**CONTENTS**

1. **Smash**
   On hardbat ping-pong

8. **Me, U, Baku, Quba**
   How a tiny enclave of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan produced some of the former Soviet world’s richest men

19. **A Problem With the Sun**
   “It’s not yet morning”

27. **Mother Tongue**
   Searing language, with God’s help

31. **David Blaine Goes Up and Up and Up to Heaven**
   Can the great illusionist make suffering, anxiety, and death disappear?

38. **The Idol and the Mosque**
   Hindu nationalist recreate India in their own image

48. **Solomon’s Island**
   On the hunt for the ruins of Solomon’s Temple in the South Pacific

67. **The Happiest Place on Earth**
   A visit to Switzerland reveals the coming age of techno-Calvinism

84. **Cities of Ice**
   A dispatch from frozen Harbin, where Jews once flourished—and melted away

93. **The Afterlife**
   Alexander ‘Sasha’ Pechersky led a successful prisoner revolt at the Sobibor death camp

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**SPORTS**

**Smash**

The Booker Prize winner profiles Hardbat ping-pong champ Marty Reisman, who never lost his taste for winning

BY HOWARD JACOBSON

Howard Jacobson was a ranked junior table tennis player in England. He is also the acclaimed author of, among other works, Kalooki Nights and The Finkler Question, which won the Man Booker Prize.

As he describes in his Tablet Magazine interview, Jacobson’s many years “standing at the table” at youth clubs and basements in his native Manchester—and the foibles of its working-class Jewish inhabitants—became the material for his 1999 novel about a ping-pong aficionado, The Mighty Walzer. His research for that novel also brought him in contact with the great American champion Marty Reisman.

Jacobson’s 1999 profile of then-69-year-old Reisman—nearly 40 years after his last U.S. men’s singles championship—appeared in Table Tennis News, the now-defunct publication of the English Table Tennis Association. This represented the first U.S. publication of the piece.

The big question for those of us jaded with the modern game of ping-pong—the oof-plock, oof-plock of devious sponge, no rally lasting longer than the cramped spin serve, the dabbed return, and the silent kill—was whether the great Marty Reisman, just one gray hair short of 70 but still refusing the rest owing to old age, was far enough advanced on his comeback trail to lift another U.S. Open Hardbat title.

Hardbat? The antiquated three or five ply wooden paddle covered with rubber pimples. Elegant and audible. Kerplock-plock.

The smart money was saying no. “The guy’s driving me fucking nuts ringing me up every hour of the day telling me how well he’s playing,” Tim Boggan confided to me on the first morning of the Open in Fort Lauderdale. “But he’s living in a fool’s paradise. Sure, he’s practising, but against the same opponent. Steve Berger. Always Steve Berger. He isn’t tournament-hardened. My heart says yes. But he’s got no chance.” You listen to Tim Boggan. Himself one of the
game’s old hardbat lions, he is American ping-pong’s most impassioned historian, a one-time English professor at Long Island University whose specialty was Romantic and Victorian poetry but whose true love was always table tennis; a grizzled, exasperated man with an icy beard, dreaming thwarted dreams, another mariner chasing the gleaming margins of the untraveled world. So you listen to what Tim Boggan’s heart says, as well.

But then whose heart doesn’t say yes to Marty? He is the fatal Odysseus you have to follow beyond the sunset. Succeed or fail, just one more voyage. Opinions differ as to whether Marty Reisman was America’s greatest ping-pong player ever, but he was certainly its boldest adventurer, lifting the prestigious British Open title when he was only 19, enlivening a doleful postwar European pingpong community with Lower East Side effrontery, an extrovert belligerent with one of the loveliest and most lethal forehands you could hope to see, a natural who seemed to be inventing the game anew every time he played it. And now here he is, over half a century since he first became United States National Junior Champion, wanting another shot at another title. Of course the heart says yes.

Attend to Reisman himself and it’s in the bag. I too have been in receipt of some of those phone calls that have been driving Tim Boggan nuts. “Howard, I just gotta tell you my table tennis has been super great stuff recently,” he told me when I rang him from London a week before the Open. “I’ve gone to a new plateau. I’ve tapped in to a vast reservoir of talent. I’ve zeroed in. New strokes are evolving. I’m better than I’ve ever been. I feel my life is just getting started.” The ravings of a geriatric lunatic? Well, the description is his. You can’t tell Marty Reisman anything about himself he doesn’t know already. But when he shows up at the Convention Center, indifferent to the oof-plocking in progress everywhere in the antiseptic hall, an ostrich in a bookie’s cap, he is still the braggart. “My game is elevated to such a level,” he says before we’ve even shaken hands, “I’ve completely discouraged Steve. I slaughtered him last week.

I have him in my back pocket now.” Tim Boggan’s words of earlier in the day ding in my head: “Steve Berger. Always Steve Berger.” Is Marty basing his estimation of his form entirely on the thrashing he gives his only sparring partner, a lively player but not the toughest opposition in the world? That’s if he is thrashing him at all—because that too has to be weighed in the balance: the Reisman hyperbole. Either way, are reality and Marty on any sort of speaking terms at present?

There is an air of other-worldly confidence about him. “I’ll tell you, Howard, I’m playing strokes I didn’t know I had,” he says. He is talking about digging into the mother lode of his experience and rejoicing that what he seeks abides there yet. This overblown serenity may partly be because the singles event isn’t until tomorrow. For the moment he has only the doubles to think about. And he isn’t thinking too hard about that. His doubles partner, of course, is Steve Berger. When a message arrives saying that Steve has missed his plane and will not be able to compete, the landscape of Reisman’s countenance undergoes an extraordinary transformation. He looks beatified suddenly, as though chosen to be the site of God’s refulgence. Is the On-High whispering promises to him? Is Steve’s not coming a sign? “I’m not gonna let that wipe me out,” he says. “I got bigger fish to fry.” I express surprise that he isn’t even minimally disappointed. A game of doubles is a handy workout, after all. A nice loosener. But there is no dimming his radiance. “I hate sharing the glory,” he laughs. Except that it isn’t a joke— isn’t only a joke.

So what is it, then?

Marty wasn’t joking when I first met him at the Ninth World Veterans Table Tennis Championships in Manchester 12 months ago. He wore a wild beard then and looked unaccustomed, unsure whether he’d come to the right place and what sort of reputation preceded him, like a leftover Beat poet about to read to a bunch of contemporary kindergarten kids in a non-English speaking country. He was carrying a shoulder-bag containing press-clippings going back 50 years. Everything you needed to know about Reisman, dated and filed, in multiple copies, there on his person. A walking data base of the self. Before I’d known him 10 minutes I was in possession of a hundred sheets of photocopied magazine and newsprint, all celebrating—more or less—his genius. He needn’t have tried so hard; there was already great excitement about his presence. Those who travel the world playing veterans ping-pong have long memories, and they all remembered Marty Reisman with the sort of sweet remembrance people reserve for the summers of their early youth. He belonged to the Golden Age of table tennis, when players resembled philosophers of linguistics and prided themselves on the elegance, variety and course the sagacity of their strokes.

Not everyone recognized him immediately. You’re not looking at other people much when you’re battling arthritis and want nothing else on earth but to take a ping-pong trophy home to Vilnius to show your grandchildren’s grandchildren. But when he began to play, competitors around him stopped to watch, first one table, then another, until finally all 100 tables were quiet, and even the most sponge-committed of the veterans—oldsters with sprung sponge mattresses in their hands, who could stamp-serv and twist themselves around the ball in the requisite Quasimodo manner of the young—had to admit that table tennis played by a master of the old game was a beautiful sight to behold. And more than that, brought back to us why players and non-players alike had once been excited by it, and no longer were.

For table tennis, in the West, is in crisis. No one watches. Television doesn’t want it because the ball travels too quickly, because points are over too soon, and because there are no charismatic personalities in the game. Although it embarrasses people to put it this way, table tennis has also become too Asianized for Western taste. First it was the Japanese, now it is the Chinese who are invincible. They are wonderfully athletic players whose speed around the table is breathtaking. But they play as though there is no room to play. They have reduced the confines of the game to a nutshell. And they play as though the
world is about to end: not just winning the point but winning it immediately. So gone from the Asianized ping-pong of today are the slow, probing, witty cat-and-mouse encounters between the great lugubrious European players of the thirties and forties, lovers of labyrinthine prose and existential narrative, readers of the secrets of another's souls—what Marty calls the “dialogue” of ping-pong, the classical drama that has a beginning, a middle, and a resolution. Once upon a time they turned up in their thousands to watch attrition table tennis, in which a single point could last an hour. In excess of 5,000 smoking spectators saw Reisman beat Viktor Barna through a tobacco mist in the 1949 British Open staged at Wembley. At this year’s equivalent tournament, held in Hopton-on-Sea (Hopton-on-Sea!—not even the English know where that is), just about the only spectator was me. And it’s me again, solus, at Fort Lauderdale. And I’m only here to write a lament for the game.

In one sense, the lightning-quick and deadly-silent ping-pong of the modern sponge era is only fulfilling an impulse buried deep in the game’s nature. Ping-pong is for the diffident. It seeks solitude. It is a touchy, thin-skinned person’s pastime. Gossima, it was once called—something insubstantial as a moth’s wing. A good name for a condom you don’t notice you’re wearing. Otherwise whiff waff—blow on it and it’s gone. It was already suffering a crisis of self-confidence when I started playing it seriously in the north of England in the early fifties, a tissue-paper boy drawn to the introspection of the game and the easily bruised natures of its devotees. There was something never fully assured at every level of ping-pong, from the agonies of individual players, embarrassed equally by their own incompetence and the smallness of the arena in which it showed, to the defeatism of administrators, who squabbled ineffectively over rules and equipment and finally allowed every last spectator to drift away, bored by the absence of plot and the lack of adventurism. Anyone in advertising could have told ping-pong it had an image problem. It was perceived to be inglorious. Hence the importance of Marty Reisman, hustler and jester, who more than any other player made a public gift of his genius, refusing to distinguish between the table and the stage. Why, in that famous 1949 final at Wembley, he not only returned Barna’s first serve behind his back but retrieved balls as though he were Nijinsky, with a leap and a pirouette. For a ping-pong masochist like me, playing in a shadowland of shame, belittled by the very sport I loved, and playing it precisely in order to be belittled, Marty Reisman offered a salvation of the sort many Englishmen before me have found in Americans. The salvation of magniloquence. Marty aggrandized what he did. He made a hero not a coward of himself. And for me he turned ping-pong from doggerel to epic. These are the grounds on which I, like many others who cannot decide whether they love him or just suffer him, forgive the omnivorosity, and sometimes even the callousness (poor Steve!) of his triumphalism. The comedian Jackie Mason, who grew up poor with Marty, makes no bones about the self-obsession. “Marty’s a tremendous egomaniac,” he told me, “but a loveable egomaniac. He can’t get over the fact that he’s a sensational player. He’s still intrigued with himself after 47 years. Like a kid with a new toy. But I never saw him do a bad thing to anybody in his life. If being obsessed with yourself because you’re good at ping-pong is the worst thing you ever do—is that so terrible?”

Besides which, the bragadocio isn’t quite what it appears. In the end, the person who is meant to be persuaded by Marty is Marty. What Reisman is riding is the come-back trail to himself.

It’s a journey he has been on all his life. Back he has had to come, again and again, from one ping-pong fiasco or catastrophe after another—dust ups with the authorities, suspensions, inexplicable slumps in form, emotional collapses, to say nothing of that cold-hearted passage of time that has put to bed most other athletes his age. Now it’s an operation on his playing arm he’s recovering from. In a little Japanese restaurant, where he had taken me to meet his wife Yoshiko, he showed me the cicatrice—a single, silvery, horizontal stigma marking the place of the surgeon’s intervention. When was that, I wondered. He turned to his wife: “The date of my operation, Yoshiko?” Not a fraction of a second’s hesitation. “November the 23rd, 1998,” she said. A good wife bears the dates of her husband’s operations like battle scars. Especially a Japanese wife, whose lineage is undiluted Samurai. Though I have to say that as she painted word-pictures with her hands in the spaces between Marty’s ruminations on his form, it was the wives of novelists she most reminded me of, and the wives of quite a few poets I could think of as well. She had that grand, devotedly obliterated look that comes with living in the company of distinguished self-absorption.

Marty’s operation was for a floating tendon. Now it’s back where it’s meant to be, attached with two titanium screws. And now Marty’s almost back where he’s meant to be as well. “When my game kicked in after my operation,” he told me, “I realized what a rare skill I had. I woke up in the morning and I started to cry with pure joy.” Another question for Yoshiko: “You remember when I came home and I told you ‘It’s back!’” Oh yes, she remembered. I didn’t doubt she remembered the very hour of the very day.

But I was in danger of giving into craven discipleship myself that evening.

“The lightning-quick and deadly-silent ping-pong of the modern sponge era is only fulfilling an impulse buried deep in the game’s nature.”
Earlier in the day Marty had worked me over for several hours at the Westside Billiards and Table Tennis Club, corner of 50th and 11th. As a boy I’d read about the new aggressive game that was exploding out of America. Dick Miles and Marty Reisman—they were the names to conjure with. Dick Miles the more defensive of the two, but both of them capable of taking the ball earlier than any other player in the history of the game, and generating extraordinary pace, not to say variations of pace, by infinitesimally subtle changes in racket-head velocity. Who was faster? Miles shows up occasionally at the Westside to renew the rivalry; use the phrase “best forehand in the world” in their hearing and each will look up, assuming you’re talking about him. Marty reckons there was always too much preliminary flourish around Dick’s forehand for it to have been the equal of his; Dick, for his part, opens his chestnut brown eyes, and says nothing. Anyway, whether Marty’s was the best or the second best, there I was facing it. Partly, I think, because of the smallness of the playing area, partly because power is generated close to the body and is therefore suggestive of intimacy, there can be an imperious wit about great attacking shots in table tennis. And Marty’s forehand is over and above witty, not only by virtue of its classical follow-through—the bat cleaving the air like a sword that has unseamed you from the nave to the ends. Put his feet up. But then Miles was always a more reclusive figure, isn’t driven as Reisman is, and doesn’t appear ever to have felt what Reisman feels—that a world title was once stolen from his grasp. Another piece of ping-pong news kept us excited at about the time Dick Miles and Marty Reisman were making a name for themselves: sponge. It was sponge that removed the two New Yorkers from the front page. And it was sponge that broke Marty Reisman’s heart.

Marty is dressed for the kill in Fort Lauderdale, like no other player in the history of table tennis. A black and white cap, suggestive of Las Vegas. A silky black shirt. Maroon pants and matching sneakers. It turns out that the sneakers are new and too tight for him, but it is important he looks color-coordinated at the table. Even the shoe laces don’t count the notes out one by one but it is important he looks as good as possible. Marty is wearing his own brand of sneakers. His logo has his slippery silhouette, bent at the knee to retrieve a low-down ball, forming the S of Reisman. He is no longer as sinuous now as he was, but in motion he still makes me think of Kokopelli, the mythic Indian Dionysus you find graffito’d on rocks all over New Mexico and Arizona. Call him Kokopelli, Coyote, Reynard the Fox: every culture throws up its own trickster. Ping-pong has Marty Reisman, sacred by virtue of his extravagant contortions, his vagabondism, and his bravado.

To this extent he has been a victim of his own magic: It hasn’t always been necessary that he actually win. In ping-pong, as in all sports, it is often the journeyman who triumphs, the calculator, the percentage player, the grubbing chiseller. There is a beauty and extravagance of stroke that befits only the loser, which only the loser has the leisurely grace to indulge. In Reisman’s case there was an emotional pay-off, in spectator affection, as a consequence of the compact he made—however we are to understand it—with defeat. So that when his great disillusionment with competitive table tennis set in he was able to play the fool and get away with it. People who know nothing of his astounding promise, of the excitement he generated in other parts of the world, remember him vaguely as someone who hustled for a living, toured with the Harlem Globetrotters, could make the balls sing “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” could hit any ordinary mortal off the table with a bar stool, could spot you 20 points and still beat you with the heel of his shoe or the lens of his spectacles. Marty Reisman? Isn’t he that guy who taught a chimpanzee how to play ping-pong?

In this way does America remember its heroes.

But in this way, too, did one of America’s heroes choose to be remembered.

He was in trouble from the very beginning of his career. Look at photographs of him as a horse-faced teen-ager in chess-player spectacles and you’d think butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. But at 15 he was already being escorted out of a national tournament in Detroit—by uniformed cops, is how he likes to tell it—for trying to lay a bet of $500 on himself. First lesson if you’re going to be a sportsman and a gambler—don’t mistake the head of the association for your bookmaker. And certainly don’t count the notes out one by one into his palm. Graham Steenhoven became famous for leading the American
Beach Reads

From Beginning to See the Light

Don’t look back (Idi Amin may be gaining on you), but the seventies are behind us. Sometime during 1976 they just faded out. Historians will recall the seventies as nasty and brutish, but mercifully short. The eighties, contrary to a lot of people’s gloomy expectations, are going to be different. Not fun and games, by any means, but an active, energetic decade that we can really live in, not just live through.

How do I know? Well, to explain I have to try to convey what life has been like these many months in occupied New York. The city, as you probably know—some of you may even care—is broke. We are being governed by a junta of bankers who do not look kindly on such decadent luxuries as police and fire protection, public education, and a functioning transit system. Without massive federal aid, which does not appear to be forthcoming, our economic future looks pretty grim. Furthermore, the sludge that hit Long Island’s beaches last summer is undoubtedly lurking out there ready to strike again. And the weather has been terrible. In short, New Yorkers have every reason to be totally demoralized.

—Ellen Willis

“ping-pong diplomacy” team to China. But maybe his most significant contribution to American table tennis was looking like a boogie and putting Marty Reisman on the wrong side of the law. Another veteran player, Freddie Borges, told me how he found Reisman in tears outside the tournament venue, escorted him back in and raised merry hell to get him reinstated. “Gambling?—ha!” Freddie told me. Everyone in ping-pong was betting then. There was no other way to turn a buck. The thing Reisman had against him, in a game that was administered from the Midwest, was that he was a smart kid from New York. A smart Jewish kid from New York. Don’t forget, Borges reminded me, this was the time someone in the U.S. Table Tennis Association nearly got away with banning “Negros” from the game.

The $500 is probably an exaggeration. And in The Money Player, his ghosted autobiography published in 1974, Reisman says nothing about the tears. It’s more fun, on the page, to be the dude who roughed up the Establishment. In conversation, though, he doesn’t pretend that the wounds caused by his fallings-out with authority have healed. He was suspended, or simply “not picked,” as a consequence of disagreements over gambling, expenses, or just decorum, more frequently than was good for his career. He was denied the opportunity to play in all the tournaments he should have played in. Officially stood in the way of his destiny, which was to be world champion. Except it wasn’t any official who stopped him dead at the 1952 World Championships in Bombay. It was Hiroji Satoh and his magic sponge.

Hard to tell from this distance in time precisely how fancied Reisman was to become World Champion in ’52. There were certainly others in the running, not least Dick Miles, who had just won the U.S. open. But that Reisman was among the three or four players considered likely to win, that he was tipped to win it sooner or later (and that he considered himself hot favourite to win it sooner), is unarguable. He had won the English Open in style. He was U.S. doubles champion. He had the form. He had the cheek. The only thing he didn’t have was what Hiroji Satoh had.

Losing to Satoh in Bombay put Reisman in good company. Satoh swept the board. No one could handle the diabolic spins and dead floats that came off his revolutionary racket. Nor the insult of seeing this hitherto unknown player simply jabbing his bat in the direction of everything you threw at him and having the ball come back at you faster than you’d hit it. Satoh became world champion. His sponge demoralized everyone and changed ping-pong forever. But most players made their peace with it. If you had to be spongeiform to win, then spongeform you became. I remember cutting up a foam bedroll to make my first sponge bat. I doubt there was anything in the rules to have stopped me playing with the bedroll itself. An interregnum of modification and restriction followed—no sponge thicker than so thick, then no sponge which wasn’t sandwiched between rubber. Whichever way we cut it, though, we were all now little Hiroji Satohs in the making.

All except Marty. For him, the significance of Bombay was not only that he had been cheated of his title—“There I was at the height of my career and they brought in a piece of equipment that had a skill of its own”—but that ping-pong had lost its aesthetic. No longer was it beautiful. No longer was it sensuous. No longer was it a contest ordered by hearing and touch. So what was it ordered by? Well, it wasn’t ordered at all—there precisely lay Reisman’s objection. Like an 18th-century aristocrat beholding the beginnings of revolution, he stepped back aghast at the spectacle of unrule. To this day he can be comically precise about the horrible sensation of playing against sponge; “It’s like scrambled eggs out here,” he calls to me during some side-event in Fort Lauderdale, his opponent an especially unpretty and ham-fisted sponger. But his objection at the last is a societal one. It’s harmony he’s missing. Harmony and methodology and order. One word crops up again and again in Reisman’s critique of post-Satoh ping-pong: chaos.

And that, really, should have been that. To the victor the spoils. To the loser—oblivion. And although Reisman did win another U.S. title in 1960 (his one faithless shmooze with sponge), oblivion, as far as tournament table tennis was concerned, was where he was heading. He opened his own ping-pong parlour on 96th Street. Played for money. Turned up as a ping-pong clown on television. Made a bit of a fool of the game which he felt had made a fool of him. Then suddenly he was back, “lured out of retirement,” as he puts it, by the reinstatement of a hardbat event at the U.S. Open in Las Vegas in 1997. Which he won. Won with dash, according to all accounts, won magnificently. The comeback kid. And having won, he was now ready to challenge the whole world. Not
just fellow 5-ply-and-rubber-pimple players, you must understand, but every hated thieving sponger out there. Roll up, roll up! At last, fired by a 40-year-old grievance, determined to prove once and for all that his pocket had been picked in 1952, he was staking his own money on a showdown with any player in the country bold enough to disarm, toss in his sponge, and slug it out with Marty, hardbat to hardbat. No fool like a resurrected fool.

It was Jimmy Butler, three times national champion, not yet 30, who took up the challenge. Romantics bet on Marty. Promptings of the heart again. More realistic punters went for Butler. Secretly, Marty’s admirers held their breath, fearing an annihilation. But there was no annihilation. Nothing like. Yes, Butler won it, won the re-match too, but the fight Reisman made of it—looking like a possible winner himself there for a while—made friends even of his detractors. Now not only was Reisman back, the old game too was recovering its glory. Top players were rumoured to be taking up the old-fashioned paddle again, if only for the fun of it. Today there is a Classic Hardbat magazine, put out by a Hardbat Committee peopled by poetical hardbat diehards, publicists and polemicians of the classical game, and at their centre, tricky as a spider, only more gar- rulous, Marty.

Outside the Convention Centre in Fort Lauderdale players are glueing up. For glues too are now part of that technology that, in Marty’s words, “covers up shortcomings in a game the way gravy covers up bad meat.” The modern ping-pong player begins his day reaffixing his rubbers to his blade, selecting from sheets of rubber, packaged like CDs: Salvo, Samba, Zenith-G, Tackiness, depending on how you like your surfaces—spinny, slippery, sticky—and how you like your pimples—in or out. You’re making decisions about speed, spin, silence. When the kids with the closed eyes hit the ball you don’t see it or hear it. Chaos.

There’s been another change to the bashful, introspective game I used to play. Now, when you win a point, you raise a fist, stamp the ground, and make a noise identical to Homer Simpson’s self-denigrating “D’oh! The difference being that your Doh! is an ejaculation of personal triumph. “Offering to make drama,” Marty mutters scathingly to me, “where there isn’t any.”

For those of us hoping for drama from Marty himself, the worry is whether he is as confident as he says he is. There is the arm to take into consideration, the double loss to Jimmy Butler, and the inadequacy of what he has the gall to describe as “rigorous four-hour training sessions” with Steve Berger. I watch him bumble through his early rounds, tentative and out of touch, complaining about the light, the space, the floors, the conditions of modern life, but always doing just enough to get through. “I’m in a struggle to the death,” I hear him saying to himself, “with someone I could once give 15 points to.” And the truth is it’s that same knowledge on the part of his opponent that allows him through. Eye to eye with the possibility of beating Marty Reisman, most opponents cave in. He is the object of an almost universal veneration. Players from all over the world cross the hall to watch him, to beg an autograph, to tell him he is their lifelong hero, the reason they took up ping-pong in the first place. One by one, seeing me with a notepad in my hand, they repeat the tribute: “This guy’s a living legend, you know.” Wanting to be certain I’ve got that, Marty says, “You hear that, Howard? A living legend. Nice, huh?”

Yeah, nice. The fear, though, is that sooner or later he is going to run up against an opponent who doesn’t give a shit for living legends. And he does. Barry Dattel from New Jersey, in the quarter-final. This is Marty’s third day of play in Fort Lauderdale. He is already out of all the any-old-surface Micky Mouse events he had entered, as befuddled and maddened by sponge as he was in 1952. But this is the big hardbat one. Beat Barry Dattel in the quarters and he meets Ty Hoff, the canny chicken-boned holder from Georgia, in the semis. That’s a match everyone has been looking forward to. When Steve Berger, who has finally arrived, learns that Marty has only Barry Dattel to knock over before he makes the last four, he makes a gesture of dismissal. “Joke city, Mar- ty!” The rest of us are not so sure. Marty hasn’t been attacking well. He’s been playing safe, pushing, trying to chisel his way through his matches. What will happen when he has to hit?

Because Marty Reisman is a living legend in Puerto Rico too, he has a leg- ioni of Puerto Rican kids cheering for him. Every time Marty gets one past
Barry Dattel, the kids cheer. But as the match progresses they have less and less to cheer about. In dribs and drabs they leave the playing area. You can feel it going Dattel’s way. It’s a petulant contest, all stops and starts and quibbles about perspiration on the ball. But that suits Dattel. He doesn’t have to do much. Just stay in there. Keep the ball in play. Let Marty make the running if he dare. Because it’s obvious now that Marty dare not. He has one of the best forehands in the world in his locker, but he won’t bring it out. Does he fear failure suddenly? For years he has been mouthing off about his hardbat prowess, throwing out challenges to the best players in the country, wagering his own money on his forehand. What if it means to make a liar of him in the end? So he keeps it under lock and key and plays pat-ball.

And loses.

A great sadness descends on the arena. Only Barry Dattel is in good spirits. Many of Marty’s supporters cannot even bear to commiserate with him. Yoko mops him down. I can tell from her expression that she doesn’t know the result. She follows him faithfully from match to match, pinning his number to his back, wiping the table—an exquisite apology for Satoh from the people of Japan—but she has never understood how the game is scored. Maybe he wants her to stay in ignorance. Maybe tonight he will tell her he has won.

To me, in stream of consciousness, he says, “Finished … that’s it … where does this leave me? … washed up … this is the worst loss of my career… career … ha! … it’s now nothing but a sham.” For the first time since he arrived in Fort Lauderdale he looks his age.

Tim Boggan comes over, wildly jubilant. He wears a gold table tennis bat stud in his ear, the ball a diamond. He blazes so furiously it is a miracle the stud is not molten. His eyes seize mine. “That’s the end of the article, huh?” he says, like a man vindicated. I am speechless. Sure, they’re all rivals, these old staggers, but can he be pleased, can he feel somehow justified, that Marty’s lost? And then I see that I have it wrong, that he is furious with Marty for proving him right about lack of match-fit-ness, for letting himself, for letting all of us, down. “There’s a big difference, Marty,” he snaps, almost pitilessly, “between playing Steve Berger every night and going into a tournament!”

But already Marty is starting his re-pair work on himself. He returns to the table he has just lost on, to inspect the net. “That’s the crap they pull in the so-called modern game,” he says. But whether he means the net is too high or too low, too loose or too tight, I cannot tell. “I was bothered by the mushiness of the ball,” he says to an anguished fan. “The conditions are terrible. You can’t do any kind of fine play out there.” Then, after another 10 minutes, to me he says, “I’ve still got a whole life in front of me.”

I sleep badly that night. This must be what sport is for: to absorb all the cruelties and injustices of life. After some sporting losses—Ali to Spinks, Rosewall to Connors at Wimbledon in ’74—I have suffered the desolation of the dying. When you recover you are stronger, but first you must lie in pain. That’s the deal. God knows how Marty is doing. Tomorrow I will fly home and think about something else. But what else does Marty have to think about?

He is there the following day for the finals of the Hardbat, looking stronger than I expected him to look. But then I was expecting Methuselah. The final is between Ty Hoff, who did in Barry Dattel in the semis, and Lily Yip, who plays for the Women’s National team with her sponge but likes to mix it with the old guys using hardbat. After a five-game thriller, Ty Hoff takes it. By general consent, this is the only final to provide excitement. Every other event climaxes in spin serve, silent kill and Doh! So it’s a win for the enthusiasts of hardbat, whoever they support.

I am pleased that Marty is able to be generous about the match and leave himself out of it. He does have one demur, though. There is hardbat and hardbat. The only pimpled rubber that should really be allowed is made by Leyland in Britain. He doesn’t know what Ty Hoff and Lily Yip are using, but it definitely isn’t Leyland. I become short-tempered hearing this. Enough is enough. It seems to me it’s one thing wishing sponge away, but that the hardbat movement will make a fool of itself if it fetishizes a single product used at one particular moment in the history of the game. Not all change is beneficial, but no change is paralysis. Marty isn’t swayed by this. He hasn’t yet finished hunting down illegal substances. The long day wanes, but still he is pursuing order. A little later I see him deep in conference with Ty Hoff, inspecting Ty’s bat and comparing it with his own. At the dinner celebrating his defeat of Boris Spassky, Bobby Fischer tried to get his opponent to run through some of their games on a pocket chess set he was carrying. The obsessed never want it to be over. But Fischer at least was obsessing from a position of strength. Marty is talking his way back into contention as a loser. Why would Ty buy into this? Then I hear that Marty has issued another of his challenges—roll up! roll up!—and that Ty Hoff, 1999 U.S. hardbat champion for only two hours, has accepted it. He will play Marty using one of Marty’s Leyland spares.

