

Transformation

On that early morning, when Josef's aching heart heralded nothing good, he thought it was already the end of his life. It was only after the pains around his heart had subsided, that he somehow regained his composure, made peace with Death, as it were, and thought that this was "the end of all man¹". No one lived forever and he, Josef, was no exception.

Indeed, no one on this sinful earth can avoid the Angel of Death, sooner or later. The old "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away" [Job, 1:21] would also heal the wounds of those mourning for him. Gołda and Mordche, those closest to him, would forget him - as all close ones are forgotten, torn from life by the Angel of Death's hands. "What the soil covers, the eyes forget²" - this wise proverb now came to his mind.

Fate had played a game with him. After all, one event after another had taken place in his tempestuous life - unrests at the beginning of the twentieth century in Poland, Lithuania and Russia, which [in the] years following the first failed revolution against the Russian Tsarist rule also encompassed Warsaw, Łódź, Częstochowa and other cities in Poland at the time:

- persecutions and pogroms, which the Tsarist and Polish governments instigated from time to time - [including] three pogroms in the town of his birth
- arrests during police raids
- struggles against the Polish antisemitic City Elders and City Council for the rights of Jewish workers and their language, Yiddish, and for the rights of Jewish culture
- the two gruesome world wars, with all their tragic consequences
- the departure from Poland, while German aeroplanes were hailing down death upon old and young, and
- the road, as a refugee, through Lithuania, Russia and Japan to America.

In his private life:

- the premature deaths of his forty-year-old father and fourteen-year-old daughter
- the murder, by the Nazis, of his seventy-year-old mother
- his two brothers and three sisters with the greater part of their families, and
- the loss of his first wife in Paris, already after liberation.

[Also:]

- the news from Poland, the abominable deeds of the Nazis
- the stolen repose
- the editing of the *yizkor* books about destruction and desolation
- the fear of loneliness and the romantic conflicts

– all this strengthened, in him, the will to endure and pull through the worst.

¹ [TN: In Hebrew in the original, with quotation marks (סוף כל אדם); most likely misquoted Talmudic proverb: "The end of man is death, the end of animals is slaughter, and all are destined to die..." (Babylonian Talmud, Broches, 17b, see there.)]

² [TN: There are various versions of this Yiddish proverb, but we have found no other mentioning eyes. The standard version is "What the soil covers must be forgotten".]

Josef was [eventually] compelled to relinquish his work for the public good and for his *landsleit*. Nevertheless, he continued working at the office, for one has to “make a living”, as is the expression in America.

However, the dream of a better world, the ideal of his youth, to see mankind freed of all suffering - indeed, a world of honesty and justice - this was a sacred wish that continued welling up from within him even more strongly. A prayer cried out to the heavens from his weak heart – that, after the great destruction of war and bloodshed, he should live to see with his own eyes the world as a free world, relieved of all that is wrong and evil!

Indeed, one must continue hoping and believing with one’s whole heart only in good. Good things are bound to come after the bad. Yes, one must hope and drive away all negative thoughts from oneself - after all, it is on the little good that the world stands, not allowing mankind to sink into the soil, the earthly matter, from which man was created.

These were Josef’s thoughts and daydreams as he sat at his desk in the office.

Days, weeks and months ran by. Josef composed himself, took care of his frail health as far as possible and gazed at the world around him with open eyes, looking to the future filled with hope and faith.

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One morning, when Josef was working at the office, Gołda, while cleaning the house, found a folder containing papers on his desk - hundreds of different written pages. She recognised it to be in Josef’s handwriting. She called her brother Mordche to come home an hour earlier, before Josef returned from the office.

Later, the two of them sat and read chapter after chapter of the uncovered manuscript. It was a history - literally an entire book - which adeptly related Josef’s tempestuous life, depicting Josef’s interesting and rich life, beginning from his childhood and until his arrival in the United States. This descriptive biography made a strong impression on Mordche and Gołda. They recognised themselves in the pages of this manuscript which they had discovered, and were deeply touched by the simple and straightforward manner in which Josef had spoken of them in his life’s work.

When Josef came home, rather fatigued, from the office, Gołda and Mordche kept silent all evening. They gazed at him with warm eyes. Josef sensed something was up and he asked them, “Why are you quieter than usual today?”.

After thinking awhile, Gołda said, “Josef, I found a manuscript on your desk today. Mordche and I have already managed to read it through. Your secret is no longer a secret! You never told me or Mordche that you were writing a book! Well, now that we do know about it, Mordche will tell you what we’ve decided”.

