from Egypt). After ten years of imprisonment and investigations, all the accused were acquitted and those witnesses who had fabricated their evidence were exiled to Siberia. This case inspired Lermontov's poem "Spaniards".
- 29 His son-in-law (my father) lost his leg during the Second World War on the way to Königsberg, which was levelled to the ground by the Soviet army (not without a little help

from the RAF).

- 30 It was Claudia Sinnig, the author of *Litauen. Ein Literarischer Reisebegleiter* (Insel Verlag, 2004), who opened for me the book of the Central European history in general. Like everyone who was born in Moscow and grew up in Soviet Russia, I was ignorant of the world beyond the limits of my immediate Russian preoccupations; I was totally oblivious to the complexity of life in the countries under the Soviet occupation — such as Lithuania, which to Soviet citizens was no more than a provincial resort. Little did I know just how entangled my personal history was with it.
- 31 One's man dream is another's hard labour. Stalinists used to fabricate fictitious "historical causes" in order to justify the miserable Soviet present. To compensate for the present emotional vacuum we re—invent our past. But it is not ours. It is borrowed from somebody else's myths or tradition — the Bible or the Scandinavian Sagas, the French Enlightenment or Prussian militarism. This past, adopted to suit our aspirations and temperament, is then imposed on others — on our neighbours, sometimes on their own territories. We create past events that are provoked by our present ideological causes, as George Eliot put it in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. This re—discovered (or manufactured) past in turn provokes our neighbours to rethink their own past, which they were unaware of before. This is what happened to the Palestinians, who discovered their own national identity after it had been awoken in them by the Zionist myth. My friend Meir Wieseltier, the most clear-minded of Israeli poets, epitomised this idea in his poem "Passengers":

When the bus arrived in Tel–Aviv, I was struck by their sleep:  
two men, thirtyish, dark skinned, dressed up in new  
trousers, shirts, ties, everything gleaming  
under their two well–cut blank profiles,  
close to each other, a sculpted closeness,  
their features unmistakably Hittite.  
Then I knew that their whole festive rig  
had grown on them without their realising.  
Sleepers for ninety generations, swept into the city at a gallop,  
and opening their eyes now, amazed and briefly emboldened,  
were about to crash unbridled into the dust of our lives.  
And I knew we were braking, pulling into the Central Bus Station  
where something horrendous would befall them.

[From *Something Optimistic, the Making of Poems*, 1976. Translated from the Hebrew by Shirley Kaufman.]

- 32 If we zoom in on the history of my grandfather's birthplace, Velizh, we can see how the complicated routes of his life can be traced to the history of this little town near Vitebsk. In medieval times it was a border fortress of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, captured, abandoned and recaptured by the Russians with persistent regularity. My grandfather's less than expected stay in Uzbekistan is linked, perhaps, to the fact that his contemporary and possible friend Max Penson, a celebrated Soviet photographer, was also born in Velizh. Penson participated in the World Exhibition in Paris (1937) winning the Grand Prix Award for Uzbek Madonna, a portrait of a young Uzbek woman, nursing her child in public. He also photographed the construction of the Grand Fergana Canal. General Rodzianko, who negotiated the fate of the Denikin White Army in Ukraine (where my grandpa was sentenced to death but saved) with the British government, was also born in Velizh. The most famous native of Velizh is Nikolai Przhevalsky, an ethnographer whose name is associated with the breed of horses he discovered in Mongolia. I could never understand why this particular scientist and his horse were studied so thoroughly in Soviet schools until I saw a photo of him: he is the spitting image of Stalin; or, rather, the reverse is true: Stalin is the spitting image of him. It is a well-known fact that while Przhevalski was staying in Tbilisi he employed Stalin's mother as a charwoman; nine months later Stalin was born. Incidentally, Stalin was one year younger than my grandpa and they died in the same year.
- 33 See note no.17
- 34 The urine bottle is called *utka* in Russian, which means a duck, because of the duck-like shape of the bottle. The circulation of blood in duck (or goose) liver was the subject of my grandfather's doctoral dissertation written in Berlin.
- 35 The suspicion of deception is infectious. It also leads to violence: when people become doubtful of your past they begin to question the legitimacy of your present wellbeing, as happens in our private life and, eventually, in the life of nations.
- 36 Isaac recognizes the first-born son in Jacob despite a striking evidence to the opposite: "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." [Genesis 27:22]

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