I have a plane to sanity to catch, challenge or no challenge. I am, though, able to stay just long enough to take in the first game, to watch Marty drilling majestic forehands, finding angles that don’t exist, driving Ty Hoff further and further back from the table, and yes, yes, winning. He is as limber as a teenager. He is leaping like Nijinsky again, and doing pirouettes. And all at once I realize I have been nursing too dark and heroical a conception of him. He isn’t Lear. He isn’t Ulysses. He is Wilkins Micawber, never to be cast down for long.

Before fortune has time to redistribute her favours once more, I wave goodbye. The last I see of him, Marty is ahead ten games to four,TY 0, MARTY 2. He shows no signs of slowing down. “I was bothered by the mushiness of the ball,” he says to an anguished fan. “The conditions are terrible. You can’t do any kind of fine play out there.” Then, after another 10 minutes, to me he says, “I’ve still got a whole life in front of me.”

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Me, U, Baku, Quba

How a tiny enclave of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan produced some of the former Soviet world’s richest men

BY JOSHUA COHEN

ne thing about dictatorships, they’re either very expensive or very cheap to fly to. There’s no such thing as a mid-range regime: Extremities charge extremities. I know a guy, it cost him $4,600 just to get to North Korea (Newark-Beijing-Dandong, and then across the DPRK border in a Jeep). I know another guy, it cost him $2,800 just to get to Laos (Newark-Tokyo-Bangkok-Vientiane). I flew non-stop from JFK to Baku, Azerbaijan, visa included, for all of $500. The plane was a brand-new Airbus A340; the pilots were military-grade, and the senior or just older pilot wore medals on his chest that resembled poker-chips: two black, one yellow, which at Trump casinos, back when there were Trump casinos, would’ve been redeemable for $1,200.

The flight attendants, uniformed in sky-gray and blood-red, were gorgeous: The men were creatic gym creatures bursting out of their shirts, the women were dripping with makeup and curvaceous, their skirts slit as high as it gets, at least in the world of Islamic female flight attendant fashion. The three exorbitant meals they served over the course of the 10-hour, 30-minute, 5,812 mile/9,353 kilometer flight were culturally specific (mutton stews and breads) and hot (very hot). The in-flight-entertainment selection was operated by individual seatback touchscreen and generous and included, alongside the standard Hollywood and Russian offerings, an impressive selection of Azeri content, all of it bearing the seal of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan. I tried to catch up on Star Wars, the prequel trilogy, in order to prepare for the upcoming release of the sequel trilogy, though by the middle of Episode II, Attack of the Clones, I’d had enough and switched to an Azeri property, but it was only in Azeri—no subtitles, no dub—and so I wasn’t able to ascertain whether the lawyer was the good guy, or the bad guy, or not a lawyer at all, and instead a slick plastic surgeon on trial for corrupting his wife.

Most of the plane was empty, with no more than two dozen other passengers, about half of whom would terminate in Baku, with the other half Israeli—Russian-Israelis, Parsim (Persian Israeli), and Teimanim (Yemeni Israelis). Leave it to the Jews to find out that AZAL, the Azerbaijani government’s official airline, or flag-carrier, had been subsidizing ticket prices from America, and so that the cheapest way to get from New York to Tel Aviv was to go through Baku and wait. I’m not sure that this subsidy policy was created for the express purpose of saving Jews money, but then neither am I sure that it was created to encourage visits by American tourists and business travelers. Instead, dictator president Ilham Aliyev just cares about being able to boast domestically that his country now has a biweekly direct flight to New York. The airport, which Aliyev is constantly renovating, as if he were intent on expanding it in tandem with the expansion of the universe, is named for his father, Heydar Aliyev, the previous dictator president. At its center is a glitzy foreign-flights terminal that resembles the Galactic Senate from Star Wars. The landing was baby-gentle; the deplaning swift; the Israelis dispersed to window shop duty-free caviar and Rolexes until their departure for Ben-Gurion. I was processed through immigration and customs, asked no questions, but photographed twice. The first person in Azerbaijan to ask me any questions was my cabdriver: What you doing here? And, What you pay?

I answered the what I doing here? with, I’m a tourist, because to say that I’d come to this majority-Muslim authoritarian country as a writer, let alone as a journalist, would be like saying I’d come to prey on your youth, or to masturbate into the Caspian. I answered the what I pay? with, How about 20 manats?—because that was the amount suggested by “Zaur J” on a msgboard on tripadvisor.com. Other posts had suggested 14, 16, 25, 30, and taking the 116 shuttlebus to the 28th of May train station for 40 qepik, which was roughly a quarter. I settled on 20, because it wasn’t my money. A bit over $12. The driver suggested 25. Which was a bit over $15.

He still hadn’t asked where we were going.

Azerbaijan is a nation bordered by threats and built atop lies. This makes it not too different from any other nation, except: To the south is Iran, to the north is Georgia and a hunk of Russian Dages-tan (which doesn’t do much to buffer the rumblings of Chechnya and Ossetia); to the west is a short border with Turkey and a long troubled ton of border shared with hated Armenia, with which Azerbaijan has been engaged in an on-and-off war over the Nagorno-Karabakh exclave since 1988; while to the east is the largest enclosed inland body of water on earth, the oil-and-natural-gas-rich Caspian, whose greatest local landlord is SOCAR (State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic), which partners with and administers contracts for the AIOC (the Azerbaijan International Operating Company), a consortium of extractors headed by BP (UK), and including—in order of declining equity—Chevron (USA), INPEX (Japan), Statoil (Norway), ExxonMobil (USA), TPAO (Turkey), ITOCHU (Japan), and ONGC Videsh (India). To make it clear, Azerbaijan is a seabound country with dwindling but still significant reserves of oil, outsized reserves of natural gas, the highest Shia population percentage in the world after Iran, an ongoing conflict with an Orthodox Christian neighbor, close-enough experience of
the Georgian/Abkhazian and Chechen Wars, a sense of Russia as representing the highest of culture, yet a sense of Putin as the lowest of thugs, bent on recapturing a toxic mashup of Soviet/Tsarist glory, and so perpetually reconfiguring the Central Asian steppes for the next Donbass, or Crimea. Dropping oil and natural gas revenues have sparked a rising interest in the previously iminical—because Sunni—Salafism blowing north from Iranian Kurdistan and south from Ciscaucasia. Over 1,500 Azerbaijani citizens are currently in Syria fighting for ISIS.

Baku, the capital, a city of approximately two million people, is a brash glum cesspit of new construction—newly stalled since the global banking crisis and again, since oil and gas have plummeted—surrounded by ruined farmland. To pass from Baku to the countryside is to pass from the twenty-first century to the nineteenth, skipping the twentieth entirely, which was such a downer anyway, everyone pretends not to notice. Throughout the country there isn’t a dominant culture, but an only-culture. Azerbaijani state power, though notionally secular, has the force of Islam and the same vertical structure: bow and scrape. The country’s best criminals are treated like businessmen, and the country’s best businessmen happen to be members of the ruling family. To get a good job, you have to have good connections. To get good connections you have to be born to a good family. To be born to a good family you have to be blessed by a good God. If you find yourself—like, say, the 7.4 million people in Azerbaijan who don’t live in Baku—unlucky enough to be excluded from this system of patronage, or nepotistic oligarchy, you’re fucked. All you can do, in your fuckedness, is put on a fake face and submit. Spend all your money on your car, or your clothes, so that you seem wealthier. Name your firstborn male child after the president or the president’s father so that he seems more employable. Have more female children, because only women can marry up. Take pride in the new pedestrian promenade, along the waterfront. In the skyscrapers you don’t work in. The malls you can’t afford to shop in. Embrace the falsehoods and lead a double life.

So, the truth of why I’d come here—if truth can be spoken, or even spoken of, in Azeri (whose word for truth, haqq, also means justice, and payment):

I was in Baku, only to get the hell out of Baku—to go to the edge of Azerbaijan and up into the Caucasus, the easternmost of the western mountains, or the westernmost of the eastern mountains, where, tectonically, Europe crashes into Asia. I was headed there to enact a submission of my own: to fall down at the Adriatic-sneakered feet of the Mountain Jews—a sect of overwhelmingly short, hairy, dark-skinned Semites—who, as craggy cloudbound slope-dwellers, seemed perfectly positioned to offer me the wisdom I was seeking, without any annoying lectures on Orientalism.

I wanted to ask these Jews—these fellow Jews—what to do: about how to handle, how personally to handle, for example, the tragedy of capitalism, as it withers into kleptocracy; or Islamic fundamentalism, and the compounding quandary that is Zionism; about how to survive as a writer, when 99% of the world doesn’t read, and when the 1% that does just reads to get offended; about how to deal with publishers, who underpay; and with editors, who overedit; with publications that cut columns and cut rates; with schools that string me along as a lecturer without insurance.

While I didn’t seriously suppose that the Mountain Jews had all the answers, I did suspect, or hope, that they themselves would be the answers. After all, they—their community—might comprise the longest-running mafia in recorded history.

Or semi-recorded—because the Mountain Jews have never written their own history, because writing is too fixed, too fixing, and surely too unremunerative. Instead, they abide in strangers’ pages, shrouded in the oral.

Among their legends are the following, which I’ll list in order from “OK, I’ll Give You the Benefit of the Doubt,” to “Definitely Didn’t Happen”:

Toward the end of the eighth century BCE, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Samaria, and deported between one and ten of its tribes—between one and ten of the so-called Lost Tribes—for resettlement in their capital, Nineveh, present-day Mosul. But the Assyrian king, Ashur, whom the Mountain Jews associate with Shalmaneser V, mentioned in II Kings, grew so enraged by the Israelites for refusing to forsake their God and for the success they had in commerce that he exiled them to the edge of the empire—to the Caucasus Mountains, where they flourished.

Toward the end of the eighth century BCE, last of the Israelite kings, attempted to gain his kingdom’s independence from Assyria and, as recorded in II Kings, stopped paying the official tribute—10 talents of gold, 1,000 talents of silver—upon Shalmaneser V’s ascension to the throne. Shalmaneser V moved to recoup his losses by imprisoning Hoshea, laying siege to Samaria, and seizing the property of between one and ten of its tribes—the property of between one and ten of the so-called Lost Tribes—whom he or his successor, Sargon II, exiled to the edge of the empire—to the Caucasus Mountains, where they flourished.

Toward the end of the eighth century BCE, under the reign of Hoshea, around 20,000 Israelites fled the destruction of their kingdom—or left to seek unimpeiled trade routes between east and west—or traveled en masse to Nineveh to post bail and free Hoshea from debtors prison, but failed—or traveled en masse to press an alliance against the Assyrians with the Egyptian King So (either Tefnakht of Sais or Osorkon IV of Tanis) but went astray. They passed through Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia before settling atop the Caucasus Mountains, where they flourished.

The more scholarly proposals of Mountain Jewish origin, the few of them there are, prove just as fascinating/unsatisfactory:

Jews came from the Israelite Kingdom to Persia ca. eighth century BCE; Persian Jews came to Greater Caucasia—the area between the Black and Caspian Seas—ca. fifth century CE. With the incursions of Goths and/or Huns from the Black Sea region, across the Pontic steppe, the Parthian and/or Sassanid Empires (third century BC to third century CE, the former) (third century CE to seventh century CE, the latter) required a border defense force. Considering the Jews to be exemplary
In the fifth century CE, Sassanid King Yazdegerd II forced all the peoples he conquered to convert to Zoroastrianism and embarked on violent persecutions of Assyrian and Armenian Christians, and Persian and Armenian Jews, with the result that the latter two fled, either together or separately, to the Caucasus.

By the eighth century CE, a nomadic Turkic people called the Khazars, or Kuzari, had relinquished their syncretic religion of Tengrism (worship of the Turkic sky god Tengri), Islam, Christianity, and Judaismism, and converted exclusively to Judaismism. Formerly a trading partner between Byzantium and the Sassanids, and then between Byzantium and the Ummayads, the Khazars now became enemies of both, as well as of Kiev Rus, whose prince, Sviatoslav I, razed their de facto capital, Attil—located along the Volga—whose population sought shelter in the Caucasus.

In or around the ninth century CE, one or more of the minor khanates around the Caspian attempted to break what it or they regarded as a Jewish monopoly on maritime and overland trade by expelling its or their Jews from the coastal plain to the Caucasus, where they flourished. Or one or more of the minor khanates sent its or their Jews up into the mountains to act as a frontier guard. Or sent its or their Jews up into the mountain passes to act as basically inspectors and toll collectors—enforcing tariffs, imposing duties. Or else the Jews, either compelled to quit or perhaps even quitting the coastal plain of their own accord, went rogue up in the Caucasus, and appointed themselves frontier guards, inspectors, and/or toll collectors—extorting tribute and/or protection payments from any and all passing through.

By the late 1600s, Jews of Persian descent, fleeing the persecutions of the Persian Safavids for the fraying borders of the Lak Gazikumukh Shamkhalate, had established themselves on the shores of the Caspian near Derbent—today the second-largest city in Dagestan, and the southernmost city in Russia—in a settlement called Aba-Sava. The Shamkhalate, in a bid to prevent the Safavids from advantaging its weaknesses and annexing its holdings, struck an alliance with Catherine the Great. The Jews, who traded with everyone—the Shamkhalate, the Russians, the Safavids—had alliances with none. Aba-Sava was destroyed in either the second, or third, Russo-Persian War, and its Jews were half slaughtered, half scattered, and found shelter only under the Russian-aligned reign of Fatali Khan, ruler of the Quba Khanate, and conqueror of Derbent, who dispersed them to remote mountain towns of his dominion.

Regardless of which interpretation you hold with, the situation seems to be this: Somehow, a loose group of Jews that spoke a dialect of Persian that contained elements of Hebrew—a dialect now called Judeo-Tat, or Juheri, or Gorsky—found themselves virtually alone high up in the rebarbative Caucasus, where—for a period of 200 years, or 2,000 years, give or take a grain of salt—they seem to have controlled most of the mountain passes, and so most of the caravanning traffic, on that tangle of routes as gossamer as thread that the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) immortalized as the Silk Road (die Seidenstraße).

Few goods could cross the Pontic steppe—between Persia, Arabia, India, China, etc., and Europe—without the Mountain Jews taking a cut. Few good merchants could avoid saddling and gapping their peaks—unless, just before the Bolshevik Revolution, they wanted to take the Transcaspian Railway from Tashkent, Samarkand, or Bukhara, to Turkmenshahi, and then a steamer across the Caspian Sea to Baku, then the Trans-Caucasian Railway to Batumi, and then a steamer across the Black Sea to Odessa—unless, just after the Bolshevik Revolution, they wanted to take an airplane.

But then even since the invention of the airplane and intermodal freight, the Mountain Jews haven’t done too poorly.

Of the approximately 200,000 Judeo-Tats, or Juheri, or Gorsky Jews in existence (gora means mountain in Russian), half live in Israel, and about 20,000 in the States; many of the rest are in Russia, mostly in Moscow—and in Azerbaijan, mostly in Baku. Only a few still live in their ancestral auls (fortified, or once upon a time fortified, settlements), midway up the flanks of mountains along two of the Caucasus’s three major ranges, many of which are inaccessible today because the lines they obey are of faults, not borders; and though the armies camped atop the crust can’t stop the sediment, Azerbaijanis can and do stop Armenians from crossing, and Armenians can and do stop Azerbaijanis from crossing, and each stops the other from crossing into the de facto independent but unrecognized republic of Nagorno-Karabakh; Turks stop Armenians from crossing and Armenians stop Turks from crossing; Georgians stop Russians from crossing, and Russians stop Georgians from crossing (not only the Russian republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkesia, but also the partially recognized breakaway-from-Georgia state of South Ossetia; the partially recognized breakaway-from-Georgia state of Abkhazia; and the breakaway-from-Georgian autonomous republic of Adjara).

What unites all these lands, besides their tramontane routes, are their Jews, whose ancestors had known all these
lands under earlier names and under no names, and had traded with all of their peoples in their own languages. It was this ability to slip between states, endonyms, exonyms, and tongues that enabled the Mountain Jews’ survival— their continuity like rock—and earned them the contempt of countless dynasties that withered. It was also what caused the Nazis to recognize them as Jews, and to treat them accordingly—in deed, they were the most Eastern Jews the Nazis ever encountered and, after studying their customs, not excluding polygamy, it was decided that their Judaism was more “religious” than “racial,” though that didn’t prohibit the occasional massacre. The Soviets, however, in compiling their statistics on national minorities, formally indexed them not as Jews but as Iranians. With the Soviet collapse, Sunni extremists started kidnapp ing Mountain Jews for ransom in Dagestan and Chechnya (Mountain Jewish communities always pay ransom), so that today, Azerbaijan seems to be their safest haven in the Caucasus—the only country to have realized the benefits of outing its Mountain Jews as mascots of ethnic comity, while shrewdly using them as regional dragomans and trade intercessors with Russia.

Because if Azerbaijan has become the Mountain Jews’ sanctuary, Russia is now their bazaar—its appetites have made their fortune. Mountain Jews of my own generation, who came of age under Yeltzin’s two terms of larceny and greed, moved into Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the vast cities of Siberia that have less name recognition, but more manufacturing infrastructure and coal mines. There they went about privatizing. Here’s what privatizing means: When a state that owns everything disintegrates, suddenly everything’s up for grabs; if you want a shop, or a factory, or an entire industry, say, you just show up and claim it as yours; the cops can’t kick you out, because there aren’t any cops—the cops don’t stay cops when they’re not getting paid—and so you dig in, and, should other parties arrive to stake their claims, you just have to hope that you have more and bigger men, and more and bigger guns, than they do. To give two examples—not to accuse them of having done anything like this, but merely to admire them if they had—God Nisanov (b. 1972), and Zar ah Iliev (b. 1966). Both moved to Moscow in the early ’90s and immediately went underground, taking over kiosks throughout the drafty cavernous Metro, whose stations had been designed to serve as bomb-shelters, but now were also becoming groceries and malls. Nisanov and Iliev began shipping produce to the capital, setting up construction firms, and investing in real estate. Today, they’re the largest commercial real-estate developers in Moscow, with properties including the Evropeyskiy Shopping Center, the Radisson Royal Hotel, the Radisson Slavyanskaya Hotel, myriad office parks, and wholesale and retail commodity markets (food, appliances, electronics, etc.). As of 2015, Forbes estimated the net worth of each at $4.9 billion, which tied them for the title of twenty-fourth richest person in Russia. In 2014, Nisanov was awarded the Order of Friendship by Putin and was elected to the executive committee of the World Jewish Congress.

Both Nisanov and Iliev were born in the most venerable of the Mountain Jewish auls, Quba. Pronounced Guba. Actually, they’re from a Jewish enclave located just outside Quba, which in Azeri is called Qrmizi Qasaba, and in Russian is called Yevreiskaya Sloboda (Jewish Town), though under the Soviet period its name was changed to Krasnaya Sloboda (Red Town). Now, it shoul dn’t seem particularly strange that a village of fewer than 3,800 people produced two childhood friends who grew up to become billionaires together. But it should seem particularly strange that this village currently boasts four billionaires, and at least twelve (by one count) and eighteen (by another) worth in the hundreds of millions. They include, as already noted, major property developers and commodity importers, but also car importers, clothing importers, and the managers of the Azerbaijani government’s oil and gas portfolios.

I’d been introduced to the existence of the Mountain Jews, and of Quba, by a man a friend of mine met at the banya—a Russian bathhouse, in Brooklyn. This man happened to know, or in the course of sweating conversation claimed to know, my friend’s relative, a Brooklyn (non-Mountain) Jew who does something I’d prefer not to understand with slot machines, and has spent time as a ward of the state. I was told that this man from Quba, whose phone number my friend obtained for me, imported apples to New York—to the Big Apple, which, last time I checked, grows plenty of its own ...

In any event, I called the man’s number, introduced myself, in English, as a novelist—not as a journalist. I figured, because my friend had told him to expect the call, that he already had my name, and I was searchable online; I also figured the man lived in America, he knew what a novelist was—he knew that it meant “vicarious thrillseeker,” or “coward.” He immediately tried frustrating my interest, but I continued to pester, and finally got him to set a meet ing. Which he canceled. I got him to set another meeting, and he canceled again, but at least had pretensions to courtesy, and txted me a local, Baku, number. I searched the number online, and it was the same one listed on the site for the Mountain Jewish community office, whose address was the same as that of Mountain Jewish central synagogue. By the time I realized all that, I’d already signed a contract, and a check for expenses had cleared my account. Not only that: I’d already flown halfway across the globe and was sitting on the bed of my hotel, the Intourist, laptop on my lap, phone suctioned to my check, being reminded—as the number I kept dialing kept ringing—why I’d given up writing nonfiction, for fiction ...

I went to the address listed on the site, ostensibly just a leisurely stroll from the Intourist, but either the address was wrong, or the street sign was: Under

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**ARTS & LETTERS**

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the Aliyevs, many of the streets in Baku have been stripped of their Russian names and given appellations in Azeri. Some of the more conscientious businesses list both street names on their sites. Most, however, don’t bother. Then there’s the issue of Azeri orthography, which further complicates map usage. Formerly, Azeri had been written in Per- so-Arabic; in the 1920s the Latinesse Common Turkic alphabet was adopted; in 1939, the Soviets forced the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet; after Sovietism, Latinesse Common Turkic was reinstated, and it was only in 1992 that the schwa, or ə, so prevalent in the name of the street I was searching for—Şəmsi Badalbıyıl was called into service to replace the diaeresic—umlauted—a. One map listed Şəmsi Badalbıyıl as Shamsi Bedelbeyli and another as Şəmsi Bədəlbəyli (apparently a formidable Azeri theater actor and director). Whatever its spelling, the boulevard I eventually stumbled upon was a double-boulevard, and wide, but composed of many tiny lanes thronged with many tiny cars; its northbound and southbound congeries were divided by an island of freshly planted parkland—the grass not yet sprouted over the sprinklerheads—beyond which, on the distant side, was the dormant worksite of a massive condo project: Beaux-Arts trimmings atop concrete bunkers separated by gravel lots like bulldozer caravanserais. Catercorner to the condos, I found it: the community office, the central synagogue—the Baku HQ of the Mountain Jews. It was an immense new building of austere Art Deco detailing that, given its sharpcornered cleanliness and shine, seemed two-dimensional, like an architectural rendering, a placard of itself: This Will Be Built On This Site.

It was amazing to me that this structure had another dimension—it was amazing that I was able to step inside. Though only for a moment.

A man strode up and, in response to my asking in Hebrew, said he spoke Hebrew. He was tall, skinny like he had a parasite, and wore a flatcap and trenchcoat indoors. He was between thirty and forty, I’d guess, but had a sparse scraggly beard—like he’d five-fingered it off the face of a surly teenager. He wouldn’t give his name—I mean his own name—or he couldn’t. It turned out that he couldn’t speak Hebrew, or what he spoke of it wasn’t just jumbled, but jumbled with rigor: morning (boker) was evening (erec) and vice-versa, six (sheym) was seven (sheva) and vice-versa, the ark (aron) was a prayerbook (siddur). After showing me around the synagogue proper, he took me into the facility’s community center portion and showed me a wall of portraits of Mountain Jewish heroes of Azerbaijani’s wars, and another wall of portraits of Mountain Jewish leaders posing alongside Putin, Netanyahu, both the Aliyevs, George W. Bush, Sheldon Adelson, and assorted Azerbaijani mullahs from the government’s Committee for Religious Organizations. Then he hit me up for a donation—he didn’t confuse the word for charity, tzedakah. I gave him 5 manats, and asked if he knew any Mountain Jews who’d be willing to take me to Quba. He shook his head—meaning he didn’t know? or didn’t understand?—shook my hand, and ushered me out the door.

From the six or so years I lived and worked as a journalist throughout Eastern Europe, I was used to this stripe of wariness. No one who grew up in an authoritarian regime likes to or, honestly, can, answer a question directly. Everyone hesitates, dissembles, feels each other out. Feels out, that is, the type and degree of trouble that truthfulness, if they’re even capable of truthfulness, might get them into. In most post-Soviet countries this Cold War ice can usually be broken or, at a minimum, thawed, by a bribe, or through the rigorous application of alcohol. But here, in this Muslim country whose signature intoxicant was tea, alcohol wasn’t an option.

So I headed back to Brooklyn.

By which I mean: I went to find the Azerbaijan Chabad House.

Chabad Lubavitch is a Hasidic religious movement based in Brooklyn, which—like a yarmulke-wearing, spiritually focused version of a UN taskforce or NGO—dispatches its rabbis all over the world, to provide essential religious services in places where there aren’t many Jews—in Asia, Africa, even Antarctica, though they’re especially active in places where there haven’t been many Jews for a while, thanks to the Soviets, or Nazis. They’re basically a missionary organization, except they don’t convert so much as reclaim: They bring the unaffiliated back into the fold. Now, that’s a laudable brief for an organization to have, but there’s also a dark side, in that Chabad, at one extreme, is something of a messianic cult (some of the rabbis proclaim an uncomfortable fealty to their deceased leader, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rebbbe), and insists on imposing its parochial brand of Ashkenazi Judaism—Eastern European Hasidic Judaism—no matter the local tradition, or preference.

There’s also this pesky issue that a few of their rabbinic emissaries have had with, OK, money-laundering.

What might’ve licensed that behavior is a quirk of history: European Jews, not just in the East but throughout the continent, had almost always been required by the governments of the countries they lived in to identify as Jewish. Even after forced registrations became census requests, Jews tended to continue the practice on their own: If they gave charity to or attended their synagogue, there was a fair chance their home city or province’s community had their name and address on file. These community rolls made the Nazi genocide that much more efficient. After the fall of Sovietism, amid the aforementioned rash of privatization, nascent independent countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia found themselves steeped in unclaimed property, a lot of which had belonged to Jews, a lot of whom were dead. Meanwhile, young ambitious Jews of the postwar generations, many with limited Jewish education and even limited Jewish identification, were busy reorganizing their official communities into nonprofit religious entities. Having varying levels of access to their prewar rolls, they applied to state, provincial, and city governments, not just for the restitution of their rightful infrastructure—their synagogues, and cemeteries—but also for the restitution of the properties of their exterminat ed members who’d left no next of kin. Not many of these Jewish communities had rabbis; Chabad had rabbis—trained
Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverslices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods’ roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. Made him feel a bit peckish.

The coals were reddening. Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn’t like her plate full. Right. He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. Cup of tea soon.

I told him we had mutual acquaintances, and named the rabbis in Prague and Krakow. He knew them. I named their wives, their children. He softened, reclined, released his belly over his belt. We talked about his difficulties getting a lease on a space to open up a kosher restaurant—there were so many people to “pay,” and so many people he might slight through a failure to “pay,” and all of them would be his only customers.

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in America and Israel. Chabad sent its rabbis to open Chabad Houses—from which they directed prayers, classes, food-and-clothing drives, and lifecycle ceremonies (mostly funerals)—and while the preponderance of the sect’s emissaries stuck to mission principles and successfully renewed Jewish life, a few were tempted, or invited, to infiltrate the administrations of their governmentally-sanctioned communities, and took up posts as official Chief or Head Rabbis—which gave them nominal power over the management of community real-estate portfolios. Some of this real estate was extraordinarily lucrative. For instance: much of the downtown tourist districts of Krakow and Prague. Local influential Jews, inured to the inversions of Sovietism, in which the state was the criminal, and they were merely businessmen, would cut deals with the Chabad rabbis assigned to them, supporting the movement and smoothing its way in return for using this reclaimed infrastructure to clean their money—say, a Russian Jew from Odessa who in the 1990s amid the ludicrous inflation and loan defaults of independent Ukraine gets involved in the counterfeit luggage racket, and launder his profits through a storefront in a community-owned, because community-restituted, building that before it’d been nationalized by the Soviets and devastated by the Nazis had belonged to a Jewish family that’d been liquidated in the camp at Bogdanovka. I once, at a very tender, pious, and moronic age, tried to report on this phenomenon—a phenomenon that, in retrospect, I now find utterly rational and tolerable—and, in return for my sanctimony, in the course of a single day, one man threatened my life, and another man handed me an envelope crammed with cash that kept me housed and fed and working on a novel for nearly all of 2004. Suffice it to say, I’m no Chabad booster. But still, if I could never completely bring myself to trust Hasidim, I could at least trust Hasidim to be Hasidim.

Chabad has its Azerbaijani House on Dilara Alieyeva Street, which used to be called Surakhanskaya, and under the Soviets was Pervomayskaya. I couldn’t figure out whether Dilara Alieyeva was related to the dictator president Aliyevs, or just shared their surname (two people said yes, the Internet said no), but I do know that she founded an anti-domestic abuse organization, and was a member of the opposition People’s Front, who died in what Russian media described, not without bias, as a mysterious car accident on the Azerbaijani/Georgian border in 1991. The head of Chabad in Baku, conforming to expectations, introduced himself as the Chief Rabbi of Azerbaijan; his business card read “Chief Rabbi” [sic] of “The Jewish Community of European Jews.” Whatever. I addressed him in Hebrew, just to be a schmuck, but also because it felt like the only language to use in Baku for a conversation with another guy from New Jersey. Rabbi Shneor Segal—robustly obese, copiously bristled, the suit I’d bet from Shemtov’s on Empire Boulevard, the Borsalino I’d bet from Primo’s on Kingston Avenue—asked me to put on tefillin and tallis to pray, and after I did, because prayer is the price of admission with Chabad, he asked me to explain my presence. I was a tourist, I said. From where? Brooklyn. Ah, he said, Brooklyn. Born there? Born in Atlantic City. Ah, he said, New Jersey. It was English after that.

One thing about the Intourist, before I continue: The original Intourist—the hotel of choice, or of no-choice, for foreign visitors under Sovietism—had aged so shoddily that it had to be demolished. But after the demolition, some oil and gas execs, feeling so nostalgic for what’d surely been a heap of reeking plumbing and intermittent electricity, commissioned a replica built on a plot just a block away.

The Mountain Jew, who was late to pick me up, was a companionable slab of stymied maleness aimless in his middle
twenties, in too tight blue jeans, too tight black T-shirt, swart face with lots of scruff, lots of Asian: epicantic folds.

If I'd had to guess his ethnic or racial affiliation from his appearance alone, I definitely wouldn't have said Jew, or Azerbaijani or any other of the undifferentiable (to me) Caucasians, so much as Man Boy—a peaceful beaten international tribe whose members are usually unemployed and single.