Mordche spoke up.

“Yes, Josef, we’ve read your manuscript with bated breath. If your manuscript is printed in book form, it will make an impact. Well, obviously, we have a personal interest in the publication of this book. [But] I’m sure that also strangers, common readers, will read this book with no less relish than I did. It’s a book which tells about the life of an entire generation of Jews in bygone Poland, and also of the lives of the newly-arrived Jewish refugees, who made their way here, to America, after the greatest disaster in Jewish history.”

Josef listened to Mordche’s words with great satisfaction and he agreed to the printing of the manuscript. But when and how?

Yet, before long - on Josef’s 65th birthday - Gotda gifted him his life’s work in book form, beautifully printed and entitled *From the Warta River to the East River*.

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The publication of his book breathed a new faith into Josef. His mood was now holiday-like, his spirits high. He was extremely pleased that his book was being received so warmly and even enthusiastically, both by his close friends and *landsleit*, and in the general circles of the newly-arrived Jewish refugees.

The reactions to the book were varied. A small number of readers commented that it was true that Josef had honestly and faithfully imparted the history of his childhood, youth and his life subsequently as a public activist in the ranks of the Jewish workers in Poland of old. But there had been no need for him to make public the romantic tussles in his private life.

The larger part of the readers, however, were amazed at his courage in actually daring to recount his intimate experiences, by which he showed that, oftentimes, one’s personal life goes hand-in-hand with the communal one, and is an expression thereof. Josef had shown that every individual is under the sway of the desires and dreams that nature instils in man.

Josef was pleased with these opinions voiced by friends and readers regarding his book. He felt that, with the publication of his book, his life had gained more sense. No, his years and the experiences and events he had lived through, which he described in his book, had not been in vain. The story of his life redeemed not only himself, but also those closest to him and his distant friends.

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In his free hours, Josef often enters the cafeteria next to the *Forverts* building on East Broadway, which is where the Yiddish writers, cultural activists and teachers meet during meals, and sit for hours on end discussing literary and cultural matters. Oftentimes, they come here just to see each other in the big New York, which has scattered them across the various distant boroughs of this global city. This cafeteria is the rendezvous point, which has taken

the place of the former Café Royale on Second Avenue, for which more than one Yiddish writer yearns intensely in his hours of loneliness.

Josef enjoys gazing at the cafeteria wall. It is decorated with paintings by the deceased Jewish painter “Lola” [Leon Israel] who, on this wall, immortalised, with his talent, the bygone Jewish East Side. Looking at the wall, one is reminded of the old lifestyle in New York’s Jewish past. For more than one of the local Yiddish writers, this wall constitutes a symbolic reminder, reminding each one of them of their creative years, when they believed in the future of Yiddish and Yiddish literature.

At the small tables in the cafeteria, different issues of the day are discussed in a lively manner. They also get all steamed up over literature, reviews, and the state of the current-day Yiddish literature, its books and its writers. The nature of Jewish bohemianism, with its sensitivity and jealousy from one to another, often reaches the point of cynicism. People speak scathingly to one another and [also] speak ill of those who happen not to be in the cafeteria. People praise one another and in that person’s absence. They harbour very different opinions regarding the one whom they had earlier personally complimented.

Josef often sits wordlessly, listening to all these conversations, both the straightforward and the opposite - the insincere talks. And, just like all the other cultural activists who show themselves here after the various meetings in the *Forverts* building,

Josef thinks, “What will happen down the line, in ten or twenty years from now, when many of us will no longer be here? Who will take the place of all these poets, prose writers, critics, journalists and providers of culture?”

With great respect— and despite the frequent half-cynical conversations he heard from the poets – in his heart, Josef bore a great affection to the majority of the Yiddish writers, and to this unique and interesting cafeteria setting in general. Oftentimes, Josef would sit to one side just looking at these bohemian people, in order not to lose his affection and respect for his beloved wordsmiths. Josef wished primarily to see them in his mind, with the reverential awe he had always felt towards the Yiddish writer - from Warsaw to New York - through their works, as they were revealed to him at the time when he had read them.

With all his strength, he wished to avoid seeing his beloved writers in their weekday, day-to-day, petty talks of jealousy and hatred from one to the other. He deemed this, too, to be a manifestation of the times - of the downhill descent, the harsh battle of Yiddish and the insufficient importance of Yiddish in current days. The fear of tomorrow envelops everyone, resulting in the cynicism and the bitter, scathing words from one to the other.

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When the book was published, Josef sent the first copies to his closest friends with fitting dedications. He was eager to hear their opinion of the book.

In the coming weeks, Josef's book was, in fact, the theme of the day amongst his acquaintances and friends, with whom he had the opportunity of sitting at the small tables in the cafeteria.

One of these, a respected friend of Josef's, was the recognised and talented Yiddish writer, Icchok³. Josef thought very highly of Icchok's talents as a belletrist. In his opinion, had Yiddish literature possessed only his friend, just Icchok, it would also already have earned the title of literature. Of late, Josef had occasionally enjoyed long conversations with this Yiddish writer on literature, art and also on social issues.

On more than one occasion, Josef confided in Icchok regarding his personal experiences, in the knowledge that this could someday actually serve him as psychological material for the heroes in his creations. In one of their last meetings at the cafeteria, the following conversation developed between the writer Icchok and Josef on the topic of the latter's book:

"Josef, you wrote this book during the times when the Jewish state was established. Why is it that you failed to share your emotions on such a momentous event in the two-thousand-year-old history of the Jewish people?"

"You're right", Josef replied, "but I did that intentionally. I, myself, am a man of the people - one of millions of Jews, who did not immerse themselves too deeply in the distant past. I have always lived in the present. I have always believed that with the implementation of socialism, which was my profound conviction, the [situation of the] Jews - scattered and spread throughout the globe - would also be set aright. As a Jew, I also rejoiced in the rise of the Jewish state. But, along with the joy, I also sensed a certain fear - the fear that this state might bring new complications and new troubles to the Jews everywhere throughout the Diaspora".

This dialogue between Josef and Icchok continued for days, weeks and months, with everything revolving around the question of "the State of Israel and the Diaspora". Josef continuously explained himself to Icchok, justifying the fact that the State of Israel is not mentioned in his book. And the more Josef explained himself, the more he felt that, in essence, Icchok was right after all.

Nevertheless, it is not out of mere indifference and alienation that Josef avoided mentioning the State of Israel - the great miracle of creating the Jewish state. Personally, he also felt the fear of the hatred on part of the non-Jews and the indifference to Jews, even on part of the democratic countries who, during the years of destruction, did not open wide the doors of their countries to their tortured Jewish brethren, the Surviving Remnant, but instead of that threw them a "present" - an independent country for Jews, atop a raging volcano of Arabic nations, while they, the Arabs, are opposed to the Jews establishing their state there.

Josef feared lest this "gift" be spattered with the blood of the survivors surging there, to the newly-created Jewish country. In his heart, however, Josef had a feeling that a new page of Jewish history had begun in the life of the Jewish people. From day to day, Josef took more and more interest in this newly-created Jewish state.

³ [TN: We can only speculate, but this would seem a likely allusion to the famous Icchok Warszawski, aka Isaac Bashevis Singer, who is mentioned above in the Introduction.]

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Josef now had one desire - to live for himself and with himself, to be at home in the evening after work at the office, to read a book, listen to music, and live out the years he was yet destined to live peacefully and tranquilly, in a spiritual manner.

But a force, an inner need, drove him, once more, to think not only of himself, but also of the outside world. Once more, the thoughts raced in his mind. Once more, his perpetual musings regarding good and evil returned to him - and thus pondering the years following the destruction, he was once more reminded of his closest ones overseas, who had not managed to save themselves from the claws of the Nazi destroyers, who annihilated millions of innocent people, including his nearest and dearest, brothers and sisters, friends and comrades, together with whom he, Josef, had spent time, lived and fought during the best years of his life in the city of Warta.

Warta - once again, the city of his youth appeared before his eyes. And Josef felt that the rich historical past had not yet been fully told, and the life of his Jewish brothers and sisters had not yet been fully commemorated. Therefore, Josef decided that a second part to the already-published first book on his hometown needed to be printed, thereby erecting an even worthier monument to a city with Jews, who went up in flames and smoke, thus reviving, through historical images and memoirs, the life of his old home, which was a part of his own existence.

Josef spoke to his closest friends in New York and in other cities in America. He appealed to them that another book of this type be published, and his words had an effect on his friends. The minimum funds were raised to that end, and the book - the second part of the first book - was published, making a strong impression in the Jewish literary-social world, with the historical treatises, articles and memoirs that are to be found in this book.