No surprise, then, that he seemed happy to be of help to me. Though I didn't understand straightaway what that meant—to be hanging outside of his clan like this—to have to depend on the whitebread Jews, the Chabad crowd...

I'm going to have to make up his name, of course, because some of the things he explained could get him in trouble with other Mountain Jews, and some could get him in trouble with his government. Also: He requested. I couldn't deny that I was a writer, I couldn't have been anything else: As he drove his dirccoli but punctiliously tidy Hyundai I was writing down everything he was saying.

He spoke Judeo-Tat, or Juhuri, which he called Gorsky, and also Azeri, and Russian—and to me in bits of broken Hebrew and English.

Kinda sorta.

I'm going to call him U. Because that's as close as I can get to You—and that's whom I've been trying to talk to...

We'd agreed on two days, 40 manats a day. He'd be driving me to Mountain Jewish sites. In Baku and in Quba—beyond. But after we'd stopped at a SOCAR station and I'd paid to fill up the tank, he took me to a Zoroastrian Fire Temple.

There's so much gas—“natural gas,” as the English phrase goes, to distinguish it from what Americans call “gasoline,” and the rest of the world calls “petrol”—seeping out from under the earth here that in certain areas you can light a match and the air will burn, and will keep burning, until the gas deposit runs out. Zoroastrians erected their temples around such natural fires—around “vents”—though now this temple, the Baku Ateshgah, is lit artificially, its ancient flame having been snuffed by the substrate damage done by adjacent oil drilling. Because of the subterranean deposits, you can't really dig (for anything but oil or gas) and if you can't really dig (for anything but oil or gas), you can't really bury. That explains Zoroastrian air burial. Zoroastrians put a corpse out on a rock. The vultures swarm. Put it all together: Flames springing up from the ether; a corpse up on a rock; vultures plucking out its liver: Prometheus.

U took me to mud volcanoes (which locals explain as “vents” from which only mud erupts, after the exhaustion of their flammable deposits); he took me to what he called the Olympic Stadium, and the Olympic Village—driving me through their abandoned concourses grinning at my incredulity. The issue here—though it only seemed to be an issue for me, not U—is that Baku never hosted an Olympics. Earlier in 2015, it hosted the European Games, which the government apparently insisted on referring to as the Olympics—the bona fide quadrennial gold—silver—bronze Olympics™—intellectual property laws be damned. In 2017, these facilities are slated to host the Islamic Solidarity Games, which U called the Islamic Olympics. I wondered, Do women compete? U said, How can they compete? Later I found out that not only were women excluded, but also that they didn't even have a bogus Olympics of their own anymore—not since the Women's Islamic Games was discontinued after Tehran-2005.

I took U to a dinner of kebabs, and he reciprocated by taking me to meet his friend, another Mountain Jew, he said, though the friend denied this, and it was only after I admitted my confusion that he said, If you're not in the business, then it doesn't count [which meant: being an ethnic Mountain Jew was not quite the same as being a professional Mountain Jew: a mafioso]. U and I met him, let's call him Asshole, in a video-game parlor above a carwash, and played video Monopoly—alas, not the Atlantic City but the London version. We hunkered around the console and drank tea—always black, never green or red, nothing herbal—compulsively, Asshole and U smoked compulsively, and I went bankrupt—every game. U wouldn't play anything else in the arcade, because Asshole wouldn't—not Pac-Man, not Tetris, not the vintage-Soviet foosball table encased in a plastic bubble so pockmarked and cloudy that the guys who yanked at the bars could only guess at the ball—at its position—at its existence. Indeed, there were too many guys, doing too much bar-yanking. There weren't any women in the place. But then there weren't any women in any place in the country—not without their husbands, or brothers. I asked U how he went about meeting women, and Asshole replied—in a sense. He ashed his cigarette, right onto the console, and said that all women who smoked cigarettes were whores. All women who drove were also whores. He didn't mean “women who had sex a lot for fun or free,” but “women who had sex a lot for money.” I asked, What about women who smoked while driving? According to Asshole, they were “double whores,” who'd cost me even more than landing my pixellated thimble on his Regent Street, which he'd outfitted to capacity with flashy red hotels. I went bankrupt again and put on my jacket, to signal that I was ready to head back to the Intourist. That's when Asshole asked, Didn't [U] tell you not to wear red? He hadn't—no one had—Why? Only gay men wore red, Asshole told me, as a signal to other gay men.

The next morning, it was unavoidable. Rainy, dreary, unavoidable. From the moment that U picked me up at the Intourist, he was suggesting itinerary-alternatives. Still, I held firm: We were driving up to Quba.

Which should've been an ascent of an hour and a half, but U took two hours, three, like he was dreading it.

I tried to suss out why, by asking him questions—trying to seem guileless—about himself, and then about Asshole, before moving onto Quba, and then to its more notorious natives, but U just hunched at the wheel and turned every answer around on me: He wanted to know how much my apartment cost (including electricity? but what about Internet?), how much my phone cost (included with the plan? but what was the plan?), how much his car would cost in America (where cars are cheaper), how much it would cost to fill up his tank in America (where, ridiculously, fuel is cheaper too), and I had to admit...
that I didn’t know anything about cars, and I didn’t want to waste my phone’s data, or its battery, on enlightening him.

Women in America no care if you no have car?

No, I said. At least not in New York.

Why—because you must to have also plane, helicopter, yacht?

We passed a roadside stand that sold sturgeon wraps—hunks of BBQ’d sturgeon squirted with pomegranate sauce, sprinkled with saffron, wrapped in lavash—and U insisted: lunch. As we ate, U pointed across the highway toward a mountain, and said that in that mountain was a cave, and that in that cave was a bevy of stone growths that resembled penises, and that Muslim women, just after they were betrothed, would visit said stone penises and kneel down to kiss them, to ensure the prima nocte potency of their husbands. Out of courtesy, I finished all my slick greasy fish, which now wobbled perilously atop the summit of my stomach of yoghurt and eggs and unwashed veg from the Intourist breakfast buffet. It was time to go, but U was unrelenting: tea.

But I was still meth-level caffeinated from the night before—between that and my jetlag, I hadn’t even gone to sleep yet...

We drove up toward the mountains, passing apple orchards. Apparently Quba is famous for its apples. I mentioned the apple importer guy from Brooklyn who’d introduced my friend, and so me, to Quba, and realized, from U’s response, that the guy’s occupation had been a joke, or a putdown. If you’re from Quba and a rube asks what you do for a living, you say, I import apples.

It’s the gangster version of Ivy League pricks who when they’re asked where they went to school say, In New Haven. In Boston.

Quba isn’t a one-horse town. It’s a half-horse town. The rear half. Smelly (from car emissions, outlying factories, sewage), hideous. Besides apples, Quba’s also known for its carpets—known for its carpets whose woven wool must inevitably soak up all the smells—and while the few formal stores display their wares flayed in windows, the bazaars roll them up and tie them and lean them against walls like they’re about to be executed by firing squad: carpets like multicolored, arboreal-patterned bodies—carpets like multicolored, arboreal-patterned bodybags.

The town ends with a river, the Qudiyalçay. I asked U what Qudiyalçay meant and he said, Qudiyalçay. He wasn’t in the mood to talk, but then he sensed my disappointment and said, The name is to do with water.

On the other side of the Qudiyalçay was the only town in the world outside of Israel that still has a 100% Jewish population: Qırmızı Qəsəbə/Yevreiska-Sloboda/Krasnaya Sloboda. Jewish/Red Town.

We stopped at the cemeteries first—the new, the old next. U went to pay respects, to say kaddish, at his mother’s grave. The newest graves were set with stones engraved with classy/cheesy full-body portraits: There were guys who’d died in their twenties, dressed in suits straight out of Scarface. How did they die so young? I asked, but U didn’t answer. Instead, he pointed to a grave depicting an obese Mountain Jew who’d died, U said, at age thirteen from diabetes. Another grave featured the portrait of a family who’d died in a plane crash over Siberia. The plane itself was etched into the stone above the family’s group-hug. The pilots had been inexperienced or drunk, apparently. Or inexperienced and drunk. The oldest graves were on another hill, crowding the pagoda tomb of Rabbi Gershon ben Reueven, the Admor Gershon, the town’s founding rabbi, supposedly a miracle-working sage but legendary among no other community.

At my prodding, U roused Yury Naftalovich, the Azerbaijan State Deputy for Quba, who kept the keys to the synagogues, yeshiva, and mikveh. Physically, he was as spare and thin as his rhetorical style, strictly facts: About 2,000 Jews currently live in Krasnaya Sloboda; the settlement has suffered a 75% loss of its population over the last decade, with most going to Baku, Russia, and Israel; Krasnaya Sloboda’s last chief rabbi, Rabbi Davidov, left for Jerusalem; another rabbi, Rabbi Lazar, left for Moscow. I had to tug all this out of him—through U, who turned my English into Gorsky and Russian, and Yury Naftalovich’s
Yury Naftalovich just held up his palms as if to say, *Why not?* I decided to pursue an easier, number-based, and *Yes/No* line of inquiry: I asked U to ask Yury Naftalovich how many Torahs the community had, but the totalitarian janitor just handed me a prayerbook, printed in 2014 in Israel on what felt like toilet paper. I asked U to ask Yury Naftalovich if he would unlock the ark, but Yury Naftalovich refused, until I dropped 5 manats—and then another 5 manats—into the donation box, and he, with a bitter twist to his mouth, opened the doors and there, inside, was a panoply of Torahs, the scrolls encased in olivewood filigreed with silver and gold and draped with silks. How old was the oldest? *Over 300 years.* From where? *Iran.* Wouldn’t this appear to substantiate the theory that the Mountain Jews came up from Persia under the Safavids? And, while we’re at it, if your winter synagogue that, by the way, doesn’t seem heated, contains an intact Persian Torah scroll over 300 years old, which would make it one of the oldest intact Persian Torah scrolls in existence, why didn’t you mention that earlier? But Yury Naftalovich was already shutting the ark, locking it, heading outside, and U was on bended knee doing up his laces.

Yury Naftalovich led us past a former synagogue, now a pharmacy. Yet another former synagogue would be converted into a Mountain Jew museum, he said, but only if they raised 200,000 manats. Restoration was expensive. Exhibits—with interactive computer terminals, because no Azerbaijani museum was complete without interactive computer terminals (which half the time didn’t function)—were expensive. Suddenly, everything became about money, as Yury Naftalovich continued with the community chest version of U’s pricing habit: talking about how much it cost to run the mikveh, and how much it cost to run the yeshiva—to buy the desks and chairs and books, to pay for all the meals. About a dozen kids sat in a classroom in the yeshiva, studying the Hebrew alphabet—which was strange. In that it felt staged. Potemkin village.

Walking into a yeshiva at some random hour on some random weekday at the end of October—two months after the Azerbaijani secular school term started, and a month after the Jewish New Year—and finding a dozen kids just starting to puzzle out the first few letters of the aleph-bet, is like happening to drop by Citi Field on a whim, only to find out it’s Opening Day, and there’s a home-game v. the Phillies.

On the wall of the yeshiva was a calendar illustrated with images of Mountain Jewish synagogues, one for each month (it’s amazing they had enough for the year)—the synagogue in Derbent (the photograph taken either before, or after it was repaired from, its firebombing by Chechen Muslims in 2012), in Makhachkala (the photograph taken either before, or after it was repaired from, its vandalism in 2007), in Nalchik (the photograph taken either before, or after it was repaired from, its vandalizing in 2000; a Chechen Muslim plot to blow up the synagogue was foiled by the Russian FSB in 2002), in Buynaksk (now closed), and in Oguz (open sporadically). The synagogue of this month, October, was the newest, dedicated in 2013, a glistening white Oriental pile in Grozny. The calendar was published by STMEGI, a Russian acronym for the International Mountain Jewish Charity Fund, a serious philanthropic but also seriously tax-exempt organization, founded by German Zakharyayev, a Quaban (b. 1971) now resident in Moscow, who, beyond being another billionaire developer (the Sezar Group), has the singular distinction of having contributed a new Jewish holiday to the calendar, through his successful petitioning of the Israeli government to establish the 26th of Iyar—which corresponded to May 9, 1945, or Russia’s WWII V-Day—as “The Rescue Day of European Jewry.” I flipped back to spring, and sure enough, the holiday was there. I asked U to asked Yury Naftalovich if I could have the calendar. No. I asked U to asked Yury Naftalovich if I could buy the calendar. No. How can I buy my own copy, then? *You can not to.* You’re telling me this is the only copy? *Yes.*

None of this crying poverty was making any sense. Because, as I couldn’t help but notice—as Yury Naftalovich couldn’t help but ignore—cropping up among the old Jewish sites he’d been bringing me and U to, overshadowing all of their carved wood and stained glass and even the six cupolas with their six-pointed stars, was some of the most lavish, most ugly-lavish, new real estate I’d ever been around. I’ll clarify: On the Quba side of the Qudiyalçay were chickens, cows, tractors, and hovels—grimness. But on this side, here in Krasnaya Sloboda, were Lamborghiniis, Ferraris, and villas that intermarried craven faux-Euro fufu—frippey with the crassest of State-side suburban McMansionism. If every Baroque has its Rococo, every Vegas has its Dubai, but this architecture was so outlandish, it verged on the extraterrestrial—there was nowhere to go beyond it. Some of the villas had five floors, some had six, most had turrets, many had elevators. Fountains in the yards, gargoyles, putti. Guardtowers, spiked fences, CCTV cameras surrounded. One had a helipad on its roof. Another had a rooftop pool. I asked to be taken to Zakharyayev’s—to ask him if he had another of his calendars lying around—but U hesitated to transmit the request, as if he’d forgotten how to speak Gorsky, or Russian, while, at the same time, Yury Naftalovich frowned, as if he were gradually remembering that he understood English after all. I persisted, and asked where God Nisanov’s house was, where Zarah Iliev’s house was, and snap, just like that, my audience with the officious

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*“Every Baroque has its Rococo, every Vegas has its Dubai, but this architecture was so outlandish, it verged on the extraterrestrial.”*
behind him and were conducted to the waiting us, and we higher primates fell in back to the yeshiva—gone.

Leaving, U was gritting his teeth. I was silent but angry, so U jacked his phone into the stereo and cranked the volume on some Israeli Mizrahi snakecharmer—ish music, before switching to a Chabad chorus nasal-singing niggunim, Sabbath songs: ayayayayay. We were headed back to Baku, chased by rain. But then U drove off the highway, and, putting cheer in his voice, or just yelling, declared that we were stopping—again. He explained that there was this seaside joint he’d just suddenly recalled, again. He explained that there was this restaurant, declared that we were stopping—at least of the summer vacation home—at least of the summer vacation destination—of some of Russia’s most wealthy and most powerful men, was over. Yury Naftalovich, that dignified creep with a hedgehog for a moustache, bum-rushed us into the car, and stalked back to the yeshiva.

The waiter returned and just gave me a line or two? Just so I know to roll doubles for you or else sell Whitehall or Fleet Street or the Water Works or the Electric Company to get you out of jail for you got my last email—did you? Even if you’re busy or depressed or both just type yo yo, kak dela? What’s going on? I hope that animal they were always finding everywhere for free, I just remembered I was wrong, the English name for it isn’t “porcupine,” but “hedgehog.” Different animals. I’m going crusading for a girl for you, don’t worry. Though your chances/the crop certainly will be better in Tel Aviv. When are you going to be there? And Yury Naftalovich, is Naftalovich the patronymic (father’s name) or the surname? And if it’s the patronymic, what’s the surname (last name)? Also what’s his official title, just the Head of the Quba Jewish Community? Todah me’rosh, Josh.

10/30

Yo yo, kak dela? What’s going on? I hope you got my last email—did you? Even if you’re busy or depressed or both just type me a line or two? Just so I know to roll doubles for you or else sell Whitehall or Fleet Street or the Water Works or the Electric Company to get you out of jail and passing Go again. Just so I know all’s kosher. I have a few other questions if you wouldn’t mind answering. Nothing too difficult.

OK ok kol tov, j
Habibi, kak dela? What’s the news? Is everything alright between us? Did you get my last emails? Doesn’t make sense to me that you wouldn’t because we were in touch without a hitch in Baku. I’m nervous. So even if you’re hassled as fuck running around a tour group of Russian blondes to Fire Temple #9, just take a moment and send up a flare, a smoke signal, whatever. Are you there? Are you angry with me? Are my emails being blocked? Do you/can you use encryption?

Nothing. I never got a single response—not a word.

I wrote the Chabad rabbi in Baku, and told him to tell ... U to be in touch. I’m not sure whether the Chabadniki passed on the message, but at least I’m sure of this: I did nothing to offend U. I mean, I was just doing my good bad job for good bad money—I didn’t do anything on purpose ...

I just slammed the cabin door behind me, and sat, panting. U grinned and re-filled my tea, and then I let him light me a cigarette and as its sour formaldehyde fur taste came on, he picked up the thread of the girl:

How beautiful she was, how much they loved each other. How much he wasn’t able to regret anything.

And then he mentioned his mother dying, and his father—who’d crashed like a wave over his childhood and then, retreated.

How shaming that was—shaming of everyone, and even of the community.

It was just after his mother was diagnosed with cancer that he was given the chance to restore his honor and name.

U was telling me something, but I wasn’t sure what—something about his life, about the girl’s life, and about family—what all of that can mean to a Jew not jetting through, a Jew not from America but from the mountains.

What it was like to be a son, a fatherless son, who had to deal with the patriarchs of Quba.

He was explaining, not least, our reception there.

So: There was this man from the community. He was older, like of U’s mother’s generation—a Mountain Jew who might’ve known U’s father, but who never mentioned knowing U’s father, who owned a large commercial bakery at the foot of the Urals in Siberia. It made cakes, it made breads, to ship to groceries—supermarkets—hypermarkets throughout Russia. Don’t think of kero-cheded babas dusted in flour kneading and rolling and waiting for their loaves to rise. Think bulk, preservatives, plastic packaging. Still, this large commercial bakery was one of the smaller things this man owned. He also owned malls, and linen and clothing stores, and linen and clothing factories, not only in Siberia. But all that U would have to concern himself with was the bakery. This man needed a guy he could trust, one of his own guys, to serve as manager. And despite the hardness that some of his ventures required, this man’s emotions were such that he still wanted to do a young struggling Mountain Jew a favor. If U, who’d had some harsh breaks, hadn’t been called out by them, why should he be? By his own success? But the way the successful wholesale bread baker and retail linen and clothing manufacturer would explain it to U was that this wasn’t a favor but a mitzvah. Which meant that U had to agree. He was flown to Sibe-ria—to the city of Perm—to manage the bakery. It was a good job, which paid good money. He was given an apartment, the apartment had a flatscreen TV. It had a washer/dryer. It was centrally located, and spacious. U spent all his days at the bakery, supervising baking. Keeping the bakers in line. Ordering the baking ingredients. Equipment maintenance. Quality control. But more often than not, he did nothing. The breads and cakes baked themselves. Everyone behaved. At night he went back to the apartment and sat. He sat and did nothing. He had no friends in Perm. No family, of course. The bakery owner was never around. He was flying constantly among all his other properties. U would go weeks without talking to anyone. Without talking personally, he meant, in person. The bakery personnel feared him. He himself was afraid of fraternizing, and of being taken as soft, pliable, doughy. He ached he was so lonely. Phone calls with his mother just exacerbated. Her loneliness increased his, and her cancer was advancing. Russians on the street, taking him for a Chechen, a Muslim, would taunt and threaten. They’d try to beat him. But more often than not, he’d escape. He considered suicide.

Then one day, he left. He gave notice. He didn’t give notice. He forgot. He bought a ticket with what money he’d saved, what money he hadn’t sent back to his mother, and went back to his mother. Baku. The man who owned Siberia was furious, which meant the man’s business partners who were also his family were furious, and the man had an extended—an overextended—family. No one was going to do U a kindness again. He’d blown his chance, and was out. On the outside, permanently. He was no one’s mitzvah.

Which limited his prospects for marriage within the community. And being broke and Jewish limited his prospects for marriage outside the community—with the girl he loved, the girl who loved him, the beautiful Muslim supply liaison. He’d only taken the job, he said, to earn enough to win the favor of her family. And a Jew has to earn a lot, he said, to win the favor of the family of a beautiful Muslim supply liaison. The rain picked up. The waiter, casting stones to ward the rabid dog off, brought the bill. U said he was paying, and not to argue. He was considering moving to Israel.

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A Problem With the Sun

Tablet Original Fiction by the author of the collection 'Notes From the Fog'

BY BEN MARCUS

It was April 29 and the streetlights were flickering in and out. And yet—little miracle—power was still on at Fowler’s house. Barely. He still had water. Heat. The clock on his stove was blinking, so at some point in the night he’d lost electricity. Briefly. His house might go dark again. Would go dark. It was out of his hands.

The flood had come on hard yesterday, the answer to a season of mountain rain. They’d seen it coming, and all the clay-faces had been crying about it on the news. Whimper whimper out of their omen holes. Everybody run for the hills. But you couldn’t force people from their homes. According to law. You could scare them to higher ground, another town, a school gymnasium outside the flood zone. You could conjure the odds of survival, showing the footage of past disasters, a child’s sock in a ditch, the imprint of a little person in the grass. Most people would relent. They would scatter.

Most people. Excepting his truly. Fowler the Last, since there would be no heirs. He’d waited out the evacuation because certain projects flourished in an empty neighborhood. Houses hollow and without people. No one around to see. Most of what was really urgent to do necessitated a near total absence of the living. Hell yes, he was relieved, but there was a sack of undesired emotion inside him. His blood was on notice. It happened. Instincts boiled up, even in idiots. That was just his body. His body could be scared and so what. Fuck it. Death to all feeling soon, right? R.I.P. and whatever, because darkness forevermore. He wasn’t in charge of his feelings. It was kind of a relief. Just see where the secret engine pulled him and don’t show your goddamn cards.

It wasn’t yet morning. From his doorway Fowler could see a distant light burning in the hills. Given what he knew about the terrain, a light of that sort didn’t really compute. There were mud barriers up there, rock dams, and lookout blinds, sometimes with little huts attached. There was what was called a sluice. He’d been to a few of the huts. He knew the hills pretty well. You could enter a hut, go to sleep. No one bothered you. You could think of it as your own home when you wanted to. But there were no power lines at that elevation. Not even animals, really. He didn’t really like the word hideout. It had obvious problems. Connotations. You pictured a shootout. You pictured an old dirty bed with handcuffs on the floor, a shit stain on the wall. But he used it to himself as a kind of code. He knew what it meant. He could call it whatever he liked.

He found it hard not to worry. A light pulsing in the hills as if someone had just plugged in the eye of God where there were no plugs, no spotlights, no people. Was there a work crew dug in up there, and did that mean there’d been a significant mudslide, bringing a hut down with it? Which had suddenly necessitated some emergency work? With some daylight he’d have perspective. Shapes would come out and show themselves.

He held something of value in the hands of the living. Just anyone and everyone. People who were not whole. Certain citizens, just a mush of sadness on the inside, ached and pined and agonized unless they could lick your insides for whatever you knew. They had to sniff you over like you were a dog bowl and tear off a piece of your special core and just rub it all over themselves like a cream. Not that there were people who could stethoscope your thoughts. He wasn’t stupid. But the operating wisdom now was that you didn’t know who could hear you, see you, know you. Weren’t you the ultimate fool if you thought you had a secret free from detection?

He could drive into the hills now, is what he could do, to check things out. Make sure his, uh, hideout was intact. Not that the roads would hold. Not that his truck could even manage. Did it matter? Was he going to die if he didn’t know? There would be a checkpoint, and a conversation to navigate with whoever was policing the area, given the flood evac. Troopers in storm gear, waving their flashlights. The whole thing was moot, due to the roads, which at this point were probably washed out.

At sunrise Fowler stepped outside his house, closed the door gently so as not to disturb his wife. It would be pretty hard to wake her, he laughed to himself, because she wasn’t home. Hadn’t been for a good while. How funny that he kept doing that, tiptoeing around, being so careful, so quiet, because she always said his steps were too heavy. And not just that. She could hear him breathing in the next room. She told him he coughed too loudly, and once she said that when he coughed like that, with such a rumble, she felt threatened.

Threatened like he was going to hurt her?

She wasn’t sure. She said she didn’t control her own reactions. How was she supposed to just pretend it didn’t scare her? Did he want her to do that? She could try to do that. Would that make him happy, she asked, if when he did something she found frightening, she kept quiet and calm and acted like it did not upset her?

He didn’t want to smash her head in. Nothing like that. He would know if
he regularly had thoughts like that. He wasn't really that way.

Fowler wandered the waterlogged neighborhood, mud spilling over his Bogs. What a strange vacancy all around him, like everyone just had to get off the planet.

He wanted to be able to look up into the sky and see a stream of people, just slashes and dark marks, from this distance, shooting off and away from here. A proper evacuation. Just a full-on abandonment. That wasn't something you got to see.

From Burdock Road to the Deering radial there were uprooted trees drifting by like canoes. The people who had left later in the day yesterday had left badly. Doors to some houses were still open, lights shining inside, which, if he didn't have something else to take care of right now, he could be a good neighbor about and switch off. He bet there were cats. People often left a cat behind. During calamity. Fowler could pick a house, and go on in, and run into a cat or two. See who wore the crown then, who owned the planet. He didn't really know who kept cats. You had to be a regular in someone's house before you knew if they kept a cat. He got the occasional invite, but mostly he knew these houses from the outside. Sometimes the cats never came out when someone strange was over. The cats had an idea of their own safety and they practiced it carefully. People less so, which, well. A different attitude towards safety. Someone comes to your house, and you happen to be in the other room, you come out. You don't crawl under your couch, mostly because of being polite. That would be a good chart to look at. Just all of the creatures and how they supervised their own safety. Strategies against harm, real or imagined. Success rates. Accurate or inaccurate view of a threat. Good choices, bad choices. How was the species doing overall, in relation to its enemies? So many charts he'd like to examine.

Anyway, if this all kept up for a few days—rain in the hills, loosening slabs of earth, which would hurl down upon them—he'd start to know who kept cats, and had left them. He'd hear them.

"Who created this inadequate language that rubbed all of the detail off a thing and still ruled supreme as the primary currency people hurled at each other to make themselves known and whatnot?"

It was funny. To have waited so long for this opportunity, a time when no one was around and he could do as he pleased, go straight to the designated location, which he would not name to himself, and grab those items of interest, which he would neither name nor picture.

But the going was hard outside in the water. And something seemed wrong. Which, well, of course.

Waders. He had them at home. He should have them on now. The mud was pretty high in places. You couldn't see through it. Walking through dark water, you had no real idea what you kept running up against, what was under your feet, what bumped your legs. Half of your world was blind. In reverse that would really be something. Sheer darkness above the belly. Moving through a cold, thick mass, unable to breathe or see, your legs kicking freely below as if dangling in space. That'd be a ride he'd pay for at the state fair.

Maybe he should return home, have lunch, and think through his plan again. He pictured himself at the table, his waders folded over a chair in the mudroom. Half a person with the bones removed. If only he'd already taken care of his errand, crossed it off his list. He had to do it now.

Slowly he aimed himself towards the girl's house.

It was at the block party a year ago when his plan started to grow a sort of awful hair, and leak, and sort of slobber on him no matter what he did or where he went. Regarding the girl. The girl, the girl. Who created this inadequate language that rubbed all of the detail off a thing and still ruled supreme as the primary currency people hurled at each other to make themselves known and whatnot?

A block party last year. What the fuck. There was a fire engine parked on the street, and there were food tables, and the neighborhood association had rented a dunk tank.

Every so often, a great big splash sent water hurtling over the crowd, and a fat, shirtless man climbed out of the dunk tank, laughing.

Fowler came around to talking with some of the men gathered in the street. First he waited in line for a sausage roll. The one they gave him was sweaty and soft in his mouth. Something like a bone seemed to run the length of it.

"You caught yourself a beauty, there," one of the men said to him.

Fowler looked down at it. In these situations, you could eat, and people understood you wouldn't be answering right away.

Men were easy, in that as long as you showed you'd heard them, you could go a very long time without saying anything back. It was a mercy.

He knew that it was a little bit of an accident that he was a man. It would have been an accident of a different kind had he been a woman. It was a small accident, really, that he was a person in the first place. A chart of all those little accidents, along with drawings of his bones, adding up to who he was. Worth looking at, probably.

In his little group, the men were talking about hunting, even though only one of them seemed to do it. The others got by on saying how much they would like to do it, or intended to try it, once certain conditions were met. A season was beginning, the hunter was saying,
The men all chuckled.

Fowler looked at them, one by one, and very nearly saw through their facades into something more. Punishing insights. Understandings. But it clouded over. He lived in an unpromising time; that was just a fact. A time of terrible ignorance. Too little information about what mattered the most. There wasn’t, as yet, a good tool to get a clear picture of exactly what others were thinking. This ability was probably on its way for people, a hundred years out, maybe. One hundred and fifty. Things would open up, in all sorts of ways. A method of getting in there and knowing something. But Fowler would be dead before such technology came along.

On his deathbed, even though he knew there would be no bed—he’d probably die in the wild—he wondered if he’d want to be told what was really in store for people, or if he’d rather not know. Deathbed. That was a joke. There’d be no bed. Fowler could picture himself, all too convincingly, running through trees, scrambling up a hillside, taking bullets to the torso. They’d itch going in, he figured. Itch and burn. He hadn’t been shot before, but it didn’t tax the imagination to picture it. It came to him sometimes almost like a memory.

The hunter went on about traps. You had to clean them after each use, and they just waited for the girls to get clear through the candy pretty slowly, sort of relaxed.

You heard a version of this story as a kid. Animals caught in traps chewed off a leg to escape. Fowler had to wonder. Obviously it hurt a little bit. You wouldn’t hope to get caught in a trap so you could have an excuse to chew off your own leg. That wasn’t something anybody would really want. But if you did have to do it, and you found yourself, as an animal, chewing into your own flesh, tearing it away, trying to gnaw through the bone, which was when the project got serious, was there ever a moment, even just for a second, when you felt like you’d been born to the job? A kind of pure calling? The slow destruction of oneself with one’s mouth? You’d be smart leaving room around categories like that, he thought. Just being careful not to believe that you know what there is to be known. You don’t.