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Days come, when the press, the daily newspapers, deliver evil tidings to humanity. The papers continuously write about a nuclear world war, which seems unavoidable - unless a miracle happens! The spectre of this war - the fear that the world will be destroyed along with all the human beings on the planet, Heaven forbid - originates in the Kremlin in Moscow. They, the rulers of Soviet Russia, are constantly overtaking America with the newest implements of destruction, and they - those who were meant to bring happiness to mankind - are continually threatening the world with obliteration.

More than anything, Josef is immersed in thoughts regarding his Jewish brethren in the Soviet "paradise". Josef is unable to comprehend the source of such hatred and malice to Jews, their life and their culture. Josef continually asks himself, "How can it be that those who preach honesty and justice - the country that ostensibly presents itself as the friend of all wronged

and oppressed peoples - have murdered dozens of Jewish writers, teachers and cultural activists, thus erasing and wiping out the Jewish alphabet in the land of Socialism? The current rulers cast the blame on Stalin. But they, Stalin's successors, are now upholding his disgraceful decree - away with Jewish culture, away with Yiddish and also Hebrew, to the length and breadth of Soviet Russia!

Also, the State of Israel's dealings with the government of West Germany did not cease to trouble Josef. In his opinion and that of dozens and hundreds like him, the State of Israel was not doing the right thing. *"Remember what Amalek did unto thee!"* [Deuteronomy 25:17]. How could one forget what the Germans did to the Jews and to humanity in general? How could one make peace with a nation with so many sins behind it? How could Jews - twenty years after the horrific catastrophe - have dealings with that nation of murderers and sell it armaments? The tears of the victims have not dried yet, the wounds are still open.

God of revenge, have mercy on us!

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Josef felt Icchok was a friend, whom he could trust with his intimate experiences, feelings of remorse and the troubled mood that was oppressing his soul and seeking a release through speech. Perhaps it would alleviate him to some extent and the following conversation was woven between them:

Josef:

"Yes, Icchok, for a long while now, I've been wanting to talk to you a little about my own life. I wish to tell you, as a good friend, about myself and my first meetings with Gołda. You already know a little about my marriage to her from my book. You're the only person, Icchok, before whom I wish to unburden my heart.

"You are already familiar with my previous life in Poland, prior to my coming here from across the ocean. You already know, from my book, more or less what my feelings [as regards Gołda] were in those days, and I also remember telling you about it a while back. I told you that I felt like even more than a father at the time. Yes - I mean to say that I could've been Gołda's father, instead of her husband.

"You looked at me in astonishment for having come clean and spoken openly. You wished me good luck in the daring step I had taken. I remember your words - 'It will be alright, all will be well'.

"But I saw a hidden, sarcastic smile on your face. In your heart, you wished me the best. But I had a feeling that, in your mind, you thought otherwise. I remember well the look in your eyes, when I told you that should someone to come to me and ask me whether a middle-aged man should marry a woman many years younger than himself, I, Josef, would have replied that it wouldn't do - such a marriage cannot be good either for the man or the wife. Your

features expressed reproach. You looked at me wordlessly, as if saying, 'You've got good advice for others - but what about yourself, Josef, and your own hypocritical decision?'

"But a few years went by. My life with Gołda had its ups and downs, but we remained firmly in our nest. There were days of spring and autumn, as in the life of any family. But now I'm tormented by great feelings of self-reproach - I feel guilty. This guilty feeling torments me very strongly. Did I actually have the right to take a decade, and perhaps even more than a decade, of a young person's life? After all, Gołda could have found a soulmate her own age, allowing her to see a future for herself in life.

"And, as regards providing her financially for the future, that is something I can hardly hope for. So, what will she do tomorrow, once I'm no longer here? Before me, I see a picture - a widow, for the second time, in her middle age. The first time, as a victim of the general, enormous tragedy. Don't forget, Icchok, that the years I'm living already approach what people call 'the gifted years'. And Gołda's future becomes ever darker and darker."

Icchok:

"Yes, Josef, you're sincere. You're doing some interesting soul-searching, which is the true introspection only an honest man can do with himself. I understand you well. Do you realise, that had Gołda been aware of your feelings of guilt, it would have made her even fonder of you? Have you ever spoken to Gołda regarding this matter?"