They were standing in a circle, eating. Some of the men held little glass jars of beer. Fowler kept away from that. He took in all the liquid he needed at night. The kids were out today, because everybody said that the block party was really for them. You did this kind of thing for the kids. And then you also took part in it, maybe also for the kids. You went to work for the kids. You cooked dinner for the kids. You cleaned up for the kids. And then you also took part in it, maybe also for the kids. You went to work for the kids. You cooked dinner for the kids. You cleaned up for the kids. When you had kids, according to the people who blasted Fowler with their views, what you did you did for them. Even when you had more kids, you did it for the kids you already had, and when you struck one of them in the face, everyone should know whose good it was for. Whereas if you didn’t have kids, like Fowler and his wife—despite a verbal project that circled the possibility, but had long since faltered—what you did you apparently did for yourself. Or maybe no one. To hear the parents talk, without kids you were nothing, a quarter person, a kind of costume that could be hung on a hook. You powered down in the evening and your body deflated in the corner. Someone could kick you down the street like a trash bag.

Some young people at the block party were making a disturbance. Fowler caught sight of the girl pretty quickly. The girl—this wasn’t really how he thought of her. It was just that the usual words had not been ideal when it came to the girl. They didn’t fully seem to function. There was too much slippage, like an electric short that kept them from sticking. He knew her name, but he wished he didn’t. In Fowler’s view the name didn’t suit her. It was like a small lie that needed to be owned up to. He had come to an arrangement with himself not to use it. He’d been to her house, watched her sleep, but she looked different out in the wild. Outdoors, on her feet, in motion.

The girl had on what looked like men’s pants and a sort of circus sweater. The pants were high waters and the sweater, too, but on her arms, like maybe she’d gone swimming and her clothes seized up, tried to vanish off her body. A creature who fell asleep for a very long time and woke up too large for her clothing. Her hair was piled in some kind of bundle as if her crafter had dropped it on her head from the sky. Because she was not ordinary. She had not been made in the normal way.

She was singing or she was shouting, and maybe what was making all of her friends laugh is that they weren’t sure which one. In a group of creatures, regardless of the species, there is sometimes one who seems to control the blood of the others.

Fowler tucked deeper into his sausage roll and saw all the men looking at her, not hiding it, their faces made of rubber and their eyes scratched from their heads, like in a picture.

As the girls walked by, the men turned small and strange. No one breathed. They just waited for the girls to get clear and then you could feel them catching up on their breath. They again gave each other glances. Just a significant exchange of silence, trying not to break into pieces.

“Well, thank god I don’t shit in my own backyard,” one of them finally said, shaking his head.

“Hell, I don’t shit in my own toilet,” someone replied, and they all laughed.

A slight concern. The girl looked different today. Fowler had seen her asleep last week, a month ago. You didn’t keep records for things like that, because of course. He’d stopped in, taken a look,
snatched some of her stuff, trucked it up to the hut, where a certain kind of situation was taking shape. A residence, a place, a grave. Today her face seemed filled with air. He squinted so she could be blurry. He hadn’t counted on this.

A bit more chatter happened, everybody seeming to silently agree that they wanted to destroy what they’d seen, that they could remove all the small parts of their bodies and make a pile there in the street. For someone to find later. Someone smart, a sort of scientist, who could look at it, throw his hand into it, and have a close enough idea of just what had happened in this place.

Then the men tensed up. “Shut up, shut up,” someone said, “here they all come.”

It was the wives, bombing at them from the other side of the street. They closed in pretty fast and acted like they’d missed all the fun.

“What are you all laughing about?” One of the wives turned to Fowler.

The Shebster wife, the Coramper one. He didn’t remember. Those sounded like fake names to him, like they had all lied about who they really were. It wouldn’t matter once their bones were exposed. He wanted to keep eating. A tough bit of cartilage was lodged in his mouth. He was almost done chewing. He’d do anything not to look at the girl. You had to follow a ration.

This wife was really on him.

“Tell us what these guys said or we will torture you,” she shrieked. Fowler was occupied with the large question of how many ways the girl could look, doing different things, even long after she’d died. As bones, as powder, at night, having all of the different feelings, and if any of those ways would change what he felt should happen—that she and Fowler should combine themselves in a remote location. Even the girl’s father, whom Fowler had seen, and once spoken to, had, buried in his face, something that drew Fowler in. So it wasn’t the girl in particular, was it? Maybe the father would do, or the mother, or, if it were possible, ancestors going back further, if you could arise out of where you lived and drift into the past, to make selections. Because the attraction—even though that was the wrong word, really—was just the cells, and the blood. Just such a precise arrangement of them, regardless, really, of the carrier, rendering her face and body just so. Maybe the girl herself didn’t matter, even if she seemed to hold a more concentrated level, as if a strong dose of it had funneled down into her for the time being. He couldn’t ignore that. He’d be lying to himself. He’d be lying to himself. He’d be lying to himself. He’d be lying to himself.

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“Tell us what these guys said or we will torture you,” she shrieked.

Fowler saw where this woman would laugh. “Marjorie,” the woman called over to Fowler’s wife. “Hey, Marjorie, I caught myself a big one!” She’d grabbed Fowler now and he started to sway, eating his sausage again, trying to smile in just the right way for the guys.

The other wives looked down and laughed. The laughing had changed. It didn’t make him feel good to hear someone say his wife’s name. It never had.

Early on, when they were first just getting to know each other and he hoped to show her some of the paths in the foothills, before they had embarrassed each other with nudity, he wondered if that meant they should not be married. Her name wasn’t entirely her fault.

Marjorie was nearby, in a circle of people, and she didn’t seem to immediately notice she was being called out.

When he saw her he could tell she didn’t want to look up—she had on her do not disturb face. She’d been gone in three months, leaving with no argument, the two of them nearly shaking hands. He wanted to keep these people from bothering her. But she looked over at them anyway.

“What do you say?” the wife asked, pointing her finger right into Fowler’s body. “Is this one ticklish? Your husband! Is he?”

Marjorie shrugged, and it was like they all suddenly felt the same thing, with this woman’s finger pressing into Fowler, as if she knew what she was looking for, when really she had her hand in something she should not be touching. The group quickly fell quiet. Maybe each of them, in their own way, was picturing themselves being launched off the street, as Fowler was, and propelled high up into the air, rapidly hurtling through space. Their faces spreading in the wind as it rushed by them, and all of them looking down at their whole neighborhood, where everything had turned so small. Killable, dismissible, unreal. There wasn’t really such a good word for how it all looked from up there where he was.

Now Fowler was out in the neighborhood, just where the block party was a year ago, and everyone was gone, evacuated. He could do what he liked. The streets were empty. Yesterday some vehicles had lifted in the muck and floated off. The biggest things, in the right weather, were suddenly weightless, beautiful. Should not people, on occasion, float past one another, weightless and rolling? The problem with the laws of physics was repetition, dullness. There was a kind of deep insult buried in the way the world was designed.

Pretty much everything was hidden by a rumbling flow of mud. Some houses were seeing damage. Was it the worst thing ever? Mud, they all knew by now, because you heard it on the news every time the rain started, slide down from Moyer Creek, which nearly ringed the town from above. Nearly. From space the creek might look like a broken circle, a circle with a tear in it, where some beast had maybe broken through. But today you couldn’t really look into the

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“The Baldwins were complete. Tag ’em and bag ’em, he thought. But still alive, of course.”

It had taken a little bit of hiding to be able to stick around yesterday, when the patrols came through on bullhorns. Men at the door pounding away. Everyone barking in animal voices. You shouldn’t have to take cover in your own house. But the county had learned its lesson from last time, when no one got out, no one was scared enough, no one wanted to be troubled. It was last year’s flood that had them all crazy. The bunch of little people they’d lost to it, just around the corner from here. The Larsen boys and their friend whose name Fowler always forgot. Everyone acted like their own children had died. You had to be prepared to discuss the matter, and be silent about it, too, when that was called for, for a long while after that. So no one was fooling around this time. They were going to scoot off and play it safe.

Not him, though. A couple of items could get scratched off his to-do list if he sat this one out and had the place to himself. He’d squatted under a window for most of the day, crawling here and there for supplies, and clocked a good bit of the mayhem going on outside.

It wasn’t as if a monster had stormed through town. But, still, that was something out of a movie yesterday. The Baldwins could sure hustle. Sometimes it was good to see other families, like the Baldwins, just fall over on their own lawn, squirming in the rain. He didn’t mean that it was good to see the Baldwins suffer. He wasn’t like that. He didn’t enjoy a family down on their front lawn like that, not especially, with one of them resorting to words. Very nearly coming to blows. That wasn’t something he was aware he enjoyed.

It was just that there were certain people you have known for a long time, since before there were children between them. The Baldwins, when he’d first met them, always seemed to have such hot, red skin. They were always exercising. But then, of course, winter, fall, winter, illness, accidents, another winter, years and years of rain, all told, and then whoever had been working on the Baldwins, crafting them just so, seemed to have finished the project and moved on. The Baldwins were complete. Tag ‘em and bag ‘em, he thought. But still alive, of course. He wasn’t imagining them dead already or anything like that. You could picture someone dead without wishing they were dead. Those were two different things.

The point being, even though you didn’t realize it, you’d come to a very fixed opinion of the Baldwins. A threat assessment. Mrs. Baldwin, for instance, had not seemed capable, in all the time he had known her, of making those sorts of sounds, which yesterday traveled easily into his house, as if she were standing right next to him, and also what she did with her body to her children. It had helped him, watching from the window, to realize this. A creature has a secret. You should never think it doesn’t.

Surely his neighbors had likewise watched Fowler out in his yard, shoveling the walk, washing his car. He painted the house every six years. He cleaned the chimney every fall. He didn’t shingle his own roof, but he was out there when the roofing crew staged their scaffold, and he could huddle and confer when
It was called for, participate in various tribal formations. A certain message had been sent. He controlled the evidence. His neighbors must have felt they had a pretty good idea of him. Their sense of what he could do.

The question was, did Mrs. Baldwin know everything there was to know about herself? Or had she been surprised?

In some sense, the person doing the crafting—whatever crafted the Baldwins—almost owed it to them, to let them know their full capabilities up front, so there weren’t just those sudden surprises in terms of anger or actions that the person had maybe long ago ruled out for herself. Obligations should be met. It wasn’t right that a person should have a hidden feature and not know about it.

Luckily he’d found a backpack to stash the stuff in. If the girl cared for the backpack, which he figured she must, since it was on her bed, then that was one more thing she’d be pleased to see.

When he got her up to the hut. After he’d solved some of the logistics. Acquisition. Transport. If the hut was even there anymore. So far, when he pictured it, he could not summon any shapes out of the darkness. The visualization was proving difficult. One’s imagination often failed.

Fowler walked home, the backpack raised over his head. He was careful not to get anything dirty, impossible as that was. If anyone came along, it’d be a sorrow, but he could sink the backpack into the mud. Objects like that seemed to reappear in the girl’s room over time, in different colors and shapes, so he could always fetch them again, but, well.

At home, Fowler stashed the girl’s backpack, peeled off his mud-stiffened clothing and dropped himself into the hot bath. He warmed a soup for lunch, then dialed into the news. A water volume report was coming up later in the hour. Numbers on the flood so far. How much of it would make the news.

The news never reported on the mountain roads. Too few people lived up there. Possibly no one. A crushed hut wouldn’t make the news.

The girl’s diary listed her top 10 favorite things. Some of them were people. Her mother and dad. But they weren’t invited. They had spent enough time with their daughter. Time’s up. Other items could be crossed off the list. If a hut came down, and its contents spilled, what would they find? A girl’s pillow. A basket of stuffed animals. In the backpack today was a poster he’d had to fold. When it went back up in the hut, with a thumb tack, it would have creases. There were four little guys in the poster. No names. They looked stunned, like they’d opened up the wrong door. One of them held a raccoon.

A set of markers and a pad. A blanket with a picture pattern of some people Fowler couldn’t place. Certainly they were famous. More stuff from that top dresser drawer. He would just reach in and see what came back out. He tried not to interpret it. What you did on a dig was you collected artifacts and kept your own ideas out of it. Your own ideas almost always led to trouble.

He could just as well take a sliver of wood from the floor in her room. A dollop of Sheetrock from inside her closet. All throughout the house, her yard. He could scrape enough pieces to where, at the mountain hut, there would have been enough. Where did it stop, and why not her father, her mother, her friends? All of them brought, in pieces or whole, to the hut, which could never hold it all. It was all getting too crowded already, but there was no way to know where it ended.

What you’re trying to do is make yourself whole. Which it’s stupid to think another person’s bones can’t help you with. And then the thing of not shitting in your own backyard.

In the same way it didn’t pay to say the girl’s name, it didn’t pay to think about her. It didn’t pay to go into her house. It didn’t pay to leave her house alone. It didn’t pay to know where she went to school and what her schedule was each day of the week, when school let out and practice began. Band or sport. Musical instrument or study group. Nothing paid. You got an answer and nothing broke open. Something still felt closed off, unfinished. Was it an imperative to seek out what did pay? Was there an obligation to be met?

Two creatures, built of cells, fueled on blood. A system of bones at the core. If they died in the same area, or were buried together, and then, hundreds of years later, were found by archaeologists, the archaeologists might easily think that they had stumbled across the remains of a single creature. There would be a way to reassemble these bones, of him and the girl, for instance, if they had died or were buried together in the same area, into one beast on their wire frame. There would be redundant bones, two of each, but a bigger and a smaller, and it would be just as easy to tell a story about this creature, to create an exhibit, to show it to children, or whatever they called their young, who could stand and look at it in awe.

The carcass of a single creature. It was just that the bones of this creature had gone into scatter, and they needed to be gathered up. Put in one place.

At around dinnertime, a trooper came to the door.

The sun was going down. A disgusting spectacle. It wasn’t a given that the sunset would be something universally considered beautiful. At the outset of things, when that feature was put into place, he didn’t think it was all at a given.

There were two troopers when Fowler opened up. One right there on his doorstep, the other leaning against a Jeep down in the street. Water to his knees.

“Evening rounds,” said the trooper. “Safety check. Passing through. Saw that your lights were on.” The trooper squinted past him into the house.

“OK,” said Fowler. “All’s well here. We’re doing fine.”

Lots of lights on all over the...
neighborhood. Was the trooper going to every house?

They stood talking on the steps. A bad spot of weather, they agreed. Too much rain collected in a place that couldn’t hold it. So down it came. Pretty fast, actually. The trooper had once used his speed gun on a flash flood, he told Fowler. Clocked it faster than a car. And if the ground was too warm, and too goddamn loose, then forget it. Too much of the mountain peels away and you can’t stop it.

Fowler agreed. He had often stood with another person, discussing recent phenomena, and found agreement on everything that could not be done. It was shameful to bond over powerlessness. Shameful. Here he was doing it again.

“Anyone else home?” Asked the trooper. “Wife?”

“No, Sir,” said Fowler. “She’s up in Rooneville.”

“No kids?”

“Not yet.” Fowler crossed his fingers and held them up. Wish I may I wish I might.

Just words in his head he would not share.

“OK, well,” said the trooper. “I’m supposed to do my best to talk you folks out of your houses. That’s my best. I’ve done it.”

“Oh yeah, other people stuck it out?” Fowler asked, looking up the street. He’d seen no one today. Heard nothing.

Witnesses, was the worry. Except what had he really done? Just the one home invasion, although that was a strong way to name it, with no one being home. A few folks. Here and there. Holed right up like you, no doubt. But look, we could get you to dry ground, no charge. Pack a bag real quick. Better safe than sorry.”

“Right. Or both.”

“What’s that?”

“Safe and sorry.”

Well, he should not have said that. “Sorry about what?” asked the trooper.

He couldn’t find an answer. This man sure could talk and now here Fowler was, answering.

“Just a lot of suffering,” Fowler said finally. “For the people who suffer. I’m sorry about it.”

The trooper gave Fowler a pretty long look.

“Anyway, good thing you’re up here on this rise.”

“Good luck for us,” agreed Fowler. “Plus the stilts.”

“What’s that?”

“Got the house up on stilts. Even last time with, what was it, six feet of it coming right through town, we kept it pretty dry in here.”

“Good for you,” said the trooper. He looked around. “You’ve got a nice little situation. You all take care.”

“We had the work done when we bought the house. Never could have gotten a mortgage without it.”

Stupid to keep talking. When someone leaves the conversation, you let them go. That was obvious. Never keep talking. Just let them go. If he ever had to write a manual, for how to be a person, that would be in there, right at the top. Just look for the silence and be the first to seize it.

The trooper turned back. “So, no children in the house, huh?”

That seemed to be a funny way to ask. Fowler looked at the trooper and tried to make the question go away with his face.

“No,” he said. Simple was best. It also happened to be true, which made him more uneasy.

Fowler saw himself doing unspeakable things. That didn’t mean he’d do them. He’d come to terms with that difference a long time ago.

“I had to ask,” explained the trooper, waving as he left.

Had to ask. Fowler knew the feeling. He thought of all the things that he had to ask, too, and that he never would ask. The things he wouldn’t say. The things he wouldn’t think. Statements waiting inside him, if only the right listening device were deployed.

He couldn’t sleep so well that night. Rain and mud and rain again, and then a shudder in the house, a kind of low thunder that shook the room.

Weather like this could peel back a mountain. A hut had no foundation. It sat on rocks. When the earth softened to mud, and the rocks shifted, then the hut was nothing. It was merely another grave, unearthed, sliding off, with no bodies in it yet. No one questioned an empty grave. It was often just mistaken for a hole. No one noticed that empty graves were everywhere, inside houses and out, on mountains and right in town. Areas being readied for the dead. All areas.

Fowler had to feel it didn’t matter. He was in his grave already. They both were. He and the girl. Their graves were on the move. The question was how best to stop them, fix them in place. That was the question.

When he finally got out of bed, in pure darkness, he confirmed that his power was down. Streetlights, too. Nothing in the hills. No light, and too little sound. Water and heat and everything, finished for a while. How he had kept power this long was a mystery.

How big the outage was, along with its long-term forecast, would remain...
unknown for a bit. He had a radio that took batteries, but the men who spoke on the overnight broadcast had little to say. Farmers and thinkers and worriers. Sensibilities from another time. Imaginary creatures with old sad voices whose message, perhaps, had never been clear. If they ever had information he could use, he’d found, they withheld it from him, in ways that could seem intentional. A promise of what they might be discussing, which they never did discuss.

He had a flashlight. He had a telephone land line that used to work, though he hadn’t checked it in a good while. Phone calls were not his specialty, though he was capable of receiving them should one come along. He’d be ready.

Probably he had candles and matches if he wanted to go and look. This was the sort of thing you did when you had a partner in the darkness, a blackout friend, Marjorie used to say. Light up some candles and make a home out of it. Marjorie had always been pretty good about keeping a kit for times like this. She’d get him to fill the tub with water, to help the toilet along when the pump was off. You’d want to move that water out of your home. Keep a little bucket by the tub. Sometimes the bustle and panic was for nothing, and sometimes he was grateful that she’d thought of it.

For a minute he wondered if she was out of power wherever she was, too, but then figured that it wouldn’t be too likely. Not that he knew for sure. Roonville was just a town name he’d given the trooper. There were lots of good town names, each of them as likely as the other. Each the name of some place you went to die. You could give them out and they seemed to work. She was asleep somewhere, he would bet, unless she’d gone and leapt a time zone, which wasn’t really like her. She was safe and warm. She would wake up soon and make tea. He could see it as if it was happening right in front of him. He could hear her voice anytime he wanted to.

Probably what he would do was sit up and wait for morning. The time right now was unclear. It could be midnight or it could be 4:00 a.m. Something might have happened and he would not know it. Something big. He hoped it was closer to day. Waiting wasn’t his specialty.

From his kitchen window he could look to where the sun would be, expecting advance notice of some kind, but right now there was nothing out there, no lights in the hills, none in the sky. The power outage would seem complete. From far away was the whole planet dark? He’d wait a little bit, then get up and look, then wait again, and then, maybe, if things seemed stuck out there, in terms of the sun, some kind of rupture, he’d move his chair to where he wouldn’t even have to get up. He could sit there looking for it, be the first to see it, a front-row seat.

Some people, apparently, suffered a mental disturbance where they were afraid the sun wasn’t going to come up. It was a fear and it had a name. His wife had read about it. She said these people had to be consoled at night, but you couldn’t console them. There was a kind of therapy for it, but she didn’t remember what it was. Supposedly it didn’t much help. They were as certain as you could be about anything. They fought you off and yelled.

Fowler pictured these people in a dark house, holding each other, trembling. When the sun finally came up they stood and shook themselves, relieved. They’d be embarrassed, apologizing to everyone. What a lot of fuss over nothing. They kept looking out the window to make sure the sun was still there. Weeping and hugging each other, shaking their heads, feeling foolish. Then the day, of course, advanced, took a turn, deepened, the afternoon came on strong, and they felt a pull again, a terrible suspicion. They went outside, staring and pointing, and they watched and wept, holding each other as tightly as they could, as the sun went down again, for what genuinely felt like the last time on earth.

A fear like that doesn’t just come out of nowhere. Some people always knew, ahead of all the others, what to be watching out for. One day, sooner or later, those people wouldn’t be wrong.

And where would he be? He wondered. Would he be complete? Would he have done whatever it took, no matter what, to make himself whole?

From The Boys of Summer

What a summer of tragedy. With my stickball swing, I’m not much of a hardball hitter. A baseball bat weighs as much as five broomsticks. I can’t pull and I haven’t any power. My arm is weak. I would be all right at first base because I’ve mastered catching thrown balls in the hall on St. Marks Place. But throws can be short, and a hardball bounces erratically off dirt, especially the pebbly, grassless Berkshire soil of Diamond 2 at Camp Al-Gon-Kwit (not depicted in the brochure). I am the third best player in Bunk 4. I am good enough to play the first half of Al-Gon-Kwit’s game against Camp Ellis (named for the owner) and to line a single to right field. But Wally Siedman (two doubles) is a better ball player and so is Lonnie Katz, who has long, sleek, veiny muscles and cracks a home run down the left-field line. I am no idiot. I know about Hephaestus and Haydn and about Tinker and Matty and McGraw and I have even, not telling my mother so as not to give her satisfaction, read a little of Ivanhoe. If, in my bunk alone, Siedman and Katz are already better, will there be room for me on the Dodgers? And first base! In practice, I lean toward a short throw which bounces off a stone and hits the side of my head. It is a minute before double vision passes. “You’re a pretty fair ball player,” says Uncle Flit Felderman, my counselor, rubbing my head as we sit on an embankment. He is in dental college and understands first aid.

“I’m not crying, Uncle Flit. A hit in the head just makes your eyes water.”

“You’re all right,” Uncle Flit says. “With a little more size, you’ll start to pull. But not first base. The outfield.”

—Roger Kahn
Mother Tongue
A Tablet Original: Searing language, with God’s help

BY DORIT RABINYAN

My mother would lose her cool every time we asked where she was going. My siblings and I, if we saw her dressing up to go out, if we asked just matter of factly, without emotion, “hey, Mom, where are you going?” she’d do nothing but ignore us loudly. Any other question she would have gladly answered, but this one, this trivial one, for some reason made her furious. According to her unwritten laws, we had to wait quietly until she herself would say she was just “running to the post office for a second” or “running errands” or “just going to Tel Aviv.”

My mother believed that the very question—“where to?”—ruined the entire purpose of her leaving the house. With all her heart, she believed that if she were to declare her destination out loud, something would go wrong, something would get out of hand, and her entire trip would be in vain. This is why she pretended never to hear the question. If she graced us with an answer, it would’ve been the same as admitting that all her efforts were doomed to fail.

But my siblings and I, we never internalized this fatalistic logic of hers. And since she never answered, we repeatedly asked: “Mom, where are you going? Where to, Mom?” Then she would lose it and let us have it: “Where! Where! Where! How many times are you going to ask me that? Nowhere!” And we watched her wildly shake off her shoes, throw down her purse and coat, cancel her plans, and settle back into her house dress. That’s how extreme she was.

My grandmother, I remember seeing her once react similarly to this question. So maybe it was some sort of ancient Persian superstition, some secret code that I never took the trouble to figure out whether it was familial or cultural—if my mother inherited this weird whim from my grandmother, or if it were just a thing that Persian Jewish families did, another of the mannerisms, though certainly not the most bizarre, they brought with them from Iran.

Anyway, this particular fear of my mother’s never passed down to me. Of all the soothing spells, of all the obsessive slogans I’ve internalized from our family’s lexicon of anxieties, this particular superstition somehow skipped over me. Maybe it’s because, when it came to this particular quirk, my father wouldn’t play along (which really makes the case that it was some private mania of my grandmother’s, which was passed down to my mother and made it no further). I don’t remember him getting particularly annoyed by our wondering innocently—“Dad, where are you going?”—and maybe I don’t remember because this question was really never addressed to him. Because every morning, our father would leave the house, headed to one place and one place only without variation: “to work.”

His lack of participation in this particular obsession of my mother’s is noteworthy, because, of the two of them, my father was the more anxious one. It seems to me that my mother, had she not bound her fate with that of a sweet and sensitive and gentle man like him, would’ve been less scared of the world around her. He was an authoritative father who inspired trust but not necessarily confidence. His sensitive eyes, some neurotic tremor in his voice, his constant worrying about us. In their 40 years of marriage there was, between them, great love. I believe even if she had some tendency toward worrying back then, when she met him at 17, that life with him had made it much more severe. She became this way out of complete solidarity with her husband.

You also have to remember that in the beginning of their life together, when they were young parents and still newcomers to Israel, disaster struck. They lost a child. I was 2 1/2 years old when the sick baby was born. For nine months they frequented the hospital, until my baby brother passed away there. My mother sunk into her grief. For days on end she would sit listlessly on the balcony, hiding her eyes from me. My father had been struck by loss for the third time: Two years earlier he lost his brother who drowned at sea, and a year earlier his father died suddenly. This trauma shaped his fatherhood, shaped her motherhood, shaped our home and the language they used to speak—and mainly not to speak—about death.

How anxious they were about the power of words, anxious about the magical power of the things that came out of their mouths. Anxious that what was said, what was passed from their minds to their lips, might spark some undesirable force to spring into action. Anxious with a relentless fear of how fragile everything was, how destined to crumble and die. This anxiety was validated daily by even the most matter-of-fact and banal utterance. This is how it was between the two of them: an anxiety lurking in each sentence they spoke to each other, in everything they said to us, an anxiety that had its inherent logic, like grammar or punctuation.

Most exalted was “with God’s help.” There was no quota in our home for how many “with God’s helps” you could use, certainly not when it came to the divine sphere of your heart’s desires and of congratulations, which unleashed a torrent of “with God’s helps” while simultaneously sighing: “Amen, with God’s help, amen.” But even with life’s little bureaucracies, almost every sentence—whether it was about going to the bank the next day or shopping for groceries next week—began or concluded with “with God’s help.” These words, which were so overused they grinded together into one—with God’s help—were loaded with hope and terror alike. They guaranteed the constant recognition of how small we all were.
here on earth when measured against the mighty will of fate. It was also an offering to appease fate, a small token, delivered again and again, incessantly, with God's help, a self-conscious reminder of what these words meant and how important they were.

On the other hand, as a dam of sorts keeping us safe from danger, we had an endless torrent of “we shouldn’t know from such things.” This expression is common in Israeli society, but in our house it was elevated into an obsession. Unlike its secular brother, “God forbid,” or even the nonchalant “Lord save us,” our “we shouldn’t know from such things” was an active act of refusal, as if the terror that arose as soon as death was mentioned helped us keep at bay the knowledge that it was inevitable, insulating ourselves from the obvious. This is why it was customary, in our house, to preface any talk of potential dangers with “we shouldn’t know from such things” as if saying “I’m about to say something menacing, so take a deep breath.”

It would play out like this: It was dinner time, and my mother would recall something she had heard during the day—say, some neighbor or acquaintance having been rushed to the hospital—and wanted to tell my father the news. She would never just deliver the information straightforward, but would instead begin by saying “we shouldn’t know from such things, we shouldn’t know from such things.”

Like some secret password between them, my father would raise his eyes from the plate in front of him and say somberly “we shouldn’t know from such things.”

Only then, when permission was given and preparations were made for the menacing statement, would she tell him what had happened. He would then click his tongue, maybe bite his lip, and ask for more details. And then again, to indicate that this chapter of their conversation had now concluded, they would seal it with another ceremonial indication, this time with their eyes closed: “We shouldn’t know from such things.”

Countless “we shouldn’t know from such things” flowed between them, back and forth. If they were watching TV and happened to see pictures from some disaster site or car crash, they would recite “we shouldn’t know from such things” repeatedly, in some ongoing mutter. Astonished, he would vary from time to time with a muted “Lord help us,” and she, clicking her tongue and speaking in a singsong voice she had fashioned for herself at some point, would say “let it be far far from any home in Israel.”

Language was their gateway into the realm of the imagination. And there, in their imagination, dwelled the most evil of thoughts, the colossal anxiety of all the bad things that could happen, and another, more minor anxiety suggesting that words have a generative power that could make them come to life. The obsessive repetition of those key sentences gave them a sense of control: They were like a speed bump built into the sentence, like insulation, like a shock absorber.

Jewish tradition, in the countless ceremonies it created to set distinct categories apart—the sacred and the mundane, the pure and the profane, and so on—has also created separate forms of speech. In all matters pertaining to the living and the dead, Hebrew sets apart mentioning those who have passed—about them we say “may their memory be a blessing”—and those who are still alive—“may they enjoy a long life.” The hamsa that Jews hailing from Arab countries have adopted plays a similar role, a literal amulet against the evil eye. But this symbolic terminology of words that create distinctions within the sentence became, for my parents a real compulsive disorder.

Because they wouldn’t just say “may their memory be a blessing” on the one hand and “may they enjoy a long life” on the other. Even the fuller, more formal forms of setting the living and the dead apart—expressions like “to make thousands of distinctions between them”—weren’t enough to calm their fear of mentioning the dead and the living in the same breath. In our home, after saying “to make thousands of distinctions” (which they’d usually say in pairs or triplets), my parents, speaking of the living, added a few strict “may they be healthy.”

My siblings and I were always referred to as “the children, may they be healthy.” And if we got carried away and spoke of something that made them anxious, they would immediately let us have it, silencing us with a “Lord save us, we shouldn’t know from such things.” And if one of us dared speak of plans or intentions to do something “tomorrow” or be somewhere “next week,” my father would raise his voice: “With God’s help! Say with God’s help!”

It was as if someone were always listening, taking notes, and might misinterpret that the words ‘Dorit has gone’ really meant, God forbid, that ‘Dorit was dead.’

Particularly crazy was their distress, that grew stronger with the years, over all the forms of the verb “to go,” a tic which found its way to us children as we grew older, becoming a family tradition. To my parents’ ears, the morbid echo that arose from saying the verb “to go” in the same sentence as the name of one of their living children posed a real and present danger to our well-being. This is why every saying, even the most concrete (‘Did Dorit go yet?”), was immediately and automatically paired with something like “Did Dorit go yet, may she be healthy?”

It was as if someone were always listening, taking notes, and might misinterpret that the words “Dorit has gone” really meant, God forbid, that “Dorit was dead.” As if this menacing string of words, once written down somewhere, might actually come true. Which is why it had to be refuted right away, which is why balance had to be created after “gone” with a “may she be healthy.” When spoken indirectly this makes some sense, but with direct speech it sounds almost ridiculous: “Dorit, when did you go, may you be healthy?”

“The tongue has the power of life and death.” This dramatic charge contained in a verse from the book of Proverbs (18:21), made even more stinging the story my mother would tell me when I was a girl, a story in which, to my horror, the metonymic term of the spoken tongue as an actual, physical tongue—the organ that generates speech—was turned from the figurative to the literal.
It was a story she had heard, I assume, from her parents when she was a girl in Iran. And she in turn, as a young mother in Israel, told it to us in Hebrew. But unlike the fables of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm she would read to us at bedtime, stories whose translations were shorn of all cruelties, my mother’s Persian morality tale remained as uncensored as the original. I wonder now if it were etched into the souls of my siblings as deeply as it was into my own, I wonder if they, who are younger than me—and she, too, as she would repeat the story again and again—were left with such a deep impression.

Once upon a time there was a boy who stole an egg and brought it home to his mother. The mother was very happy with the egg, and she hugged the boy and praised him. Years went by, and when the boy was a young man, he snuck into the king’s stables and stole the king’s horse, and he was eventually caught and sentenced to death. Standing on the gallows, he was asked for his final request, and he said, “my mother, just let me give her one final farewell kiss.”

The elderly woman emerged from the crowd, weeping, and came by to hug her son. The young man leaned over and kissed his mother on her cheek, kissed her on the lips. And then, to the horror of everyone, he bit her tongue hard. People watching recoiled in horror. The executioners asked him: “Why did you do this to your mother?” And he replied: “When I was a boy and I stole an egg, my mother did not punish me and did not forbid me from stealing, but rather she encouraged me to steal more and more. She’s to blame for my execution today.”

Only now, as I put down in writing what I had known just orally, do I realize that the story has to do with the relationship between a mother and a son, and that this educational tale, designed to help children refrain from stealing, contains the concrete image of my mother telling it to me. The message, in other words, is also delivered in reverse: the story’s heroine is a terrible mother, while the person telling the story is, at least in her own eyes, a benevolent mother.

Another reversal: The young listener, even though the mother is the one who has her tongue painfully cut off by the son, identifies with the terrible pain of the parental figure. Here, there is no simplistic dichotomy of good guys versus bad guys—who here is the protagonist and who the antagonist? Who is good and who is evil? The mother or the son? And my own mother, telling me this cruel story, is she bad or good?

As my mother drew nearer to the story’s climax, to the moment of the kiss, I would watch her lips move with terror. My gaze was fixed on her words and the movement of her tongue, mesmerized by the spittle-flecked twinkling of her sharp teeth. From within the darkness of her mouth would emerge force and vulnerability alike, destructiveness and sensuality, growing embodied in front of my very eyes as the story was told. The metaphorical tongue, the sinful one, which I already knew would receive fierce punishment, and my mother’s telling tongue, red and meaty, the soft kiss about to turn into a terrible severing—was all too alive and too close, too real.

The old woman’s shriek. The terrible shock in her eyes. Her open jaw, filling with blood, black and empty. The crowd’s astonished growl. And then the son’s stormy expression, the spasm of disgust on the faces of those watching, as he spits out the severed and bloody lump of flesh that now rolls at the feet of the executioners. And even before that frightful and biblical drama that so stirred my imagination, was that intimate kiss, the fierceness of how forbidden it was. I was 5 or 6 by the time I knew the story well, and that kiss, even if I couldn’t say why, I already knew it was foul.

The more I think about it, the more complex the story seems, and the more the son’s vengeful act seems like some sort of castration fantasy directed at the mother. On the cusp of death, the son realizes a forbidden sexuality with his mother, while simultaneously punishing her for this realization. Also, he gets the last word. Once she’s maimed, once her tongue is cut out, the mother can no longer argue her own innocence. She’s silenced. She doesn’t even have the voice to ask for forgiveness. And so, mother and son return to the primal sin, that existed before that egg. I was preoccupied with that egg, thinking about its oval fragility inside the son’s sweaty palm. Thinking about him, running, excited, likely to shatter that egg at any moment. And that poor mother, I’ve thought a lot about her hunger, how hungry she must have been that she was so thrilled with one single egg? What could one egg do to sate the hunger of one person, let alone two? I was mad at the mother and I felt sorry for her, I resented her, and I forgave her all at the same time.

And suddenly I notice one more thing I never noticed before: Why is there no father in the story? Where is the boy’s father? And how come I never wondered about that before? And if indeed instilling the fundamentals of ethics is the father’s role—the father who is supposed to castrate the son’s Oedipal desire for his mother—then maybe it’s because of the father’s absence that the son has turned into a thief and eventually coveted the king’s horse? Freud might have noted here that the king is himself the conceded father in this story: The young man covets not the king’s horse but his phallus.

It wasn’t for nothing that my mother repeatedly told me this story. I was 7 or 8, already a veteran at swiping the occasional coin from her wallet, when one morning I outdid myself and stole a mighty 100 lira bill from my father.

It was early. Everyone was still asleep. His shirt, the one he took off when he came home the previous night from work, was draped on the couch. And from its pocket something was protruding—a thick wad of bills, wrapped in a rubber band. I reached out and touched it. There were many hundred-lira bills there. I peeled one off secretly, and put the heavy wad back into the shirt pocket—did someone say Oedipal?—into my panties.

The smell of my father’s sweat when he came home each night. The sour, manly scent of his shirts, of his cotton undershirts. These were the smells that tickled my nose when I hugged him as he came home each night. Sleepwalking, forever missing him, I waited to hear the
sound of his footsteps coming up the stairs, waited for him before I fell totally asleep. His clothes smelled like “work,” his perpetual lover, my mother’s only nemesis, and therefore mine as well.

With the bill deep in my panties, my heart pounded as I slipped back into bed. A little while later, when the entire household woke up, I pretended that I, too, was just rising. On my way to school, the same path as always, I stopped over at Alpha, the neighborhood stationery store. The owner must’ve been surprised to find me waiting for him so early in the morning in front of his store, and he must’ve been even more surprised by the large bill I handed him. It wasn’t pencils, nor cardboards nor a notebook—which eventually did me in was what I ended up buying, and how eager I was to buy it: scented erasers that were then the object of every girl’s craving. They had fantastic shapes and colors, so bright, and the smells they emitted, sharp smells of something new, never faded away.

With my leftover change, all dizzy, I went to Victor’s kiosk (or, as it was officially called, announced by the lettering on the parasol out in front, Tony Montana’s Hangout) and bought 30 round bubble gums, hard and brilliant little balls, filling up a bag with every color in the bubble gum jar.

The very same day I was caught, as soon as I returned home in the afternoon. Shamefaced, I had to return all the dozens of pretty erasers after Alpha’s owner ratted me out to my mother andI, too, was just rising. On my way to school, the same path as always, I stopped over at Alpha, the neighborhood stationery store. The owner must’ve been surprised to find me waiting for him so early in the morning in front of his store, and he must’ve been even more surprised by the large bill I handed him. It wasn’t pencils, nor cardboards nor a notebook—which eventually did me in was what I ended up buying, and how eager I was to buy it: scented erasers that were then the object of every girl’s craving. They had fantastic shapes and colors, so bright, and the smells they emitted, sharp smells of something new, never faded away.

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The very same day I was caught, as soon as I returned home in the afternoon. Shamefaced, I had to return all the dozens of pretty erasers after Alpha’s owner ratted me out to my mother and told her all about that morning’s wild purchase. But the round bubble gums I had time enough to chew, in haste, in the field behind our house. I sat on a rock and chewed them all, one by one, until I had time enough to chew, in haste, in the field behind our house. I sat on a rock and chewed them all, one by one, until I felt sick and my jaws hurt.

When I came back home, my mother punished me. I still have a scar from the educational lesson she taught me that day. The scar is on the back of my right hand, thin and pale and, on wintry days, silvery and shimmering. Her method of punishment wasn’t original, but something she must have seen as a girl. She punished me the same way they punished children in Iran when they were caught stealing, the same punishment never meted out to the boy who stole the egg, the same punishment that would have saved his mother her shame.

It happened in the kitchen. She stood above me and lit a match, taking a long moment and letting the flame burn, and then blew it out. Then she purred her lips, grabbed my hand, and brought the still smoking and blackened match to the back of my hand, with me screaming in her lap the entire time. It was a cruel punishment by today’s standards, and even by the standards of back then, Israel in the 1980s, but more than the searing touch of the match on my skin, I remember what I saw in her two eyes as they reflected the fire, remember her fright and her tears for what she was doing. I remember her quivering hand and her hoarse shout: “The next time your hand will burn! Remember and never take anything that isn’t yours!”

“And the child grew up, and Pharaoh would kiss and hug him, and he would take Pharaoh’s crown and put it on his own head. And the magicians of Egypt sat there and said: We are fearful of he who takes your crown and puts it on his own head, lest he ends up taking away your kingdom from you. Some said Moses should be killed, and some said he should be burned. They tested him and brought before him bowls with gold and coals. If he reaches for the gold, he has knowledge and will be killed. And if he reaches for the coal, he has no knowledge and will be spared. They set the bowls before him and immediately he reached for the gold, and the angel Gabriel came and pushed away his hand and it grabbed the coal. And Moses put his scorched hand in his mouth and burnt his tongue, and became tongue-tied and stuttered.”

Right here, in the tale told by our rabbinic elders about Moses in Pharaoh’s court, everything comes together: the greedy instinct that reaches out for the egg, for the wad of bills, the king’s crown; the scaring by fire, whether by match or by coals; and the tongue, maimed, casstrated, punished for desire.

Because, really, what was it my mother wanted when she told me again and again of “the boy who stole the egg”? She wanted me not to go out into the world all bold and covetous, she wanted me to stifle my whims so I wouldn’t be punished and bring shame upon her. In doing so, she placed me in a paradoxical situation, a lose-lose scenario. If I had too much free will, if I developed an appetite and grabbed all I could, she would be punished for not raising me right. And if I obeyed her and her fears and became a docile daughter, she would castrate my freedom. It was this terrible balance: Would it be the mother who would condemn her daughter to a mute life, or would it be the daughter who caused her mother’s tongue to be cut out?

In fact, this was the message of all the panicky slogans recited in our home, day and night. With all the nonstop humming of “we shouldn’t know from such things” and “may she be healthy” and “to make thousands of distinctions,” my parents signaled that words and the spoken language itself were deadly and dangerous, that they contained a destructive force that one just had to rein in. By castrating their spontaneous speech, that natural speech that trusted in life (“With God’s help! Say with God’s help!”), my parents again and again bit their very own tongues.

The angel Gabriel’s intervention, the burning coal he shoved into the soft mouth of infant Moses, saved the latter from death, but the traumatizing burn severely stunted his speech. And I, a cheeky Israeli child, nicknamed “Pepper” by my Iranian uncles, a tribute to my quick and sharp tongue. Language, when I learned how to read and write, gave me pleasure, and, with time, tools to create worlds of my own. My two hands—the one seared by the match and the one that still remembers fire—move on the keyboard, telling stories. And yet, something is always stuttering within. Maybe it’s my guilty heart. With the bowl of gold lying in front of me, something about the freedom to reach out my hand and greedily grab whatever I want resonates with its own strong logic. My parents were mortified by the power of words, and I, terrified by the power of desire, have made words my life.

Translated from the Hebrew by Liel Leibovitz.

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David Blaine Goes Up and Up and Up to Heaven

Can the great illusionist make suffering, anxiety, and death disappear?

BY JEREMY SIGLER

W

e hear the swish of blood coursing through a gray heart. Or is it a spade? It's actually a “d” and a “b” (db)—the David Blaine logo—animated to appear as if it's been welded out of twisted wrought iron.

Enter “Jen,” i.e., world-famous actress Jennifer Lawrence, kicking back on a FaceTime call with Blaine, getting into character to assist in a piece of magic that, while designed to reach millions, will create an impression of two pals just killing time. Blaine instructs Jen to take out her own deck and “riffle shuffle” the cards (creating a hypnotic ASMR effect). He then asks her to choose a card in her mind and to say it out loud. “Jack of clubs,” says Jen tentatively. Blaine then instructs her to choose a number between one and 52 (she chooses 23) and to flip each card until she gets to that number. At the 23rd card, Jen flips over the jack of clubs.

This is when the public display of mentalism becomes extremely alluring, as Lawrence, a highly trained actress, warps the fourth wall of 5G. “No!” she screams, in a tone ordinarily reserved for horror films. “You’re a witch! You’re a witch! No!” We cut back to Blaine who smiles like an unpopular eighth grader who has finally found a way to interest the prettiest girl in his class.

But it’s not yet time to press the yellow thumbs-up emoji, not until Lawrence unleashes her plea: “One day before you die, are you gonna write a book and tell us? You CAN’T die! If you started a religion, I would follow it!”

Blaine smiles. He looks satisfied.

Hasn't Blaine already started a religion? Or at least a cult? Blaine is shaman to the stars. He’s like a very dark Rick Rubin. In fact, the two bearded gurus (or Jew-rews) are chummy. A podcast hosted by Malcolm Gladwell features them in a conversation, Rubin having come out as a magic lover and devoted fan of db. If rap impresario Rubin is a touch rabbinical, then Blaine, by comparison, has been touched by evil. He's basically overwhelmed by the room's demonic aura. Blaine shuffles and asks Harrison to think of a card (nine of hearts), as he teleports this card (nine of hearts) through a mysterious portal of time and space into the juicy interior of a navel orange.

“Here’s what we’ll do. Do me a favor …” Blaine says, scanning and commanding the kitchen counter. He asks Harrison to grab a ripe orange out of a bowl of fruit, hold it steady on a cutting board, and hand him a knife, so that he may perform a C-section on the orange, and deliver the nine of hearts. Harrison's eyes go into a hypnotic spiral, and he begins to breathe heavily, as if he's going into cardiac arrest. He turns to Blaine and says: “Get the fuck out of my house.”

I replayed the video, pausing to study the intricacies of Blaine’s sleight-of-hand and to reverse engineer his switcheroo. But who would want to debunk David? I’m reminded of Robert Bresson's 1959 masterpiece Pickpocket, and the 2018 Japanese film Shoplifters. The trick, in magic as in theft, is to be one step ahead and to never get caught red-handed.

Blaine’s celebrities who help him pull one over on us, are all of a piece: They’re not just big, they’re the biggest stars that Hollywood has to offer. And Blaine has a way of wedging himself right in there with them, allowing us, as viewers, to feel right at home—at Travolta’s, or sitting on Margot Robbie’s ping pong table watching Blaine tamper with her mind. Robbie—who is certifiably gorgeous—is visibly moved (her eyes get moist) when Blaine reads her mind, takes out a Sharpie, and crudely writes the word “BUNNY” on her sister’s hand. Bunny? Like the generic bunnies magicians pull out of hats? No, this is a personal rabbit that Robbie conjures from deep within. But what matters is the way her astonished coterie of Aussies react—they turn away from Blaine as if to shield themselves from the diabolical force he emits, while Blaine acts unaware of his own mental potency. It’s as if he’s crushed yet another party and blasted his hospitable hosts with evil rays of psychic telepathy. He just can’t help it. “That’s not only weird,” says Robbie, staring at the word “BUNNY,” “but it’s really embarrassing!” She is now blushing as if she’s been exposed.

And Blaine is just as mischievous when he strips Will and the Family Smith, Kanye, Woody (Harrelson), Dave Chapelle … and I almost forgot, Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul (aka Walter White and Jesse, from Breaking Bad). He asks them to hide a six-inch icepick face up under a bunch of tall Styrofoam cups while he’s out of the room. He then marches back in and begins smashing each cup with his bare hand, intuitively
What have we just witnessed? A beautiful optical illusion? A beautiful special effect using cameras and prosthetics? A beautiful, albeit mortifying, work of extreme body piercing? Has Blaine, the beautiful devil, played the ace of spades again, and won? I’m reminded of Full Metal Jacket, where we see the superstition-heavy card tucked under the band of a soldier’s camo-covered helmet along with the graffitied slogan “Born to Kill” and a pack of Marlboro Reds.

If something with this level of ambiguity cannot properly be called magic, then what can? And what is magic anyway? I typed the word into Google and quickly arrived at something called “black magic.” I began to read up on the history of “the left-handed path”—the use of supernatural shamanic powers for selfish intent. I learned that back in the Renaissance, black magic was considered witchcraft. During the Inquisition, all the self-made diviners, charmsiders, wizards and even jugglers were shit out of luck—I mean life. According to the occultist and founder of the church of Satan, Anton LaVey (aka The Black Pope), “the Satanist, being the magician, should have the ability to decide what is just, and then apply the powers of magic to attain his goals.”

And what about believers in magic? What about their goals? Do they (do we) have any say in any of this? According to one of the most pioneering mentalists in the age of radio and television, The Amazing Dunninger, “for those who believe, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not, none will suffice.” Magic may therefore be seen as a game of getting believers to believe, and the nonbelievers to, well, exit the room. And while there’s no room for a WikiLeak in magic, magicians certainly play off our skepticism and are challenged to push the threshold of our willful suspension of disbelief.

Magic has always been a carefully set trap for the consumer. It is merchandise. I can imagine the classic hobbyist browsing the aisle of a local magic shop eying the spine of every cool paperback, pulling various props and kits off the shelf, reading the back of the package, and contemplating: “Should I splurge? Will this be the trick that finally magnetizes their admiration?”

Growing up in the burbs of Charm City in a sea of Baltimorons, I was exposed to a bit of hands-on magic, via my dad, a doctor by profession, and something of an amateur magician. On occasion, he’d pull out his dusty box of props. I seem to remember a velvet cape; a top hat that crushed down into a flat disk; a pistol that shot out a red flag with cartoon letters reading “BANG”; a plastic hollow baton stuffed with an endless chain of linked pink handkerchiefs; and a tricked-out deck of cards that could be made to look pierced by a very sharp pencil—but (Voilà!) without leaving any sign of being punctured. Dad would set up somewhere and invite us all in to view the same show he’d done as a teenager growing up in Stamford, Connecticut, in the ’50s, where he charged admission and ushered in the entire neighborhood, pocketing around a dollar in change.

The magician and the doctor are cut from the same cloth. Originally these two practitioners were one and the same. The first doctors, with their bag of tricks (ointments and remedies), were a bit more performative than today’s cool clinicians plugged into their magic diagnostic tablets. Drugs were administered with far-out incantations, wild dancing, and distorted grimaces. Prior to the white-coat and stethoscope costume, the family physician appeared more like a wily sorcerer putting on a phantasmic show, even when the pocks, rashes, and oozing sores failed to vanish.

The trick I most remember was the Detachable Thumb—a classic. My dad would perform this one on his patients and on his own children. When I saw that thumb tip slide away from the knuckle, I nearly sprained my eyelids. Talk about disbelief. And yet, it is this elementary thumb trick that lies at the root of so many of the most grandiose tricks in magic, like the sexiest of all—the one that employs the buxom blond assistant to (never mind misogyny) get cut in half.

Now that I’ve grown up and debunked the Detachable Thumb, as well as the Tooth Fairy, Santa, Nine-Eleven, and the president, I guess I’ve come to see everything in life as a trick. The cognizant mind prefers to see the detached...
units of life as one fluid truth, in order to construct this atomized fuzzy holistic thing called reality.

Apparently, my dad never outgrew his adolescent enthusiasm for evil, which impelled him in 1987 to throw us into the station wagon and blaze up the Jersey Turnpike to New York City in time for a Sunday matinee of Penn & Teller on Broadway. This was right after the dynamic bound-for-Vegas duo broke through, when they made a cameo doing a three-card monte on the streets of NYC in Run-DMC’s “It’s Tricky” video, which aired on MTV pretty much on the hour.

After my dad got the car parked (it did get towed, by the way), hustled us through FAO Schwarz, Radio City Music Hall, and into and out of a booth at the Russian Tea Room, we hunkered down in a cozy theater to enjoy this obnoxious loudmouth and his Buster Keaton-esque sidekick. But the show wasn’t quite cool enough to hold my adolescent interest. Let’s just say, it wasn’t the Rolling Stones.

Yet the fact that I was witness to a significant moment in the history of magic was not lost on me. Despite my teenage angst, I knew I was experiencing the cutting edge—the avant-garde, the “make it new” (Ezra Pound) moment of magic. Penn & Teller’s gimmick was pretending to FINALLY come clean—pretending, that is, to sacrilegiously teach us all the oldest tricks in the book, pretending to FINALLY come clean—pretending, that is, to sacrilegiously teach us all the oldest tricks in the book. I must have inadvertently exposing a hidden mirror or something. They efficiently escorted me (and my family and parents) out of the room, down the elevator, and back out onto the sidewalk.

I was through with magic, but apparently magic wasn’t through with me. David Blaine, you might say, was on the way to save magic from cheesy sequined capes and jury-rigged rooms. In an early appearance on Conan O’Brien, in 1997, Blaine actually teetered on the cusp of cool. He spoke in a monotone, dressed in a baggy gray sweatshirt and black jeans. And most importantly, he was sporting a pair of Adidas Originals. In 1984, The Fat Boys made these kicks the iconic marker of vintage hip-hop. In “Jailhouse Rap” they wrote, “so I put on Adidas, headed out the door, as I pictured myself, eating more and more.” Two years later, Run-DMC said “my Adidas walk through concert doors, and roam all over museum floors”—at least that’s the way I heard it.

Early Conan-era Blaine is slouched, slumped, and simply nonchalant. He doesn’t speak so much as mumble. He seems unconcerned with ratings. It’s 1997, and his Mediterranean, olive complexion speaks for itself—it’s pre-terrorist chic. His eyes are their own mirrored shades. He gives off a brooding sense of danger, even when merely shuffling a deck of cards. Conan jumps back in shock the minute he appears, as if Satan has entered the studio. And that’s coming from a ginger.

A few years prior, on an earlier incarnation of the Jon Stewart Show airing on the newish MTV cable network, Blaine has not yet learned to walk through the stage doors in his Adidas. He’s still buttoned up in a tucked-in, starchy white shirt. He looks wet behind the ears, as if he’s been buffed up backstage by a pushy Jewish mother-manager. He walks out to a sizzling blues riff, introduced as “a psycho-illusionist” to a room of rowdy teenage boys who are all on their feet. Stewart then begins his intro: “Most of today’s magicians … they’re old, they’re beat! Kreskin? Over. Copperfield? Toast. Siegfried and Roy?”

A huge grin forms—he almost laughs. “I don’t even think they’re magicians, but they’re easily like 500.” He gets the laugh.

Blaine begins a card trick but aborts. “Actually, you know what? I just realized, card tricks don’t play so well from a distance. Let’s not.” He sets down the cards on the coffee table. “Forget this! I’m sorry, I’ve got something better for you.” He spills out a box of 3-inch carpenter’s nails (a magic shop prop if there ever was one), hands a hammer to Jon, who then assists him (as the crowd cheers) by whacking one of the nails up Blaine’s nose. We brace for at least one spurt of blood, as Blaine calms us: “Don’t worry. It’s just an illusion.”

In ’97, when Blaine’s first television special, “David Blaine: Street Magic,” aired on ABC, it was Penn & Teller who endorsed it, saying that it “broke new ground.” A writer in Time also praised Blaine’s style, noting that “his deceptively low-key, ultracool manner leaves...
spectators more amazed than if he’d razzle-dazzled.” Blaine, who claims to have first seen Penn & Teller on MTV (presumably around when I saw them) must have decided to take the Run-DMC thing literally—to go urban. He was soon collaborating with the cameraman who shot the television series *Cops* for Fox.

Blaine did manage to get the kids to huddle around and watch him perform long enough to capture their reactions on tape (I assume he got signatures and paid them for their services), and it is their profound reactions that make the show bounce. In one clip, Blaine tricks a bunch of kids into thinking he’s actually levitating. Is it the Balducci Effect? Or something even more extreme? The hand-held camera focuses on the audience’s contorted faces at a moment of rapture. “How did he do that?” asks one bewildered kid.

2020. Inches of levitation have now grown into 25,000 feet of ascension. Blaine resurfaced, and he wasn’t wearing a mask. And he pulled off arguably his most epic magic trick/endurance stunt to date, brought to us, at inconceivable expense by YouTube Originals. It seems that Blaine was given carte blanche to a nearly three-hour live platform. To do what? To ascend (with us, up close) to a very peaceful, oxygen-depleted place far above the clouds.

Before his ascension, we get to spend time with Blaine on the ground, in his final phase of preparation. It is tense, for sure. We are somewhere in the Mojave Desert in the swing state of Arizona (is this relevant?). We tour the sandy site with Blaine, get introduced to his “team” of leading scientists in aeronautics and astronautics. It’s like Cape Canaveral prior to the Apollo 11 launch in ‘69. Blaine’s stunt has NASA written all over it. Or is he having a pissing contest with Elon Musk, who promises to take us to Mars?

Anyway, Blaine, basking in his highly idiosyncratic blend of ultra-sincerity and con man, explains how hard he has trained in order to minimize risk. He introduces us to his coach, an expert daredevil skydiver named Luke Aikins. He explains that it took 500 jumps to earn his pro skydiving rating, and that he had to get a hot air balloon certificate and even a rarer helium balloon flying certificate. He explains that he has learned the tricky skill of navigating wind currents, while showing us an image of “catastrophic balloon failure.”

Next, he walks us through the biology behind hypoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain, which shuts down the mental functions). And hypothermia, which, at high altitudes causes the body to begin to quiver uncontrollably.

Blaine explains how he will attempt to climb into his parachute only after he ascends past a certain height (a somewhat arbitrary additional challenge). Only then—assuming he is not unconscious—will he release himself from the balloons and skydive back down to earth, pull the rip chord, steering past any trees, power lines, and fences to find a relatively flat place to land. Blaine’s macho team of experts also includes a weatherman who cuts in to inform David that the conditions are perfect but likely to change; he urges him to seize the moment. Blaine seems palpably exhilarated—it is showtime, and you can’t fake predatory fear in the pupils.

The team straps, buckles, and wires him into a wearable harness with a metal arm that reaches like the Statue of Liberty up to the giant bunch of oversized colorful inflated helium balloons and to the welded core of electronics camouflaged within. In other words, Blaine will not actually be gripping the strings of balloons, and hanging by his own weight from his arm, but will be rigged to an armature that will provide considerably more structure.

My mind wanders. Who else, other than astronauts and ETs, will be where he is about to go? I think of the very credible recent report by three commercial pilots of a man coasting along in a jetpack at altitudes only trafficked by 747s. Fake news? Clearly. But nothing seems fake on this YouTube Original. I’m ready to watch (check); the balloons are ready (check); licenses obtained (check); the coaching is complete (check); the parachute is loaded (check); the cameras are all in position (check); the backup oxygen tank (check). Check, check, check and check.

Blaine drops the first of many balloons, and the balloons silently, eerily begin to lift off the ground. He is giddy, as if wandering around the parking lot of a Grateful Dead show taking small hits off a balloon of nitrous oxide.

Blaine explains what motivated him to do this astonishing stunt, which is deceptively hazardous despite its whimsy. We learn that it’s actually inspired, at least in part, by his 9-year-old daughter, Dessa. “My daughter was at the last one when she was 2 years old.” Here he’s referring to “Electrified: One Million Volts Always On” (2012). “It was so difficult and extreme that I decided right then and there that I would find something that would inspire her, not scare her.” He continues, “my hope is that it brings happiness to people for a moment... When I look up and see this,” he says, turning to face the balloons, “it just makes me smile.”

Recently on Joe Rogan’s podcast, Blaine promoted Ascension. He was hyper, almost manic—definitely over the moon about his upcoming stunt, thrilled by his ability to deprive himself of oxygen to the point of blacking out, which has become a form of recreation for him. He is so enthusiastic about this process that Rogan taps his fat cigar, grins, and rolls his eyes. It’s a moment laced with sleazy innuendo that seems

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to refer to the dangerous act of auto-erotic asphyxiation. Moments later, Blaine takes a swig of water, belches a few times, and regurgitates a live frog which hops around the table near the microphone. It’s a trick he’s performed countless times.

But Blaine’s Ascension is not an old trick, nor is it intended to be creepy or grotesque. It is designed to be wholesome—and maybe even to clean up his somewhat dirty reputation. In 2017, he was #MeToo’d with allegations of sexual assault that he vehemently denied. In 2019, Blaine was investigated by the New York City Police Department concerning other similar allegations. It doesn’t help that the name David Blaine showed up in Jeffrey Epstein’s little black book (along with many of the most filthy or filthy rich blackmail-able individuals in the world). According to New York magazine, back in 2003, Blaine “put on a private show for Epstein’s dinner guests … The dinner was organized by Ghislaine Maxwell and included a group of young women who were introduced as Victoria’s Secret models.” You can see why Blaine might want to fly away from planet Earth ASAP.

Dessa (her mother is Blaine’s former partner, Alizée Guinochet) is helping Blaine transform his act into good clean family entertainment. Prior to liftoff, they have a few tender, father-daughter moments, where Blaine offers reassurance that he’ll be back on the ground soon. They say the words “je t’aime” to each other, conjuring a tinge of sadness, as if they both know that Blaine is potentially on his way straight up to heaven, where the angels speak French.