Josef:

"No, Icchok, she doesn't know a thing about it and I avoid touching the subject. I occasionally throw out a word, as if in hint, but we never come to a serious conversation on these matters. Even more than that, when Gołda is good to me and shows her more tender feelings - and there are many such moments - I'm angered at myself. Then I do everything to make these tender moments pass as quickly as possible. Gołda's warmth towards me brings me both joy and anguish. Why should I let myself remind her of that which may disrupt her future happiness in life?"

Icchok:

"Yes, you may be right. Only a man with 'God in his heart' can think in such a manner. But that is man's destiny. Fate doesn't lie in our hands. Our whole life is a chain of mysterious and fatal events."

Josef:

"Tell me, Icchok, why shouldn't man, with his intelligence, guide his own destiny? Wouldn't it be better for Gołda to find a man now, with whom she could bind her future to come?"

Icchok:

“Things are good for her now. Why should she think about tomorrow? I still don’t know, my dear Josef, what you would say if Gołda were now to fall in love with a young man and decided to leave you. How would you react to that?”

Josef:

“That, you see, is my current concern. I’ve already thought about it more than once. It would certainly pain me. But, at the same time, I would be pleased. The mood in my soul would feel lighter. The feeling of a father, who makes provisions for the happiness of his child, whom he wishes to support – this feeling would now return to me, and I would suppress in me the feelings of a husband.”

Ichok:

“Well, yes – I do understand you. But were this to happen, Heaven forbid, what would you do with yourself in your loneliness - that loneliness which tormented you for so many years? Have you thought about that?”

Josef:

“But my life isn’t whole now. I am the child of simple folk. I have dedicated half my life to the common good, to the suffering masses of my people, to the victims of dark Nazism. Now, I live in days when fear hangs over humanity. This fear is that the world, the lives of millions of people, could be destroyed in the blink of an eye. Why shouldn’t I continue devoting my life to my Jewish brethren everywhere? Why shouldn’t I, for as long as we are all destined to live, dedicate the few years left to me to the welfare of my people?”

“The wrangle between East and West, between dictatorship and democracy, has elevated man to a level that he can now reach the most distant spheres - the heavens are becoming nearer for man to reach. Borders are erased, the world has become smaller.

“The dispersed Jewish people carried the ideals of our prophets all over the globe. It was these very ideals, along with their bearers - the Jewish people - that they wished to wipe off the face of the earth. But this rich spiritual force, the ideas of the prophets, prevailed after all. The Surviving Remnant of the people of the prophets was carried over to its historical land, and the State of Israel was created. We have become an equal nation among nations.

“The State of Israel currently sits along with all nations at the same UN table, and must also play the game. It must gird its loins and learn the art of conducting warfare. That is the world in which we live. And we, the Jews - the children of the prophets, who preached peace - are now forced to take part in this ‘game’, and we must live with the strength of being able to beat back our enemy

“That said, dear Ichok, I believe that it is not with physical prowess that humanity and we, the Jews among the people of the world, will be redeemed. For the time being, enough Jews - the majority of our people - are still living outside the borders of the Jewish state. It is still a long way off before the majority of the Jews live in the State of Israel!

Therefore, we, worldwide Jewry, must be the keepers of the ideal which the prophets preached - the ideal of everlasting peace! This will be, and will always remain, our greatest strength. If we lose this ideal - the spiritual legacy of the prophets, this powerful weapon - we are lost forever.

“And I, therefore, actually think that my place is there, in the State of Israel, where I shall live out my last years amidst the ranks of the ideological minority - a small group for now, whose ideal is a ‘*ner*’ [Heb. candle], a light which will not be extinguished - the light that burns in the hearts of those who wish only peace with all peoples, peace with the neighbours of the Jewish state, as well as with all others. And it is only these ideas that can still save the world from going under.”

lcchok:

“I see you’ve come to say goodbye to me. You’re not travelling today or tomorrow, but I sense your decision - like all the decisions you make - will be carried out. Therefore, I wish you success, and may the small group which bears in its heart the ideals of the prophets grow and grow, and turn from a minority to a majority everywhere - in Israel and in all parts of the globe.”⁴

New York, 1960

⁴ [TN: According to the obituary in the “Forverts” of 5th June 1972, Rafal Federman passed away in Flushing, NYC, on 3rd June 1972. This article also reveals the true names of his wife and brother-in-law (Golda and Mordche in the book): Genia and Motl Berkowicz.]