Blaine continues to drop ballasts and rise to the edge of the Earth’s atmosphere, to a height few men have ever gone with the use of only their lungs. At around 20,000 feet, he is convinced to take a hit of oxygen from the respiration. He inhales presumably seconds before blacking out, and I’m once again reminded of COVID-19. As Blaine rides out the horror of lung failure, many of us are down here on planet Earth in masks, terrified, as of late, of the very air we’ve been enjoying our entire lives. I think about men and women who have been transported to hospitals, and then to morgues—or somewhere in between, hooked up on life support, face down on hospital beds, shot full of steroids, fighting for a single inhalation. I think about the scramble for ventilators, and for medical professionals who know how to use them. Ah, David Blaine!

All to create a beautiful image? Like a French Impressionist painting? If this is a signed “db” original, (and a YouTube Original), then I’m afraid it’s not very original. If anything, the image of a person lifted off the ground by a big bundle of colorful helium balloons has itself been lifted. Not from the 2008 animated Pixar film Up, but from Up’s source. Blaine mentions being taken by his mom when he was little to “a movie about a boy who floats away on a balloon”—this would have had to be the 1956 Academy Award-winning French short Le ballon rouge (The Red Balloon). In the sentimental final scene, a Parisian boy is visited by hundreds of escaped balloons which seem to come streaming across wind currents from all over Paris floating down out of the sky like helium-filled puppies. They hover over, twist together into a bunch, and dangle their braided strings down to the boy. The boy grabs on and floats right up into the pale blue sky over Paris. It is this melancholy magical climax that won the film the Palme d’Or at Cannes, and that tattooed this poetic image into our collective imaginations. It’s a moment of unforgettable whimsy so iconic that it can’t possibly belong to Blaine without, at the very least, the assurances of a very expensive fair use copyright lawyer.

What is it with balloons anyway? Especially the red ones. Are they symbolic or something? From boy, to clown, to artist, to magician, and back again, the balloon seems too menacing to be mere nostalgia or melancholia. A few years ago, the very dubious artist known as Banksy used some sort of remote-control gadget to slide a picture of a girl walking along with a balloon right out the bottom edge of its gilded frame as if it were a paper shredder, just minutes after the unanticipated kinetic artwork was sold for $1.37 million at auction. It was an outrageous real-time DC comic-book crime.

In the high ’80s, a song “99 Luftballons” sung in German, if you can believe it, by someone called Nena was in
the rotation on MTV for months. It is arguably the most mysterious one-hit wonder ever released. All I know is that it had something to do with the Berlin Wall.

Blaine's Ascension (his will to defy gravity and float away) did not just happen overnight. He worked his way up to it. It was back in the '80s when he began to wade into the murky waters of Harry Houdini—to venture, that is, beyond mind-tingling magic tricks into gut-wrenching visceral genres of endurance and escape. He was compelled to do the type of things doctors are always saying can't be done—like living in a glass box for 44 days (in London) on nothing but water, a gesture that Blaine is proud to boast garnered the attention of the New England Journal of Medicine. "They actually used me as research for science."

Blaine became obsessed with seeing how long he (or any living creature with lungs) could hold its breath underwater. Doctors insisted that any duration over six minutes would cause permanent brain damage, and yet, he'd seen a news story of a child who fell through the ice, stopped breathing, was rescued, and miraculously brought back to life and to a full recovery. Could the human body, or more specifically the Blaine body, defy biology? In his quest for answers, Blaine got down to work devising the ultimate magic trick: to go on living without breathing. He first, naturally, went to Home Depot, where he bought supplies (plastic tubes and duct tape) in order to fabricate a "re-breather"—a kind of CO₂ scrubber, that would be inserted down his throat. I believe this is called life support. Not surprisingly, Blaine's da Vinci-esque, home-brewed machine failed. He stubbornly tried a novel form of "liquid breathing" which also failed for lack of gills. Blaine then set out to invent a heart-lung bypass machine that could be surgically attached to an artery in order to oxygenate his blood, thus circumventing his respiratory system. "Another insane idea, obviously," says Blaine, who then researched pearl divers and was soon able to purge (or hyperventilate and rid his lungs of CO₂), relax, remain perfectly still, and hold his breath for absurdly long periods of time (we're talking four to five minutes). In other words, he learned to slow down and nearly stop his heart using his mind.

Why? In his famous TED Talk, Blaine reveals just how skilled he is at story-telling. Standing before an auditorium mumbling about his unfortunate childhood (he was born with inward-pointing feet and asthma) he seems exhausted and depleted emotionally by certain memories. It's as if he's in recovery, detoxing after a particularly draining stunt. "As a magician," he says, "I try to show things to people that seem impossible. And I think that magic—whether I'm holding my breath or shuffling a deck of cards—is pretty simple. It's practice, it's training, and it's..." Here, he gets choked up and fights to retain his composure. "It's practice, it's training, and experimenting—while pushing through the pain, to be the best I can be. And that's what magic is to me."

A standing ovation! As far as TED Talks go, it's a keeper. The clicks don't lie. (Well they do, actually, but...) But why does Blaine almost cry? For one, in the previous 30-some minutes he has just chronically a harrowing stunt that humiliated him on national television and nearly cost him his life. In "Drowned Alive at Lincoln Center" (2008) he succumbed to hubris and the demands of show biz. "Watching someone hold his breath and almost drown," he says, "is too boring for television. So they added in cuffs." ("They," being the executives.) The Houdini-like manacles, he admits, were the critical mistake—adding anxiety and a small increase in physical exertion that broke his concentration and stole fractions of his oxygen supply. Footage shows Blaine submerged in the big glass bowl with his eyes clenched and bubbles beginning to escape from his nostrils. This is when divers had to swim down and un latch his cuffs and pull him to the surface. Shit was real—and he barely made it.

Blaine seems to be especially comfortable talking about his failures, which is kind of amazing given the world of arrogant denial we now live in. In "Frozen in Time," performed in Times Square in 2000, he made another near-fatal miscalculation—he told his team to ignore him should he eventually plead to be let out. After standing upright for over two days inside a hollow block of ice (the claustrophobic space is only a little bigger than his own body), he began to completely fall apart. "There was a point when I crossed over, I completely lost track of time, I was slipping in and out of consciousness, I thought this was never gonna end... I was convinced I was dead... and that Josie [his girlfriend at the time] could no longer see me... I thought at that point that my mind was permanently gone."

Eventually Blaine was cut out by chainsaw and delicately placed on a stretcher. The tape is grim—he's clearly experiencing hypothermia, sleep deprivation, starvation, and has gone into shock. His clothes are soaking wet. A little beanie hat has begun to slip down over his eyes, but he hasn't the strength to lift his arm and adjust it. He looks like someone being rescued from an avalanche. He tries but fails to speak words into a microphone being held out in front of him by some reporter. He breaks down into tears as the crowd cheers him on. A ticker tape is seen behind him. He finally manages to grunt, "Josie, I'm weak, I'm weak. Something is wrong.'"

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something to do with his mother, a former fashion model of Russian Jewish descent who raised him in Brooklyn, on welfare. His father, a traumatized Vietnam vet of Puerto Rican and Italian descent, was, and presumably still is, absent. When he was 9, his mother remarried, and his new family moved to the suburbs of New Jersey. By then, Blaine was already deeply infatuated with magic, consumed by a card deck his mom had given him. In one interview Blaine laughs as he remarks that whenever he’s on the phone with any of his magician friends, they can always hear him shuffling a deck of cards in the background.

At age 4, he used his first “magic” deck to perform a trick that creates the illusion of a pencil puncturing a card without leaving a hole. (Sound familiar?) Blaine also began to perform endurance stunts at an early age. I’m not sure if it began on Yom Kippur, but he wound up fasting for six days! (My question for Blaine is, have you ever read A Hunger Artist by Franz Kafka?) At 10, his family scraped together enough money to send him to a fancy summer magic camp called Tanen’s, where he was encouraged to practice obsessively.

When Blaine was 19, his mother became ill with ovarian cancer and passed away at 48. The loss led to Blaine’s obsession with death. He describes how experiencing his mother’s deterioration led to his first endurance stunts, all of which have been attempts, in one way or another, to understand what she went through as she was dying. And I’d respectfully add, where she went after dying. Soon he was getting hired and paid generous sums to stand around doing card tricks at private parties hosted by millionaires. Blaine also began to crash tables in fancy Park Avenue restaurants where celebrities were dining—Leonardo DiCaprio was one of his first victims (today they remain the best of friends).

In an interview with Kalush and another early influence, Bill Harris, Blaine explains how hard he had to work to find his own style. How he had to reject so many magicians that he admired like Yuri Geller (the spoon guy), or even Doug Henning (the box guy), and of course the badass Ricky Jay. Eventually, he invented his own brand of what he calls “Urban Shamanism”—which he reduces to a basic equation: “You enter somebody’s life, try to affect them for a moment, and you wander away.”

Eventually in 1999, Blaine figured out how to stand out from the pack and create some really big buzz: Donald Trump. Throwing vulgarity to the wind, he pitched a classic from Houdini’s repertoire “Buried Alive” to Donald. In this stunt, Blaine is sealed in a thick plexiglass box, which is not covered in dirt but by a 3-ton tank of water, for seven days. Trump takes the stage delivering something of a christening/eulogy/earth-breaking ceremony that takes place on a small untrquil plot near the East River Drive: “David, I can just say, you’ve got great courage,” says Trump (by now you know the cadence). “I wouldn’t do this on any kind of bet, but it’s gonna be interesting. And lots of luck. And enjoy it! And I’ll see you in about a week—I hope. I hope.”

Blaine has claimed that the stunt was a way for him to lay in bed with his mother, and then to lay in the grave with her. “In many ways, I endured a week buried underground as a tribute to her … I guess I am trying to put myself in a position where I could understand what she went through.”

Various tricks have given me an opportunity to observe Blaine’s tattoos. One on his wrist is his db logo. Another, at first, seems to say EARTH, but then, like an optical allusion, flips to the word FAITH. Across his back is a reproduction of Salvador Dali’s “Christ of Saint John of the Cross.” But the most compelling tattoo is found midway down Blaine’s forearm; it is the concentration camp number that belonged to Primo Levi: 174517.

It makes perfect sense that Levi, an Italian Jewish chemist and author, who wrote so eloquently on surviving Auschwitz and on The Periodic Table of elements, is one of Blaine’s heroes (Levi died in 1987, after falling from a third-story apartment). And there are other moments when Blaine shows his Jewish side. When asked if he was concerned that Dessa might follow in his harrowing footsteps, he compares himself to an overly protective Jewish grandmother. “If she bumps her leg, I …” He shrick.

My favorite Blaine stunt is called Bullet Catch (2008). It feels like it could be taking place in CIA headquarters, or the latest Jason Bourne flick. Blaine has invited a marksman (his old pal Bill Kalush) to stand across the room (about 20 feet) line him up in the green laser scope of a .22 caliber rifle, and pull the trigger, firing a bullet into Blaine’s open mouth. I’m reminded of the artist Chris Burden, who, back in the ‘70s, had a marksman shoot a puny little bullet into his arm. Clutching his bloody arm, he poses in a white T-shirt for a documentary photograph looking like some nervous kid who messed up playing with his dad’s loaded firearm.

Blaine, a man with a Las Vegas appetite for upping the ante, appears to catch his bullet, not in his fatty bicep, but in a small steel cup hooked to his teeth and resting on his jaw. Even a bullet made of Jell-O would have probably blown his head off. A high-speed phantom camera captures the moment at 10,000 frames per second and, what can I say? It’s radical. “Obviously,” says Blaine, “I cannot flinch or it’s a real problem.”

Blaine is also clever enough to prep us by telling us that 20 magicians have died attempting the trick, that Houdini wimped out of doing it, and that even Blaine’s own producers folded only hours before the stunt due to the obvious legal ramifications. Then, a few seconds later, it’s done. All done! Like getting a shot. Blaine reaches into his mouth, removes the mashed metal bullet, walks over to bear hug Kalush, and dishes out a round of high fives to his team. And for a moment, death is only an illusion.
The Idol and the Mosque

The rebuilding of a temple that may never have existed on the site of a destroyed mosque in Ayodhya is part of a larger, decadeslong attempt by Hindu nationalists to recreate India in their own image.

BY SIDDHARTHA DEB

Ayodhya, under the dirty gray monsoon sky, was a surprise and a disappointment. All the way to this town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous, largest, poorest, and possibly most violent state in one of the most violent countries in the world, the promise of change had been insistently. It lay behind me, in the sheet metal cordonning off the heart of New Delhi and demarcating the $2 billion Central Vista project that will erect a new parliament complex and a new residence for India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi. It glittered on the edges of the pristine, mostly empty airport at Lucknow, where I had flown in from Delhi, and along the freshly tarred highway that took me, in a four-hour drive, from Lucknow to the town of Faizabad. Most of all, it lay ahead, in Ayodhya, Faizabad’s twin town, where Modi and his cohort of Hindu-right political groups are building a grand temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a destroyed mosque.

In October 2022, the new parliament will be complete; in December 2023, the temple. In May 2024, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the political party that is the electoral wing of the Hindu right—expect to win national elections for a third consecutive term. In 2025, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the five-million-strong paramilitary organization that is the fountainhead of the Hindu right, will mark a century of existence. For a significant section of Indian society, all this, taken together, marks a beautiful convergence. It means that India is close to achieving its true self, a futuristic nation that has fulfilled, in spite of assaults by Muslims, communists, and the West, its grand promise as an ancient, supremely advanced, Hindu civilization.

The centerpiece of this millennial fantasy is the 57,000-square-feet, three-story sandstone temple being constructed in Ayodhya. If the parliament complex is necessary to maintain the facade of India’s democracy, the temple is of far greater resonance. It consecrates, supposedly, the birthplace of Ram, the blue-skinned, man-king-god who is the troubled protagonist of the epic poem Ramayana composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Given that the temple is being built on the ruins of a 16th-century mosque—the Babri Masjid—constructed by the Mughal dynasty just coming to power then in the Indian subcontinent, the temple is intended as a mark of Hindu supremacy in India and perhaps of the beginning of the end of the Muslim presence here. As a local RSS official called Dr. Anil told me one morning, humanity itself originates in Ayodhya. Here is where the first man Manu was born after the great flood, along with the first woman Satrupa, he said. This is where Ram was born, the ideal king of a utopian kingdom—Ram rajya—that will soon be revived on the Indian subcontinent.

And yet when I visited in August, Ayodhya-Faizabad was nothing more than a warren of muddy, waterlogged lanes and squalid buildings, the Ram temple just another hoax of the sort India has served up in plenty over recent decades. A model of the temple sat under a glass box in the reception of the hotel I was staying in. An ochre-colored complex of cupolas and spires, it appeared generic and unimaginative, completely adrift from the glorious temple architecture historically found in India. It is being designed by a Gujarat-based family close to Modi that specializes in contemporary Hindu temples, among them one in New Jersey raided last November by the FBI for using forced labor.

The hotel itself wallowed in sullen suspicion of its guests. The Canada-resident Indians who owned it had turned the white, once-elegant mansion—belonging to a former socialist legislator who had been defeated in 1948 by a Hindu right smear campaign about his atheism—into a shabby sequence of rooms, the large windows in the corridor firmly shut against the red-bottomed monkeys marauding along the rooftops. The Wi-Fi worked, but only near the reception. There was no bar. Meals were served only in the rooms, and the bathroom floor was uneven, collecting runoff water from the shower and clumps of the plentiful mud I tracked back from outside.

The streets outside weren’t much better. Apart from SUVs muscling their way through the chaotic traffic and the occasional smartphone in the hands of a passerby, nothing seemed to have changed over the past half century. The Muslim driver, a boy in his late teens whose only glimpse of a world beyond came from a brief stint driving trucks between Lucknow and Delhi, voiced his despair quietly as he guided the car through the streets. He wanted to get out, he said, but he didn’t know how.

He drove me around and showed me the sights available for those who couldn’t leave. There, he pointed out, was the afim kothi—the opium house—a haunted ruin of a mansion with crumbling boundary walls that marked the arrival of British colonialism in the late 18th century. The opium the peasants had been forced to cultivate had been exported to China, the descendants of the impoverished peasants shipped as indentured labor to Fiji and the Caribbean. Across from the opium house was...
the postcolonial Indian state's contribution to the memory of this violence, a vast, open dumping ground littered with garbage.

We moved on. There was the Gulab Bari—the Pink House, characterized today by blackened onion domes and minarets, with echoing corridors where young Muslim men and women took selfies and a lone fakir silently contemplated the ineffable. A mausoleum for the 18th-century Shia Muslim monarch Shuja-ud-Daulah, it was built at a time when Faizabad had briefly been capital of Awadh, a tributary state to the Mughals. And there, finally, was the muddy brown Ghaghara river, which is called the Sarayu when it touches Ayodhya on its journey downstream. Ram had drowned himself in the Ghaghara around here, I was told; the temple to our left marked that event.

Rain came down hard on the new, slippery concrete paving the riverbank. People—priests, attendants, their families—napped inside the temple complex. Young men loitered outside, trying to find some pleasure in their surroundings, while ragged children scurried around selling peanuts and flowers. Most of all, the promenade seemed to belong to the cows, protected by a Hindu-right law that promises punitive measures against anyone “endangering their lives,” a piece of legislation that has resulted in roving lynching mobs targeting those suspected of bovine endangerment. Bony, whitish, and dirty, the cows were scattered everywhere, depositing their shit wherever they wanted. I stepped on a pile of cow shit and went down. The driver helped me up and we stepped on a pile of cow shit and went down. The driver helped me up and we were driven a few kilometers around the temple complex. On Sept. 26, 1990, L.K. Advani, India's avuncular-looking president of the Hindu right's group of organizations, the RSS, led a march to Ayodhya to protest the Hindu right to carry out violent purges in areas where Hindus were a majority. At least a million people were killed, millions more displaced, hundreds of thousands of women and girls sexually assaulted, with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all caught up in the spiral of suffering and hate. But soon after these traumas, the RSS appeared to run aground. On Jan. 30, 1948, a Hindu extremist shot Gandhi dead for being too conciliatory toward Muslims and Pakistan. Although the RSS claimed that the assassin was no longer an active member of the organization, it was banned for a brief period and disappeared from mainstream public life.

As it turned out, being underground agreed with the RSS’s cultlike tendencies. Even after the ban had been revoked, electoral maneuvering was left to its political front, the Jan Sangh—which morphed into the BJP in 1980—while the RSS focused on its ideal of building a patriarchal Hindu nation. It recruited boys between the ages of 6 and 18, using doctrine and a routine of paramilitary drills to mold their “Race Spirit.” Individuals can be members of both the RSS and the BJP, and the latter’s top leadership, including Modi, inevitably worked in the trenches with the RSS before making the move into parliamentary politics.

It was a combination of decadeslong deep organizing with a massive public campaign that finally overcame the Hindu right's consistent electoral failures and handed it the keys to India. In December 1949, just as the Hindu right was emerging from the backlash that had followed Gandhi's assassination, a Ram idol appeared mysteriously inside the Babri Masjid. The Hindu right's version of this story was that Ram had manifested himself to seize back his birthplace; the more prosaic truth is that a Hindu monk from one of the most powerful monasteries in the area snuck the idol in, aided surreptitiously by sympathetic Hindu government officials. As tensions rose, heavy iron padlocks were placed at the mosque gates. A complex legal dispute followed, with Muslims as well as three rival Hindu monastic orders claiming the right to worship in the structure while idol and mosque slumbered more or less undisturbed through the coming decades.

In 1984, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—the World Hindu Council—demanded that the mosque be torn down, claiming that Muslims had destroyed an ancient temple that commemorated the spot as the birthplace of Ram and built the mosque on top of it as an act of deliberate humiliation. There is no historical evidence that Ram existed; that present-day Ayodhya coincides at all with the celestial Ayodhya spoken of in the Ramayana; or that any other temple previously occupied the spot where the Babri Masjid was built. But the VHP—one of numerous Hindu right groups affiliated with the RSS—was underlined by these factual hurdles and demanded that a temple to Ram be built at the site. By 1989, its temple campaign was in full swing, with donations and shilas—bricks—being solicited from all over India and the wealthy Indian diaspora in Britain and the United States. Bricks to build the temple, some of them made of gold, wound their way across the country toward Ayodhya in long, ceremonial processions that were inevitably accompanied by violence. When the national elections took place that year, the BJP's share of parliamentary seats rose from 2 to 85.

By the next fall, the temple-building campaign had moved up another notch. On Sept. 26, 1990, L.K. Advani, the avuncular-looking president of the BJP, began a symbolic rath yatra—a chariot procession—across the country in a Toyota pickup outfitted as an ancient Hindu chariot. His starting point was Somnath, a town in Gujarat some 6,000 miles southwest of Ayodhya where a Hindu temple had been sacked in the 11th century by a Muslim ruler.
from Ghazni, in present-day Afghanistan. The man in charge of organizing the procession was Narendra Modi, captured in photos as a brooding presence on the Toyota chariot. Like the procession of bricks, Advani’s chariot and the kar sevaks or volunteers who planned to build the temple with their bare hands provoked sectarian rioting in the cities, towns, and villages they passed through. Advani was arrested before he reached Ayodhya, but kar sevaks already in town stormed the Babri Masjid on Oct. 30. The ensuing police response led to the deaths of 16 men, according to the official account, while the Hindu right claimed that more than 50 had been killed. Riots broke out all over India while the BJP withdrew support for the coalition government then in power in Delhi. When a fresh round of national elections was completed in the summer of 1991, the BJP increased its tally of parliamentary seats from 85 to 120.

The increasing electoral success of the BJP against the backdrop of escalating violence meant there would be one final move in this phase of its temple campaign. On Dec. 6, 1992, while Advani and leaders of the BJP watched from a nearby rooftop, members of the Hindu right raged the barricades around the mosque just as they had done two years earlier. Their numbers, this time, were far greater; the police were partly intimidated and partly sympathetic to their cause.

Grainy footage from the time is available from the Indian television program Eyewitness and its reporter, Seema Chishti. It is just past noon, and thousands of men, some saffron-clad, clamber over the fence, banging away at the three domes of the mosque with whatever they have at hand; rocks, picks, hammers. In contrast to an early morning demonstration by RSS volunteers—purposeful, military—this is a crowd in a state of frenzy. Nevertheless, there is enough forethought to carry out the Ram idol and its canopy before attacking the mosque. It takes two hours for the first dome to collapse, another 90 minutes for the second dome to be brought down. In six hours, the entire mosque has been leveled to the ground.

“IT TAKES TWO HOURS FOR THE FIRST DOME TO COLLAPSE, ANOTHER 90 MINUTES FOR THE SECOND DOME TO BE BROUGHT DOWN. IN SIX HOURS, THE ENTIRE MOSQUE HAS BEEN LEVELLED TO THE GROUND.”

Dr. Anil remembers the demolition and the events leading up to it as a time of great clarity. His father had been a “leader” in the Samajwadi Party (SP), which had opposed the temple project and was in power in Uttar Pradesh when the first group of kar sevaks arrived in Ayodhya in 1990. Dominated by the Yadav caste, a largely agricultural group, the SP’s electoral success was built on an alliance between Yadavs and Muslims that challenged the upper castes consolidated around the Hindu right. Dr. Anil’s father, who was upper caste, was moved sufficiently by the fervor of kar sevaks passing through their village to nearby Ayodhya to switch political allegiance. “When he crossed the river, it was as a kar sevak to take part in the struggle against the mosque,” Dr. Anil said.

Dr. Anil appeared to think of this transformation in his father as only natural, the coming to life of a higher principle. “When Ram was here, there was no Islam, no Christianity,” he said. He would expand on that idea later, but that morning he was in a hurry to get the essential points of his life across. He himself had been loyal to the Hindu right from the beginning, starting as a member of the student wing of the BJP and eventually joining the RSS. Now he was the Prant Prabhari—the area chief—of the Rashtriya Muslim Manch, the Muslim wing of the RSS.

He seemed particularly proud of two achievements in this capacity. He had organized a ceremonial meal where Muslims had been served milk and fruit instead of biryani, the Persian-influenced dish of rice and meat more common on festive occasions. “Meat, fish, the eating of these things is a sin,” he said. In the switching out of meat for fruit and milk, he clearly felt that he had in some sense briefly liberated the Muslims from their sinful existence and converted them into upper-caste, vegetarian Hindus. He had also convinced local Muslims to donate money for the construction of the Ram temple. “The soil is India,” he explained. Ram was the ideal Indian, they were Muslims living in India: Where was the contradiction?

I hadn’t known that the RSS had a Muslim wing, and I didn’t know quite what to make of Dr. Anil. Slight, balding, with a gentle paunch and lively eyes, he didn’t project the violence I associated with the RSS. He was a Kshatriya—the warrior caste—but it was hard to take him seriously as a combatant. He laughed a lot, although never at himself, and a boyish self-satisfaction radiated from him, remarkable for a man in his early 40s. He had arrived at around 8 in the morning in my hotel room carrying a motorcycle helmet, the very persona of a busy professional who started his days early and worked long hours. Dismissing my offer of tea because he was required, as an RSS man, to avoid all intoxicating substances, he filled the ugly, airless room with his soundbites: “The RSS is purely interested in the development of the nation, not individuals”; “The RSS is not a political party. It does not depend on the BJP”; “There is no casteism in the RSS.” To this, he occasionally added the specifics of his personal story. The “doctor” referred to his Ph.D. in library and information sciences. He now worked as “guest faculty” at Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia University (a university named after an anti-colonial, socialist politician). He also owned a computer and photocopying business near the university.

It was possible to read these details as characteristics of an entrepreneurial multitasker dabbling in politics,
education, and business, someone exemplifying the energies that have been unleashed in Modi’s India. But then, there was the fact that, like almost everyone else I sought to interview, Dr. Anil came to the hotel room because there was nowhere else to meet in Faizabad-Ayodhya, no cafés or bars or restaurants offering the possibility of a social life. His guest faculty position had been terminated 15 days earlier because he had come to the end of a four-year contract; he had massive debts and his business wasn’t going well; he had pulled his daughter—the youngest of three children, the other two being boys—out of school because he didn’t have money for the fees and didn’t believe she was learning anything anyway.

The harsh truth about Ayodhya seemed to be that very little had changed there for the better even if the temple-building campaign had made its effects felt all over India by fueling the rise of the Hindu right throughout the country. Modi, in particular, seized on it, taking its combination of violence and spectacle further by giving it the distinctive stamp of his paranoid personality. In February 2002, on the 10th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, 59 kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya to Gujarat were killed in a fire engulfing the compartment of the train they were traveling in. Later investigations suggested that the fire might have originated from a malfunctioning cooking-gas cylinder. The Hindu right blamed it on Muslims, some of whom had quarreled with the kar sevaks at the railway station just before the fire erupted. Modi, who had recently become chief minister of Gujarat, was accused of unleashing a series of riots in the state where nearly 800 Muslims were killed and 150,000 displaced.

In 2014, Modi, proudly flaunting this record of anti-Muslim violence, won the BJP the national elections and became prime minister. A second, even more emphatic, victory in 2019 was anointed with a judgment that gave the government the go-ahead for the building of the Ram temple.

On Aug. 5, 2020, while the coronavirus raged unchecked in India, Modi, dressed in shiny, flowing clothes and a white KN95 mask, carried out a long ceremony inaugurating the construction of the temple. While images of Ram and a model of the temple were flashed in front of a giant screen near Times Square, Modi offered prayers to the Ram idol and the 88-pound silver brick that will serve as the keystone of the foundation. Addressing a subsequent gathering of Hindu-right grandees, many of them dressed in the distinctive saffron that is meant to mark the detachment of the Hindu ascetic from all worldly affairs, Modi did not forget to mention that along with Hindu pride and assertion, the temple would also bring massive economic development to the region.

The one area in which Ayodhya does seem to have grown is as a pilgrimage destination for rural pilgrims who are directed with casual brutality through metal barricades by armed policemen in khaki. Past shops selling sweets and flowers the pilgrims went, hustled by ravenous-looking men offering to be guides, past the competing shrines of dueling monasteries, the most prominent of them the steep, fortresslike shrine of Hanumangarhi that sits on the outer perimeter of Ramkot, the mythical fort of Ram. Beyond, behind more barricades and guarded by more armed police, lay the disputed center where the new temple was being constructed.

Had a great Hindu temple to Ram ever previously existed here? The claim is a surprisingly recent one. In 1990, B.B. Lal, an archaeologist who had conducted digs around the mosque in the mid-’70s and reported little of significance, suddenly claimed in a Hindu-right magazine that his excavations had actually revealed temple pillars predating the mosque. Lal went on to have a fruitful post-retirement career, publishing evermore speculative books asserting that Ram was a historical person and receiving two of the highest civilian awards in India from the BJP government in 2000 and 2021.

In 2003, another dig, ordered by the courts, began on the site of the demolished mosque. The dig was carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a state body that reported to the BJP-led government in Delhi. Khalid Ahmad Khan, a septuagenarian who had been a member of the Muslim alliance opposing Hindu claims on the land, had described the dig to me in his house the previous day. Khan had been present as an observer on behalf of the Muslim petitioners, the court-appointed arrangements displaying a portentous attention to balanced representation; 33% of the 51-member team from the ASI had been Muslim, with the same proportion of Muslim labor chosen for the actual digging. The 2003 dig, according to the report eventually filed by the ASI, uncovered material going back as far as the 13th century BCE, including “glazed pottery, tiles and bones.” But the ASI’s main contention was that “a massive structure” existed at the site “from the 10th century” CE on top of which the 16th-century mosque had been built, and that the “remains” recovered of this 10th-century structure contained “distinctive features found associated with the temples of North India.”

Khan did not believe that the material found provided evidence of a Hindu, as opposed to a Buddhist or Islamic site. Surrounded by voluminous files of legal documents and newspaper clippings, he gave the impression of clinging to the illusion of democracy and constitutional principles against an ever-encroaching reality. Anxious to assert his loyalty to India and his cordial relations with the Hindu religious leaders, Khan told me that the Hindu argument had been based entirely on faith and belief. The Muslims, however, had depended on evidence. “We produced revenue records, government affidavits, and artifacts. They said their records had been destroyed. I was there during the digging. They found no proof.”

Vineet Maurya, another opponent of the temple whom I had met in my hotel, was also skeptical of the Hindu temple theory. Maurya, who converted in his youth from Hinduism to Buddhism, was engaged in a legal dispute with the government about its forcible acquisition of his family home in Ayodhya as part of its expanded temple complex. Maurya, who came from a family of agricultural laborers, had belonged to one of the castes at the bottom of the hierarchy. His
break with Hinduism had been accompanied by a long journey of educating himself. He had a law degree, was learning Pali so he could read Buddhist texts, and was studying for a master’s degree in ancient history from Awadh University. He believed that the oldest civilizational artifacts discovered at the site were Buddhist rather than Hindu, and as such the site should be turned into a “national monument” that brought in tourists and pilgrims interested in India’s Buddhist past.

Given that the area in the sixth century BCE had been a Buddhist center of some repute called Saket, it is quite likely that a Buddhist structure had indeed existed on the site. It could also be that a Hindu temple was later established on the site as Buddhism was pushed out of India. But this temple would not be older than the 10th or 11th century CE, and it featured, according to the ASI’s own report, gods and goddesses other than Ram. Except in the Hindu right’s colorful murals and popular television skits, no one seems to know quite what happened between the 10th and the 16th centuries, when the Babri Masjid came up. It is quite possible, for instance, that the large mosque was built on top of a smaller Islamic place of worship, which could indeed have been built on a Hindu temple built on top of a Buddhist structure.

The ASI report itself had noted defensively of its “evidence” that its work had been done hurriedly and under difficult circumstances, including heightened security checks, torrential monsoon rains, and monkeys who made a mockery of the court’s directions to preserve materials “under lock and seal.” The Supreme Court judgment in 2019 that granted the site to Hindus spent an enormous length of time going over the arguments and counterarguments of the ASI report. The judgment, in keeping with the verbatim reading of the ASI report and any evidence, it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction of time going over the arguments and counterarguments of the ASI report. The judgment, in keeping with the verbatim reading of the ASI report and any evidence, it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction of time going over the arguments and counterarguments of the ASI report. The judgment, in keeping with the verbatim reading of the ASI report and any evidence, it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction of time going over the arguments and counterarguments of the ASI report. The judgment, in keeping with the verbatim reading of the ASI report and any evidence, it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction.

“The judgment might be its extratextual aspects. The five-judge bench delivering it was headed by Ranjan Gogoi, who had been appointed as chief justice of the Supreme Court under the Modi government a little over a year earlier, in October 2018. Hounded by accusations of sexual harassment and persecution by a junior employee, Gogoi went on to deliver a series of controversial verdicts in favor of the Modi government, including the removal of a special provision for the Muslim majority in Kashmir and the creation of a register that targeted Muslims in Assam and striped at least a million of them of their Indian citizenship. Eight days after delivering the Ayodhya judgement, Gogoi retired from the Supreme Court. Within four months of his retirement, he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha—one of the two houses of the Indian legislature—by Modi’s government.

“There is no specific finding that the underlying structure was a temple dedicated to Lord Ram,” the Supreme Court judgment conceded. It also agreed that the demolition of the mosque had been illegal and that the Ram idol had been smuggled illegally into the site in 1949. Nevertheless, on the basis of “documentary and oral evidence,” it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction.

One afternoon, I went to meet Dr. Anil at his copy shop. We were planning to travel to Karsevakpuram, the Ayodhya neighborhood that has gone from being a temporary encampment for kar sevaks in the ’90s to becoming a permanent feature of the town. But elections for the Uttar Pradesh legislature were to take place in February 2022—which the BJP would go on to win on March 11—and Dr. Anil needed me to wait until a television crew had arrived to interview him. We waited in the shop, a cubicule dominated by a photocopy machine and a desk holding a computer and printer. Generous cracks ran across the unpainted floor, dust sat on open shelves built into the wall, and brown plastic stools served as chairs, the brand name stickers still attached.

When the television crew arrived, we stepped out and went over to the edge of the highway. The name of the channel, according to the burly, bearded producer, was Newsprint. It wasn’t a joke. He was earnest, maybe slightly evasive, as he told me the channel was based in Delhi and uploaded directly onto YouTube. I wondered if it was part of the Hindu right’s fecund disinformation network of talk shows, trolls, and WhatsApp groups, and if the intention behind filming outside was to create as much of a public spectacle as possible. Later, when I searched for the channel on YouTube, I couldn’t find it. In the moment though, the afternoon sun down beating down the highway. The name of the channel, according to the burly, bearded producer, was Newsprint. It wasn’t a joke. He was earnest, maybe slightly evasive, as he told me the channel was based in Delhi and uploaded directly onto YouTube. I wondered if it was part of the Hindu right’s fecund disinformation network of talk shows, trolls, and WhatsApp groups, and if the intention behind filming outside was to create as much of a public spectacle as possible. Later, when I searched for the channel on YouTube, I couldn’t find it. In the moment though, the afternoon sun down beating down the highway.

The BJP was seeking reelection in the place that had changed its political fortunes, where a utopia once existed, where—according to a pamphlet widely
available in Ayodhya—virtuous Hindu men and women lived in sky-high mansions where the floors were heaped with gems. I took a look at my surroundings. Across from me, the Buddhist-inspired domes of the Ram Manohar Lohia university offered a faint reminder of other histories of the region. And yet all pasts seemed irrelevant against the distressing reality of the present.

A billboard hemmed in by electric wires and hung crookedly from a tree looked down at the crew. The most prominent of the faces displayed on it were that of Modi and Yogi Adityanath, the shaven-headed, saffron-clad Hindu monk who is chief minister of the state and whose reputation for instigating anti-Muslim violence rivals that of Modi’s. The long years of their combined rule had not produced much: a newish sidewalk already cracked and smeared with garbage and cow shit; small, crammed shops similar to Dr. Anil’s; and bright, garish advertisements for banks, mobile phones, and tutoring agencies that promised a pathway to a government job. Over 40% of the population in the district is illiterate; nearly 40% lives below the poverty line.

None of this appeared to have any purchase on the interview that unfolded, the knot of people around the camera caught in billowing dust and exhaust from passing vehicles. The gathering was still small, but there was a practiced TikTok flourish to the young reporter as he began, twisting his body into a V and pivoting on his sandals as he held the mic in one hand and gestured with the other at the people gathered around. First in line was Dr. Anil, confident in his pronouncements. He was followed by a man called Haji Syed Ahmed, a member of the Muslim wing headed by Dr. Anil. Ahmed, too, spoke in sound bites, confident of the good work being done by the Hindu right, although the most distinctive thing about him was his elegance in that crowd of slovenly Hindu men. He wore a long gray kurta, white pajamas, and stylish blue sneakers. He neatly trimmed beard, his white skullcap, and blue chequered keffiyeh indicated his status as a devout Muslim, as did the adjective “Haji” before his name. Earlier, he had told me a convoluted story about his shop being forcefully occupied by another man with political connections and his hopes that the Hindu right would be able to get it back for him. He was, he admitted sorrowfully, more or less ostracized by other Muslims for his overt support of the Hindu right. There were others Dr. Anil had summoned to give their views, including a Muslim woman in a hijab who was distracted from the interview by her restless toddler children.

The lovefest for Modi and Yogi looked like it would go on forever, but two passersby decided to intervene. Both men appeared to be supporters of the SP, confident and articulate in spite of being vastly outnumbered. The BJP’s cow protection laws had resulted in feral cattle running wild and destroying crops in the fields, one of the men shouted. His companion, younger, more cerebral, responded to his hecklers with verve, talking about the corruption of the Hindu-right politicians whose names could be found in the Paradise Papers. The reporter got increasingly flustered, as did Dr. Anil. At the university across, classes had ended, and students slowed down on their way home to listen. A few were women, but they did not linger long. The Muslim woman had departed with her children, without speaking, and it was almost entirely a male crowd gathered now around the television crew.

Although it was all talk, there was a physicality to the scene, the height and burliness of the Yadav men offering a challenge that could not easily be quashed. The crowd got larger and louder, and small, independent quarrels began to break out on the edges, Dr. Anil struggling to be heard above the noise as he faced the camera once again. Another big man entered the scene, his political affiliation obvious from his Brahmin’s topknot. I got the impression that he had been summoned there to wrest the initiative back, which he did by ignoring all questions from the reporter and raising his voice in a chant. It was the war cry of the Hindu right coming out of his mouth, the same one that had resounded in the air the day the Babri Masjid was demolished, the same one that Muslims hear when pogroms break out, that clogs the television channels and social media networks in India as prelude or punctuation to a vitriolic outpouring of abuse. “Jai Shri Ram,” he shouted, and “Jai Shri Ram,” the crowd responded, tentatively at first and then louder by the moment. The Yadav men laughed, shook their heads disbelievingly, and exited the scene.

Another billboard featuring the Modi-Yogi combine graced the entrance to the site where the bricks gathered in the nineties are kept. It was hard to believe that these were the shilas gathered from all over India and abroad, blessed by priests in Sanskrit and trucked to Ayodhya in ceremonial processions of kar sevaks displaying unsheathed swords. The place had the feel of a storage shed, with waterlogged ground crisscrossed by policemen changing shifts, elderly kar sevaks in saffron dhotis going out for evening walks, and monkeys foraging for food. The bricks were stacked in untidy columns against the walls, along with elaborately carved columns that seemed to belong to some forgotten 1.0 version of the Ram temple.

Promises had been made that the bricks would be used for the temple being constructed, but it seemed unlikely that more than a few would find their way there. And yet what else was the entire project of Ram rajya other than endless symbolism evoked to obscure tawdry reality? A temple stood in the center of the yard, but it was not the temple that caught the eye as much as the murals decorating its outer wall. History had been turned there into a singular story of the oppression visited upon Hindus and their courageous resistance: Cruel-looking men in vaguely Arab outfits brandished swords and fired cannons at the temple supposedly torn down to make way for the Babri Masjid; next to them, the Sikh reformer Govind Singh was busy fighting on horseback, a deft touch meant to draw the Sikhs into the Hindu right project; below, the faces of two brothers from Kolkata killed in the police firing of 1991 looked out, the calm resolution of their faces borrowed from iconic representations of Indian anti-colonial revolutionaries.

Karsevakpuram itself was different, the symbolism held in check for
the quieter machinations of power. It housed the offices of the VHP, which had fronted the assault on the mosque. Armed sentries were on duty around the large complex, neat and quiet, with flowers and well-watered lawns. It was the first time since I had been in Ayodhya that I felt a sense of order, and with it came the sensation of being in close proximity to authority.

Fifteen Hindu men comprise the committee in charge of the construction of the temple, which is already mired in controversy. A vast amount of the money donated for construction—there are pictures of Modi soliciting money for the temple throughout banks in India—is said to have been siphoned off. Land near the temple had allegedly been acquired by a close relative of a senior BJP functionary and then flipped over to the temple trust at many times the purchase price. A member of the temple trust committee had also apparently rented out offices to Larsen & Toubro, the Indian engineering firm—the name harks back to the Danish men who started the original, colonial-era company—constructing the temple pro bono.

I had tried talking to this member. His name was Dr. Anil Mishra, the doctor in this case referring to his homeopathic practice. Mishra, who had apparently installed an elevator inside his multistory home to signal his newly acquired affluence, sounded alarmed when I called him. I should talk to his colleague Champat Rai, general secretary of the temple trust committee, he said. He himself was unable to tell me anything. I was unsurprised by Mishra’s refusal to talk to the media. The Hindu right, which refers to journalists as “prostitutes,” is choosy about who it grants access to and what it reveals. But Dr. Anil—the original one—was confident that he could introduce me to Rai, and so we loitered inside Karsevakpuram, the quiet of the evening occasionally interrupted by monkeys jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

A convoy swept in, white SUVs disgorging men in crisp white clothes, the policemen and hangers-on attentive. Dr. Anil suddenly appeared diminished, but I could also see something of his determination as he attached himself to the men striding into the main office, introducing first himself and then me. I could sense the shimmering outline of a system built entirely on patronage and influence and that Dr. Anil’s stock had perhaps risen subtly because, in spite of his modest motorcycle, his failing copy shop, and his truncated position at the university, he had brought a journalist from the United States with him to this place.

Inside the office, Rai listened to my request for an interview, his smooth, clean-shaven face animated by something that could have been suspicion, or fatigue, or both. An Indian man wearing jeans was introduced to me as a North American working for the Hindu cause. We made small talk about New York. “I have no time for you today,” Rai said finally. “But tomorrow, I can give you 15 minutes. Come here at 5 p.m.”

The next evening, I waited for nearly an hour at Karsevakpuram. Neither Rai nor any of his entourage showed up. Instead, I found myself chatting with a man called Hazari Lal who sold incense and ayurvedic medicine at an exhibition hall near the front gate. A giant model of the Ram temple sat under bright fluorescent lights, beige rather than the ochre chosen for the version under construction. A large photograph of Ashok Singhal, the VHP president at the time of the demolition, squatted in front of the model, the base of the temple cluttered with random slabs of marble and what I assumed were consecrated shilas. Paint had flaked off in patches from the yellow guard rail around the model and the pink walls of the hall. A raised relief map of the temple site occupied the outer perimeter of the model; apart from a few yellow blocks indicating buildings, the rest was unpainted concrete, as if the maker had become exhausted halfway through the project.

Lal, insisting that I sit with him, brought plastic chairs out into the open so that we would see Rai if he showed up. Lal had been a kar sevak during the attempt to storm the Babri Masjid in 1990. Two years later, he returned for the successful assault on the mosque. He described climbing up to one of the domes and of falling from it, injuring his head and fracturing his left hand. He had been imprisoned for two weeks for his part in the demolition and then released on bail. Beyond that, there had been no legal repercussions for his actions.

There was no guilt, no self-consciousness, in Lal’s telling of the story. The mosque and Muslims were a foreign imposition to him, and his world, apart from that spectacular outburst in the early 90s, appeared to have been largely side-stepped by modernity. Although only in his early 60s, he gave the impression of being an old man, aged according to the calendar of impoverishment that holds sway over so much of life in this part of India. There were hints of personal tragedy, of a son who worked in a factory and whose little girl had died. When he posed for a picture for me or took out an old mobile phone to ask me to enter my number on its tiny keypad, I got the sense of a man mimicking what he had seen others around him do, which is probably why in spite of his violent past as a kar sevak and his proximity to power, he evoked mostly vulnerability. His right eye was opaque with a cataract. I recalled how the previous day, he had asked Dr. Anil if he could help him find a clinic where the eye could be checked out. Dr. Anil had been pleasant but noncommittal. Later, he had compared Lal to Rai. “Some have the capacity to rise, others don’t,” he had confided to me. “That is the only difference between men.”

One morning, as I made my way into the heart of Ayodhya with Dr. Anil, we bought pedas—round hard discs of sweet cream that look like cheese—as an offering from a sweet shop owned by one of Dr. Anil’s Hindu-right colleagues. We left our slippers there for safekeeping as well; our phones and wallets we had already given to the driver of the car, waiting in a parking lot on the edge of the pilgrimage zone. It was early but already crowded, the pilgrims clustered in front of Hanumangarhi, where three streets converge in a blur of noise and color.

The ground was slimy under our feet as we climbed up to the shrine of Hanuman, the monkey god. A beloved, all-action figure in the Ramayana, where he is Ram’s most devoted ally, Hanuman too has morphed in recent years into an icon of violent Hindu masculinity. He is now visible everywhere, particularly...
on motorcycle windscreens and the rear windows of cars, as “Angry Hanuman,” a contorted face in saffron and black that went viral after Modi praised the design at an election rally in 2018.

Modi, accompanied by Yogi and trailed by bodyguards and a television crew, had visited the Hanumangarhi shrine in August 2020 after the Ram temple ceremony. He had used an alternative entrance, one that allowed him to avoid the climb. The shrine had been emptied out for him, and he had stood directly in front of the Hanuman idol, swirling a lit lamp and muttering a prayer.

We had no such luck. We climbed the 200 steps, on top of which a sign announced “Only Hindus May Enter.” In front, a crowd jostled to get closer to the shrine, priests leaning down from the inner sanctum to accept their offerings. Dr. Anil led me into the press of bodies and glided away. I stood there amid the crush of bodies, uncertain of what to do. I could barely make out the features of the Hanuman deity. Later, when watching Modi’s visit on YouTube, I would get a sense of it, diminutive and aniconic, a far cry from Angry Hanuman. I held my bag of pedas up, found a priest willing to receive it, and then I was out of the crush, relieved.

Dr. Anil looked at me with surprise. “What did you do with the pedas?” he asked. He stared at me with astonishment when he heard that I’d given them to the priest but not taken them back, as I apparently should have. When I first met Dr. Anil, all I had told him was that I was a devout, right-wing Hindu all on my own. Now I could sense a hesitation, as if he was considering for the first time who I might really be. Standing with my back to the crowd, I felt a wave of unease. Just the day before, The Guardian had published a piece of mine on the Modi government’s practice of planting malware on the computers of activists and incarcerating them for years without trial under an anti-terror law.

But the moment passed. Dr. Anil, happy to have a chance to laugh at me, decided that I was merely displaying the ignorance of someone not born in the Hindu heartland. We went into the office area to try and find the head priest, a man whose Persian title of Gadd-e-nashin—Keeper of the seat—indicated the origins of Hanumangarhi in the time of Muslim kings. The Gadd-e-nashin was not in, however, and Dr. Anil led me to another priest, a gigantic man who sat on an open platform meeting devotees. I went through the motion of seeking his blessing, which he granted perfunctorily, tossing some flowers in my direction while waving a white, ceremonial whisk with the other.

Although Dr. Anil seemed inclined to introduce me to one senior priest after another, I persuaded him out of Hanumangarhi. In front of us lay the site of the future temple and the temporary shrine housing the Ram idol. Dr. Anil was disappointed that we were approaching it from the commoners’ entrance rather than through the VIP access route that allowed important people to drive right up to the gate and avoid the crowds. Instead, we waited in front of the security booth in a long, straggling line, exposed to marauding monkeys and touts hustling people to leave their belongings in lockers available at nearby shops. At Hanumangarhi, the pilgrims had been mostly poor and local, many of them women and the elderly. Now I began to spot urban, middle-class men who had come from southern India and Kolkata.

Through the security booth we went, stepping into a corridor enclosed above and to the sides by wired netting, like a bunker from which to monitor the position of an opposing army. An excitement animated the crowd as we progressed through the labyrinthine corridor, accompanied by the shouts of policemen asking everyone to keep moving.

Everyone slowed down again as we approached the temporary shrine. The idol was set well back from the pilgrims sequestered in the iron corridor, attendants handing out packets of consecrated sweets through an opening in the wired netting. I lingered as long as I could. After the decades of violence in the name of Ram, portrayed in memes as a muscular uberman, all veinly biceps and chiseled six-packs, the appearance of the idol, small, dark-skinned, and with big mangy eyes, was unexpected. Because this was Ram’s birthplace, the idol was of an infant Ram—Ram Lalla—and just a little over 6 inches tall.

This was the god who had changed the fortunes of a nation. He had been smuggled in under the cover of darkness, in 1949, and hurried out amid the noise of a mosque being brought down, in 1990, a god placed here and there by his followers. Now, he looked like a doll sitting in a temporary dollhouse in front of a bunker inside a fortress. We had just seen the
he took his vows. In 2017, he became the mahant.

The wealth, ambition, and aspiration that the Ram temple had precipitated all around was more intermittent in its presence in the Nirmohi akhara. The mahant's room was big and airy; the floor had been tiled recently and the ductless air conditioner on the wall was new and sleek. They were planning to rebuild the two other structures in the complex, grassy and overgrown, set back from one of the narrow lanes curling through Ayodhya. One building would be converted into a guest house for visiting devotees and monks. The other would be torn down for a new complex where the shrine would face outward, toward the road, in a concession to modern sensibilities that require even a deity to advertise its presence.

But if change was coming, indeed had already come, it had not yet made its full impact on the akhara. I was invited to lunch with the monks—the mahant ate separately—in the main building. It was in the old North Indian haveli style, with an inner courtyard around which the shrine and the quarters of the monks were arranged. The deity faced into this courtyard, and I was led past it by monks in their early teens who looked at me with curiosity. The kitchen was narrow, with old, high ceilings. The meal consisted of rotis and rice, dal and a vegetable curry. We ate sitting on the floor, served by a muscular monk with a Brahmin's topknot and a wicked sense of humor.

When I apologized and said I hoped that they had not been waiting because of me—the interview with the mahant had gone on beyond their lunch hour— he replied, “You’re exactly the reason we’ve all been waiting with empty bellies.” There was no malice in the comment. When I later asked the assembled monks, ranging from the teenage boys to men in their 70s, how they had been affected by the coronavirus, the same man responded. “We’ve all come here to die,” he said, referring to the belief that by cutting off ties to family and the material world and living out their years on sacred ground, they had the opportunity to break the cycle of rebirth. “But god has a way of not giving people what they want,” he chuckled. “So those who want to live are dying, and those of us who want to die are living.”

I found his humor refreshing, displaying perhaps an awareness that lives, religious as well as secular, are built in part on fantasy. That had been apparent when I asked the mahant about the daily routine of the Ram Lalla idol. The mahant had been bemused by my question, but not annoyed. It had taken him a few phone calls to determine the exact details. The infant Ram was woken at 5 in the morning, I was told. He was bathed and then offered aarti, a ritual in which an open flame is waved to accompanying songs, the first of five such aarti sessions punctuating his day. From 7 to 11, devotees came to visit Ram Lalla. He ate at 11:30, took a nap, and was woken again at 1:30 for a second round of visitors. At 6:30, he had a substantial dinner of puris, sabzi, and kheer. At 7:30, after a final dose of aarti, he was put to sleep and the shrine shut down for the night. Two bodyguards were always present, in eight-hour shifts, but they were not allowed to carry weapons.

There was something odd but endearing about a monastic order of childless men ostensibly devoted to taking care of a never-changing, never-growing infant. But these rituals of care were a long way from the Hindu masculinity I had seen in evidence all over Ayodhya. Khan, the Muslim opponent of the temple, had told me with some sadness that the Hindu right did not really believe
that Ram was a god. “The temple is not being built to Ram the god but to Ram the ideal man, what they call ‘Purushottam Ram,’” he had said. This was certainly how Dr. Anil had referred to him. “Ram is not a common man. As a son, brother, cousin, his character is that of ‘Maryada Purushottam,’” he had told me on our first meeting. “Why do institutions today fail?” Dr. Anil had continued. “Why do we have murders and rapes? The writers of the constitution forgot our past. The constitution brings things from the outside. In Ram’s time, there were no locks in houses, no gates in temples. This temple will start that culture of Ram.”

And yet Ram the ideal son, brother, and king is a long way from the versions of him encountered in the many adaptations of the Ramayana that flowered in the Indian subcontinent and beyond through the centuries. Although he is the seventh avatar of Vishnu, and in that sense immortal, Ram doesn’t always remember his divine antecedents. Often, he struggles with events and actions and their consequences, and his life is, from one perspective, utterly tragic. Banished from Ayodhya because his father wants to appease his younger wife—Ram’s stepmother—who wants her biological son to inherit the throne, Ram is unable to prevent the abduction of his wife Sita while in exile. When he wins her back, after an epic war that involves the help of Hanuman and other monkeys, he is hounded by the suspicions of his conservative subjects that Sita has not remained faithful to him while in captivity. Even a fire test of purity by Sita cannot stop the tongues wagging, and Ram banishes a pregnant Sita to the forests. All this is the backdrop to his utopian rule. Even his death has a tinge of darkness to it, with Ram—at least in some versions—finally drowning himself in the river.

It is possible to argue that this very frailty and conflict in Ram endeared him to the spiritual traditions that rose around him. Often, the stories and songs composed and sung about him came from marginalized sections, from men of the weaver caste like Kabir and from women like Mirabai, people removed from direct access to wealth, power, and knowledge. But these approaches to Ram are a long way from the toxic version on display in Ayodhya and in India at large, a version that always tends towards Purushottam Ram.

I recalled how Dr. Anil, after the visit to the temple site, had been in a gregarious mood that appeared to have nothing to do with his having visited Ram Lalla. As we walked back past shops selling religious souvenirs, saffron scarves featuring the Angry Hanuman prominent among them, the conversation had turned, somehow, to Muslims.

“They had their chance in 1947,” he said. “They wanted a separate Muslim nation and they got it. Why do they still stay on here?” They were mostly Hindus who had long ago converted to Islam. To stay on in India, they should reconvert, he believed. What if they wanted to be in India as Muslims? I asked. He shrugged. “What can we do? We can’t kill them,” he said. They should have their voting rights and any state benefits taken away, he believed. They could live and work in India no more. It was a horrifying vision, one that has already been put into place in Assam and was the other part of the culture of Ram that the temple would bring into being.

Earlier in the day, just before we visited the Ram idol, Dr. Anil had wanted me to stop by at an apartment he had bought as an investment. It was close to the center of Ayodhya, and he described to me how everything would be transformed once the temple was complete. The river bank littered with cattle sheds and shit would be converted into a promenade. Condominiums would come up everywhere, as would a new airport being constructed not far from his photocopying business. Devotees with dollars in their bank accounts would be whisked from Delhi to Ayodhya by air or a high-speed train. They would relax in luxury, seven-star hotels on the outskirts of the town and be driven along wide highways directly to the new Ram temple. The website for the temple offered additional details. Visitors would be able to enjoy a “special peace zone for deeper meditation,” gaze at a “Lily-pond [sic] and Musical Fountains,” and check out the VIP cousins of the cattle I had seen everywhere being pampered at the “Adarsh Gosha-la” shelter for cows.

The highways existed—I had been on them. But Dr. Anil’s apartment was at the end of a grim block of concrete—housing bearing the unmistakable stamp of being built for the lower middle class by a government agency. There were cars parked in front of the two-story buildings in a demonstration of the upward mobility that had come to Ayodhya. But the electric wires ran in manic fashion from rusting, crooked poles, the paint had pealed off the walls, and mildew grew like an alien infestation on the window ledges. Dr. Anil led me to his second-floor apartment, empty, still in the process of being finished. He spent a long time washing the stainless steel sink. Then he showed me the squat toilet, which he said had been relocated at considerable expense because it originally pointed in a direction considered wrong by the scriptures. Everything about the apartment and its surroundings was miserable, but Dr. Anil’s energy and optimism seemed boundless.

I could understand why. Ayodhya, after all, is only the start of the liberation the Hindu right envisions for India. In Varanasi—a city far older and much more central to Hindu traditions than Ayodhya—the Gyan Vapi mosque sits surrounded by barricades and police men while the Shiva temple next door is expanded along lines similar to what is being done with the new Ram temple. There are demands to install an idol inside a mosque in the town of Mathura because it supposedly occupies the birthplace of Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu. There is even talk that the Taj Mahal is really an ancient Shiva temple appropriated by Muslims that must be returned to its former glory. The Ram temple coming up in Ayodhya, built with stone from Rajasthan, designed by an architect from Gujarat, funded by dollars from the diaspora in the West, is only the beginning of an effort to construct a past that never was, in the hope of devising a future from which India’s Muslim inhabitants can be erased.

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Solomon's Island

On the hunt for the ruins of Solomon's Temple in the South Pacific, and finding a bizarre web of connections to Israel

BY MATTHEW FISHBANE

One afternoon, a little over a year ago, I received a more or less random-seeming email from a colleague that had no particular connection to either of our busy professional lives. The main purpose of such emails, containing links to the weirder corners of the Internet, is to waste time, and having some time on my hands that day, I followed the two links inside. The first was to a Facebook post, on which I viewed a lo-res video of Papua New Guinea’s Gogodala people—in grass skirts, their bodies decorated with palm leaves, body paint, feathers, shells, and other accessories, and with one man wearing barnacle goggles—singing the Shema, the holiest of Hebrew prayers. When I followed the second link in the email, I came across the text of a 2006 book titled Bine Mene: Connecting the Hebrews, by “geoscientist” Samuel Were, which made a linguistics-based case for a tribe of ancient Israelites who “journeyed down to Lake Tanganyika and in an unexplained way ended up in Fiji.” Elsewhere that day, as the result of my research (or Google searches), I found this: “Growing numbers of evangelical Christians in North Malaita believe that the Lost Temple of Israel lies hidden at a shrine ... in the mountainous interior of their island.”

It was one of those frigid city days that make it easy to want to go—anywhere. I clicked over to Google Maps, punched in “Malaita Province,” then zoomed out and sat back, and considered what now appeared to be the makings of a truly great story—the kind I could tell in hotel bars for the rest of my life. A story about how the Internet said Solomon’s Temple was on Malaita in the Solomon Islands, an archipelago whose half a million people inhabit nearly 1000 atolls, islets, reefs, cays, and islands including Guadalcanal, the site of the famous World War II battles—and about how I actually went there to see myself, which is something that very few of us do anymore, which is a shame, because the mysteries of the world are only revealed in person. How did the destinies of Israelites and the inhabitants of the most remote member of the British Commonwealth become intertwined? What did this Solomon’s Temple in the Pacific islands look like? I then bought a ticket online—which was surprisingly cheap, considering that I would be traveling 8,505 miles, or one-third of the way around the circumference of the globe.

Which is a short way of explaining how, by late spring, I came to be seated in the black leatherette of an Air Pacific red-eye, reading Conrad’s Victory en route to the South Pacific by way of LAX. I transferred to Air Nadi, where I took my seat in a hand-me-down Boeing behind a sandal-and-skirt-wearing member of Fiji’s National Rugby Delegation. In Suva, we were met by customs agents and Mormons wearing skirts and sandals, and by a Tiki band. Live orchids hung over the bathroom stalls. From Vanuatu’s Bauerfield International Airport, named for the American World War II fighter pilot Harold Bauer who made 11 enemy kills, we flew low over Guadalcanal’s Weather Coast, across unbroken green canopy on volcanic slopes, and touched down in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands—the site of the Japanese-built landing strip that in 1942 was a fulcrum of Pacific theater supremacy before America dropped the bomb.

Jonathan, a diminutive, trim islander who sat next to me on the last leg from Vanuatu, introduced himself and inquired about the purpose of my journey.

“I’ve come to meet the Malaitans,” I explained, as he downed as many free international-flight gold-label SolBrew beers as he could. “I’m told they have a kinship with Israel. I’ve read that Solomon’s Temple is buried in the bush.”

“Matthew,” he said. “I believe God has sent you here.”

Before departing from New York, I called my bank and phone provider to flag my upcoming travel. They told me flatly that the Solomon Islands don’t exist. It was a thought that followed me through the quiet strangeness of Honiara, a dusty capital with a single main road named for the Spanish navigator Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira, the first recorded European to make landfall here in 1568. Mendaña claimed to have rediscovered the site of King Solomon’s mines, the El Dorado of the Pacific. Now there were right-hand-drive cars, the South Seas Evangelical Church and hundreds of other churches, the Hot Bread Kitchen, Club Paradise, a colonial-era Chinatown, distribution facilities for SolBrew, lackluster government buildings, shipping agents, and a university, along with the headquarters of Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation radio, and commemorative World War II sites.

The King Solomon Hotel was fully booked, so I settled in to the Mother’s Union resthouse, run by nuns, which Jonathan had suggested as a godly alternative to the Pacific Casino Hotel, with its karaoke bar and “penthouse suites,” or the Japanese-owned Mendana. The lazy, barefoot pace of things seemed governed by the chewing and spitting of betel nut, a mild stimulant made from the blood-red seed of the areca palm. At first glance, the city appeared locked in a battle between sidewalk betel-nut-sptitters and store and restaurant owners who fought the rust-colored gloppy splatter with NO SPITTING signs—a battle that neither side appeared to be winning.

For about 4,000 years, until the arrival of gun-bearing Europeans, the tribes that populated the islands of Melanesia,
Polynesia, and Micronesia maintained a balance of offense and defense that basically precluded the possibility of large-scale political units. In the intervening years, Solomon Islanders have not lost their taste for tribal piercings, markings, and imaginative hairstyles. Mohawks, blowouts, dreadlocks, half-crowns, tonsures, cornrows, shaved-tops, birds of paradise, and naturally blond afros grace the heads of men and women alike. They speak a host of local tribal languages and a lingua franca of Pijin whose simplified syntax and phonetic spelling were a gift from missionaries, who helped contribute words like “pikinini”—which here means “child.” The possessive form—a shortening of the construction “belongs to me” or “belongs to you”—becomes blong me, blong iu, which is in turn in speech shortened to just blong, such that everywhere you walk, you hear people telling each other blong me, blong iu. A giant billboard along Mendana Avenue advertising baby formula exhorts Solomon Islanders to Luk aftam gud helt blong pikinini blong iu.

As remote as they are, the Solomons are also used to the idea that they are a pivot on which history turns. From August 1942 to February 1943, when the Japanese fully withdrew from the islands, some 31,000 imperial soldiers and more than 7,000 Allies were killed in fierce land, sea, and air battles. What they did mattered to the outcome of the war. Dozens of Allied and Japanese military ships, transporters, and cargo vessels, and hundreds of planes rest between Guadalcanal, Savo, and Florida, on the seabed of what American soldiers dubbed Iron Bottom Sound. Over time, the hundreds of wrecks sprouted coral gardens, havens for some of the earth’s most astonishing forms of life.

In 1978, the Solomon Islands were granted independence, but remained within the British Commonwealth, making the new country a constitutional monarchy with the Queen of England as its figurehead. A series of ineffective prime ministers then quarreled, stole, blundered, and strangled the untapped potential of land and sea that is as close to a terrestrial paradise as we are likely to see before death. A 1920s colonial prospectus put it best: “The soil and climate of the Solomon Islands are admirably suited for the growth of every kind of tropical production.... Coconuts grow there faster, and more luxuriantly, than in any other part of the world. Hurricanes are unknown. Here is a rich, fertile country, with nearly every natural advantage.”

But poverty clung to the people. Jobs were scarce. The colonial systems of copra and cocoa farming allowed middlemen and wholesalers to hoard profits. Crippled by remoteness, producers were only as good as their ability to reach shipping. Sovereignty in many ways became the country’s most valuable asset. Soon, whaling countries were offering to build bridges and repair airports; Taiwan, needing leverage in the international community, built health centers and kept a watchful eye on the price of tuna. Tribal rivalries fostered. Non-governmental agencies also proliferated, as the Solomon Islands languished in the ranks of the 40 poorest countries in the world. In the late 1990s, high unemployment and complex internal migrations plus severe tribalism, “land alienation,” and incompetent post-colonial governance led to general unrest and instability. A loose band of marauders known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement, or Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, started to target Malaitans, who though ethnically indistinct from Guadalcanalese, were technically settlers and resented for having grown into a working-class majority in Honiara.

Malaitans responded by forming into the Malaita Eagle Force, led by a dread-locked, dark-skinned man named Jimmy “Rasta” Lusibaea who, like Solomon’s Temple, is something of a legend on the Internet. In 2000, he captured Prime Minister Bartholomew Uluvalu and forced him to resign. He rallied his troops under a modified Solomon Islands flag that included the Star of David—a black warlord fighting for Israel in the South Pacific.

By 2003, despite the Townsville peace agreement in 2000 and the contested elections in its wake, the country was bankrupt and the capital in full-blown chaos, with militants and less organized gangs roaming the streets and raiding the national treasury to pay for beer. The Solomon Islands prime minister made a desperate appeal for international aid. Under the aegis of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a security force of several thousand troops landed and effectively began to run the country.

Representatives of 14 other Pacific nations also participated under Operation Helpem Fren. RAMSI is only this year finally handing over full command to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force; for a year New Zealand troops have been on a farewell tour, performing the Haka war dance. Charged with “ensuring the safety and security of Solomon Islands,” RAMSI has presided over amnesties, weapons collection, looting control, contested elections, anti-Chinese rioting, health and development projects, economic reform, tax collection, among other civic activities.

Into this post-conflict environment parachuted an Israeli development expert named Yoel Siegel, whose photograph I’d spotted on a website, in which he is seen posing between a pair of rotund Melanesians below a banner strung across an empty tropical road. The sign reads:

“The Israel Development Experience 2nd–10th November 2010 Auki, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands”
After changing a precious wad of U.S. dollars into Solomon dollars, imprinted with warriors, shields, ceremonially carved posts, and mythical sea turtles, I bought a cell phone from an Australian telecom outfit, and as the attendant handed me the device over the counter, I noticed my first Star of David—no more than the size of a bottle cap, it appeared between her thumb and forefinger. It was a moment before I realized it wasn’t a pen doodle, but an unofficial tattoo, and that the twin lines above the star made it look like the flag of the Jewish State, a resemblance that turned out to be entirely intentional, and an important part of my story.

In the decades following the 1967 Six Day War, when Israel in the eyes of many was transmuted from “socialist beacon” into “imperialist aggressor”—and as Israel battled Yasser Arafat’s PLO while strengthening ties with Ronald Reagan’s United States—the Jewish state increasingly found itself vilified in sometimes crude and simplistic anti-imperialist terms. To combat its increasing isolation, Israel sought friendly diplomatic relations with some of the most remote nations on earth—a push that happened to coincide with what Sec. of State James Baker called the “expansionist policies” that saw the settler population in the West Bank quadruple and led to the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987. In the South Pacific, Israel first established diplomatic relations with the Solomon Islands in 1989, following Tuvalu (1984), Marshall Islands (1986), and the Federated States of Micronesia (1987), all three of which have been consistent and often lonely supporters of Israel in international forums like the United Nations. The 1990s saw Israel’s diplomatic focus shift to the states of the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, and across Africa and Asia, before circling back to the South Pacific, where the Jewish state found some of its most consistent allies in Vanuatu (1993), and Nauru and Palau (1994).

In 2006, as the Lebanon war exploded, Israel came up in votes in the United Nations General Assembly 17 times; the only countries to side with Jewish state were the United States, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Micronesia, Nauru, Australia, Canada, and Tuvalu. In 2007, the Wellington, New Zealand Dominion Post ran a feature titled “The Last Outpost of the Diaspora,” about how “remote Solomon Islanders, convinced they are descendants of the Lost Tribe of Israel, have rejected Australian projects because they are too busy growing copra for the mother country.” A wave of “Israeli business men,” it seemed, had landed with a sudden and unquenchable thirst for coconuts.

These bizarre diplomatic subplots reached a head in 2009, following Operation Cast Lead, which sent Israeli ground troops into Gaza. When the controversial South African Jewish jurist Richard Goldstone issued his 574-page fact-finding-mission report concluding that both Israel and Hamas had committed possible war crimes during the conflict, only one Pacific country sided with the 114-member majority against Israel: the Solomon Islands. Three weeks later, the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth published an Israeli foreign ministry report that explained the defection—claiming that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Iran had sent a delegate to Oceania promising $200,000 to fund the studies of Solomon Islands medical students in Cuba.

“The Solomon Islands have never been supportive of Israel,” Michael Ronen, Israel’s ambassador to the Solomon Islands, was quoted as saying. “Iran won the support of the Solomon Islands for $200,000. I won’t offer $250,000 to overturn the decision. Israel does not buy support for money.” Leliana Firisua, the 265-lb. Malaitan who had been appointed honorary consul of the State of Israel in Honiara earlier that year, was faced with his first diplomatic challenge in attempting to explain to his countrymen Israel’s “disappointment.”

“The Iranian regime continues to come up with anti-Jews comments which also include the Holocaust denials and also other public calls for the total liquidation of the State of Israel,” he told the Pacific Islands News Agency. “So basically it is one of the nations that hates Israel and everybody knows this. So when it becomes friendly with other nations, you know Israel always had a concern.”

Yet it would be wrong to understand the entirely pragmatic connection between the Solomon Islands and the modern day State of Israel as the sole reason for the Star of David tattoo on the cell phone booth attendant’s hand. There is documented evidence that at least some 18th-century convicts, deposited in the South Pacific instead of being sent to gaols in England, were Jewish. A convict named Samuel Pollend, for one, who stowed away on the Matilda, headed to the Polynesian Marquesas, survived a 1792 shoal-wreck, and ended up in Hawaii. Another group of 20 anonymous sailors were wrecked on Malaita in 1829 and allegedly were kept there for eating by cannibals. Did one of these men father one of the competing Jewish origin myths that circulated on and around Malaita?

Because islands offer the illusion of self-contained worlds, beachcombers, or “transculturites”—people who, as one academic I was reading put it, “temporarily or permanently detached from one group, enter the web of social relations that constitute another society, and come under the influence of its customs”—can spread stories and customs like pollinating bees. In the 1920s there were some 650 Europeans and non-native whites living in the Solomon Islands, many of them busy converting the heathens. One of the most influential of the great missions in Melanesia, besides that of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, was the Pentecostal South Seas Evangelical Church, originally founded under another name in the late 19th century to convert the black laborers who worked the sugar-cane plantations of Queensland. Like other Pentecostal movements, SSEC held mystical beliefs in the power of an inerrant scripture and promoted a connection to the long-ago apostolic age of the early church, which for a people without a written history but with customs of ancestral worship was less of a leap than might be expected.

Tracing the Israeli connection to Malaita through the fascinating work of the Dutch ethnographer Jaap Timmer...
of Macquarie University led me quickly to his studies of The Deep Sea Canoe Movement, a splinter of South Seas Evangelicalism led by a former minister of Home Affairs on the Solomon Islands named Michael Maeliau. The key to the “ethno-theology” of the Deep Sea Canoe Movement is an interpretation of elements of the prophets Daniel and Isaiah, and of Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Since this verse precedes the foundational chapter of Pentecostalism in Acts 2, which narrates the creation of the fellowship of believers, Maeliau sees particular urgency in the idea of the Solomon Islands as the geographical and therefore the spiritual end of the earth.

In an account of his prayer movement, published in 2006 by the Australian/Singapore imprint Onestone, Maeliau describes a singular vision that came to him in 1986, a vision of the Solomon Islands. It begins with a great flood coming down a valley despite the fact that it was not raining. The water is crystal clear and forms a beautiful lake that overflows into a spray of mist like a cloud. The cloud floats toward Australia and turns north to Papua New Guinea, then makes several more loops in different directions. When it hits it splits into three: One stream turns north toward the pole, the other to the south, and the middle stream rages across the United States. When this last hits the east coast, it turns back on itself, creating a great tsunami-like wave, linking up with the north and south currents to cause one huge tide covering the Earth, which then splits across the continents and swirls over Europe and Africa and then splits again, so that the currents form a tidal circle with Jerusalem at its center. Over Jerusalem, the waves smash together and shoot up into the sky in a great pillar of water reaching deep into the heavens. “It opened up like a mushroom and then floated out into all directions in the most beautiful cloud formation one can ever imagine,” Maeliau wrote, “until it completely engulfed the whole earth. Then these words came out from heaven: ‘And the Glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea!’”

That was the end of the vision, which supported a widely held mythology on the islands that Malaitans are descended of biblical kings and that perhaps the Ark itself landed them here, that the Lost Temple is buried on Malaita, and that Hebrew tablets in sacred places are proof that Malaitans are Israelites of a far greater purity than those corrupted by the migrations of Europe and conquests in the Middle East.

My search for Maeliau—who seemed like exactly the kind of person I wanted to meet for the purposes of telling a great bar-room story—took me to Kukum, a neighboring village, where I met Pastor Baddeley. The pastor appeared in a puff of dust, emerging out of the darkness of a storage doorway into the overcast, greenhouse-like light. He wore a crisp white shirt, shorts that were once someone else’s dress pants, and Velcro sandals. He had been sweeping, he said. His English was inflected with the polite sing-song of the BBC World Service. He told me he didn’t know where Michael Maeliau was, though he himself had been named for Walter H. Baddeley, the seventh Anglican bishop of Melanesia (1932–1947). When I pressed him, he conceded that there had been a schism, and that his church and Michael Maeliau’s church, which used to both belong to the South Seas Evangelical Church, were now no longer the same.

“Actually, what’s good is that we didn’t have to send him away,” Baddeley said about Maeliau. “We just drew lines: This is our doctrine. This here is our belief. And people, they make choices. Do I want to be on this side or that?”

He gestured to the vast cement-floor church behind him, locked shut, looking semi-abandoned. Its walls were made of traditional palm-leaf decorative matting, its beams crossed with rakish flair. When I peered through mosquito screens, I could see that the pews were gone.

“So, on Sunday that church is full and people sit on the floor or stand?” I asked.

“Actually the central committee has decided not to use this site,” Baddeley said. “I have the power to unlock this church, but I cannot open it, because I do not want there to be trouble.”

He seemed caught up in the middle of some serious business.

“Go to Auki,” Baddeley said, about the capital of Malaita. “No point in wandering around Honiara. There everything is.”

I caught a boat called the Pelican II, which impersonated a harmless harbor ferry—a diesel metal tub with slapdash soldering and thick multiple coats of white and blue paint. I took a bench seat under the awning on the back deck and chatted with Samson, who wore cargo shorts, flip flops, and a wool beanie. He was headed to Papua New Guinea to finish his technical motor mechanic degree, because no such vocational training existed in his country. He suggested I climb the volcano that is Savo Island, an iconic outline on the water that I recognized from Terrence Malick’s World War II epic The Thin Red Line. “You light a match there,” Samson said, “and the path fills up with smoke.”

The Pelican unhitched. Engine noise drowned out our voices. We cruised over Iron Bottom Sound. As the slopes of Guadalcanal receded, Samson lit a cigarette, and he and a dozen others sat impassively. At the southern tip of Tulagi and the Florida archipelago, the Pelican rounded to portside. The ocean turned opal blue, its surface suddenly a riot of surging dune-sized waves, and the ship began to rock—lightly then with increasing resolve. Saltwater sprayed abaft, then across the mid. Passengers headed inboard. An uneasy Malaitan came out to tuck his cardboard boxes peeping with live chicks into a semi-sheltered corner. Flying silver fish like strange proto-hummingbirds leapt...
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he idea that the Lost Temple of King Solomon can be found on Malaita manifestly captivated one man, Frank Daifa—or Daeifa, or other variants on the spelling that appear in occasional news stories out of New Zealand and Australia. Frank was said to live in A’ama village, where he claimed to have uncovered evidence of a physical ruin that proves the Israelite-Malaitan connection as well as the onset of end times. I had a phone number for him but couldn’t get an answer. In a way, as the keeper of the temple, he was my destination.

Luckily, Jonathan, my friend from the plane, had arranged for a guide to meet me at the wharf in Auki. “I am Revelation!” he announced. A knobby-headed man in cut-off jeans and a plaid shirt relieved of its sleeves, he told me not to worry, he knew everyone. “You will meet the former premier, Richard. You will go to A’ama Village and see the temple, there is Frank and his brother they call ‘Grassbird.’ You will meet our friends, who pray for Israel every day! But first, Matthew, where will you stay?” I asked if the Auki Motel, where I’d reserved, might be suitable, and he said, “It is fine, fine. We shall take a taxi there.” He led me to a windowless, rusty station wagon, hand-painted with the lettering TAXI, and negotiated a ride.

Malaita is generally the same width as Israel—as long as from Be’er Sheva to Nazareth—and it is the only one of the Solomon Islands’ nine provinces to sit on a different tectonic plate. (Revelation said Malaita was split into its north and south islands by mythical sharks fighting so fiercely that they tore through the ground.) Auki, a former colonial capital, is tucked neatly into the mouth of the Langa Langa Lagoon, a collection of stilted settlements built onto artificial islands of piled coral rocks and sand. From there one road heads south along the coast, and another north. The town, no more than a half dozen streets in a grid, was alive with the turmoil of market life and the cargo the ferry had brought. There is a bank, various government agencies and NGO headquarters, two hotels, a Telecom office with three busted Internet stations, and below a school a soccer field filled with Unicef tents serving as classrooms after storm damage to the main building. Colorful signs lined the trading posts, with their covered balconies: Shine Cocoa Exporter, Lost Sheep Clothing. It had the flimsy look of an overrun film set for a cheap western, complete with spitters and idlers, except that they were all black and curly-haired and their teeth were stained blood red from betel juice.

“We could have walked,” I said to Revelation, after our taxi ride turned out to be no more than a couple hundred yards. “But you have bags,” he said, looking despondently at my one worn duffel.

He described the key to all economic, social, and political matters in the Solomon Islands as being an expression of “one-top business”: Strong men, at the top of steep pyramid schemes, decided everything. He seemed to think the Israeli development project under Yoel Siegel was as doomed as the other projects he’d seen before it, like the massive Japanese-sponsored rice-growing mission in central Malaita that neglected to consider that locals didn’t lack for rice.

Revelation said he’d arrange for me to meet some people who knew about this Israeli one-top business, and then he sheepishly awaited some bills to pay for his transport back to his village.

At the Auki Motel, the TV in the common room was tuned to a satellite feed of Pope Benedict, in vestments, leading Pentecostal mass from Rome. I ate dinner there with the owner and a man named Peter Mac, and we naturally got to chatting about what I was after. I asked Peter if he knew of Leliana Firisua, the honorary consul of Israel. He looked up from coconut whitefish with incredulity and said, “He is a punk. The only thing that man do before is run a credit union, and it fail.” As if to confirm that these matters were no joke, the owner then told a story about a blood vengeance carried out in that same room some years ago, when a former Malaita Eagle Force commander walked in and shot a guest, killing him, while the owner sat watching. “As a witness, I was scared for my life,” he said. The shooter was never charged.

On another afternoon, on the truck to Fia River for a freshwater dip, Dani from Bulea village introduced himself and inquired politely about my reason for being there. “I am so, so happy to meet you,” he said, his gray curls bobbing eagerly. “I am happy to meet a Jew, Matthew. I feel this is God’s plan. A great opportunity. Great, great. I am Christian. I have a pan-flute orchestra.”

I explained to him that I wasn’t a spiritual person and added that I’m not in the music business, in the hopes of tempering the more outlandish promises of the other representatives of my people. “But I am very lucky and happy to meet a Jewish person here,” he said, unbowed. “You know Malaitans are Israelites?”

By then, I did, because I’d gone with Revelation to Langa Lagoon, and attended Sunday services in a one-room church overflowing with people, segregated by the sexes. I’d listened to their pastors welcome me as a “Jewish brother,” and preach on the day’s text, Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.” Pastor Kenneth wore a green T-shirt printed with a verse from
Isaiah: “From the ends of the earth we hear songs.” Shell mobiles hung from the ceiling. A tattered poster showed a drawing of topless islanders menaced by shadowy, flaming hands, with a cross-shaped wharf leading into an ocean of salvation. The congregants prayed loudly, for more than two hours, raising the temperature of the baking airless room and lifting their voices to the heavens, reaching frenzies, singing Melanesian choral polyphonic hymns in Pijin: “God u tekem laef blong me.” When it was over, we moved to a ceremonial hut, where a table had been set with banana leaves and bowls of salty mangrove-flower gruel and boiled manioc. After we ate, I watched the rainbow-colored parasols and bright wraps scatter down the paths of coral stone, back to their home villages for Sabbath rest.

The evangelical spirit teaches the lesson that whoever is most plugged in to God and the line of ancestors that lead to God is most plugged in to power. For many evangelical Christians, God can literally move mountains. Pastors are constantly being tested in their ability to dream and move people and resources on the grandest scale. The bigger the vision, the broader the bureaucracy, the greater the need for everyone to have “bought in” to make the change happen. I found most things in the Solomons to be organized on models that closely resembled the size and structures of apostolic or Pentecostal churches. This “one-top business” that Revelation was so angry about was, at its empirical extreme, a version of monotheism.

The acolytes of Israeli development in the Solomon Islands had organized themselves in much the same way. The Malaita Chazon Authority, housed in a 1960s building on the other side of the governor’s mansion in Auki and designed as the recreational center for colonial officers, with its bar and “cold rooms” still intact, made a churchlike HQ (the name, chazon, means vision in Hebrew). Recently, the MCA had changed its name to MCDA, with D for “development” added to expand the mandate.

The main room of the MCA was set up like a classroom or conference room, with a giant Israeli flag hung on one wall. The offices were behind a reception desk, in a row of hot wooden barracks at the back. There I met Patrick Taloboe, a heavy-set man with a round face who had been a Telekom engineer and palm-oil processor and, in Fiji, a business manager. He had tribal markings on his cheeks and nose: light grooves that made childish sun-style emblems and lines and showed him, he said, to be “descended from kings.” “Now that Israel is in partnership with Malaita,” he told me, “it brings back the knowledge and the historical passing of the message of stories from ancestors, that one day Israel is coming back to develop Malaita.” He then enthused about the tonnage per hectare of bananas, oranges, and lemons produced in the Negev and how saying something like “100 tons per hectare” could completely blow the minds of local Malaitans. He told me Frank Daefa came through occasionally to drop off messages for the Israeli government or to share his scholarly work. Taloboe handed me a photocopy of one handwritten treatise, titled “The Rise and Fall of Oba Kingdom,” that Frank had left recently. Then he handed me another photocopy—from the image decay it was a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy—with Hebrew lettering that he said was a rubbing of a stone in Siale, the remote mountain the ancestors came from. Taloboe ran the field office, with an “allowance” from the Israeli development agency TAG, and supervised 11 employees. He had been to Hebrew University in Jerusalem the year before for a certificate in agricultural management (the diploma was taped to the wall next to some regional maps) and was holding down the fort while an 8-man Malaitan delegation—including Firisua, Lusibaea, and local MCDA administrators—was on an official Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs-sponsored trip to the Jewish state. (On the day I had landed, the local Solomon Star had published an image of the delegates, skull caps propped high on afros, standing at the Western Wall.) “The trip is like taking Queen Sheba to see King Solomon,” Taloboe said, reporting what he had heard from the delegates, who were due back later that week. “Starting from Ben-Gurion, all the delegates just say, ‘Wow. Wow. Wow.’”

When my meetings were done, Revelation arranged for me to get a front seat next to Anderson, the driver of one of the flatbed transports going north from the market. Anderson, who wore sportshades and had a rag of clean dreads, also worked as an EMT at the local clinic and was a talkative companion for the 4-hour drive along the coast, stopping often to load and unload passengers and their wares. He dropped me in A’ama just past the main village, where a chirpy barefoot man with gray-flecked hair ran out to greet me. I said I was looking for Franklin or Grassbird. He looked astonished at the sounds I was making.

“Franklin is here!” he said, pointing into the bush behind him.

We caring nothing but a pair of patched jeans and exposing a curly-haired, dark-coffee-colored chest sagging off a wiry frame that used to support more, Franklin Daefa had the look of an impish shepherd. His wide nostrils, high cheekbones, v-shaped ears, and sharp chin tufted with a gray goatee all pointed to his tight smile. I told him I'd heard about the temple. I'd read about it on the Internet. I wanted to see it. I'd come from America for just that purpose. I'd been calling him for days.

As caretaker of the Kingdom of Oba, Franklin found all of this most natural. According to his elaborate theology, Oba was a 19th-generation descendant of the biblical Noah, who left some ruins that may or may not be from the period when a merchant Jew, perhaps Turkish, arrived on Malaita. The talkhouse, opposite a copra-drying oven and a Christian chapel on the property, was a talkative companion for the 4-hour drive along the coast, stopping often to load and unload passengers and their wares. He dropped me in A’ama just past the main village, where a chirpy barefoot man with gray-flecked hair ran out to greet me. I said I was looking for Franklin or Grassbird. He looked astonished at the sounds I was making.

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In fairly choppy but uninhibited English, he told me a mixed-up story about the biblical Solomon’s treasure chest.

“Half the room, if it could be called such given the porosity of the thatched walls, was a dirt floor; the other was a raised platform that made more of a gesture to “inside,” with the kitchen—soot-blackened pots over a firetable—set apart by a flattened bamboo. When Grassbird joined us, now wearing a shirt and shoes, I greeted him by name. Franklin was surprised. Grassbird said, ‘David: that’s me,’ explaining his name. ‘I use Grassbird when I deal by name.’ Franklin was surprised. Grassbird said, ‘David: that’s me,’ explaining his name. ‘I use Grassbird when I dealing the ganja.’

Franklin pulled out an official-looking document dated October 2011, bearing six signatures, and showed it to me as proof of his legitimacy and also his generosity. ‘You will see,’ he said, ‘that we have made a gift of land to the Jews. You will see the temple. You will make your notes and record your things, and you will understand everything.’ The paper described the “terms agreed on by O’oba Tribe for offering a parcel of land to the Jews as a gift.” Term 1 read: The parcel of land offered is not by friendship, but by blood relation tie. The blood tie was first established by Gad the Jews high priest who was one of O’oba tribes great ancestor, therefore the gift is a show of token of appreciation for re-unification after a separation for more than 2,700 years.

“This document has been all the way to Shimon Peres. I sent it to him. He has read it. The Jewish thing,” he said, “may be our chance to survive.”

After a dinner of canned fish and boiled taro root, Franklin held court, sitting under a bulb connected to a solar-fed car battery. Above Franklin’s head, nestled in the open rafters, was a canoe-sized ceremonial platter, carved whole out of an 8-foot piece of hardwood by an ancestor; owning the trough, where manioc was pounded and slaughtered pigs are presented for feasts, was an honor and a great responsibility. In fairly choppy but uninhibited English, he told me a mixed-up story about the biblical Solomon’s treasure chest, from Kings and Chronicles: about how a decoy, containing only the tablets of the commandments, was kept in the temple, and that the real fortune, shrouded by the wings of cherubim, was shipped to Malaita, where it lies buried somewhere in the jungle. To me and the five or six gathered black men in the lower part of the talkhouse—almost nothing but eyes in the gloom—he retold Queen Sheba’s test of Solomon’s wisdom: How she had brought before the king two finely wrought silk bouquets and one from the royal garden and challenged him to identify the real. (“In my own country, far, far away, I have heard much about your power and glory,” Sheba says, in James Baldwin’s version of it, which I later looked up. “Now, tell me, O King, which is the true, and which is the false?”) Franklin told how King Solomon had the windows thrown open to let the bees lead him to the truth; he told it with great mischief and delight, inventing words where he had no English, speaking with his face all in shadow in front of the light. “You see, Solomon was a wise man. And a wise king listens to even the smallest of beings.” His mother hooted on cue.

“Matthew, we will show you the ruins because you are a Jew,” Franklin said. “And now it’s time for you to rest.” Stalin took me to one of the huts where, using his half arm and his whole one, he tied a mosquito net to some box nails with a stretch of dried vine. Franklin’s mother came in to explain the arrangements. “Bush toilet,” she said in a toothless Pijin, pointing vigorously out the open frame that served as a window, while clapping a roll of toilet paper. “Me love you,” she added, clutching my hand in her bony fingers. She headed out, muttering. I bedded down, tucking in the edges of the netting, popping my daily malaria pill. A hazy half-moon sent down slatted shadows of palm fronds. Above them were streaks of high clouds and stars, so many stars as to be almost cloudlike.

I listened to the singsong of half-whispered To’abaita mixed with a faint undercurrent of surf and breeze. The foreignness sank in: their remoteness and separateness and otherness, the strength of their longing to be heard, my unannounced and odd arrival. Getting there had taken a week of planes, boats, trucks, contacts, negotiations, meetings, starts, and stops—but always forward toward this strange man, the master of Solomonic ruins on Malaita Island in the South Pacific. Tomorrow we would be heading further into the bush.

Later, in the deep stillness of the night, I stumbled dreamily to the edge of the compound, past the pigsty and behind the chicken coop, peering into that moonlit jungle. The depths! A wall of gray-green shadow. Where was I? King Solomon may have been wise, but these people are not, I thought, and nor am I. I knew the walk into the interior had its dangers—a slip and it could be days to reach proper medical care—but I was also struggling to suppress a great, looming sense of disappointment. What if there was nothing here?

By morning the dread hung like an early dew. I was in the talkhouse at 4 a.m., the appointed time to embark on an...
overnight trip that we would attempt in a day. Frank sat regally on the same chair he had occupied the night before, as if he had never left it. Women prepared packaged “trimix” of instant coffee, powdered milk, and sugar and rekindled embers to cook rice and yams for breakfast. Bowls appeared, topped with oily, curried canned tuna. I ate like it could be my last meal. Frank looked on approvingly and then put finishing touches on his hand-drawn map.

He explained that two of the corners of the inner temple held powers of “Thunder + Lightning,” and “Earthquake destruction.” He pointed to the Jews Priest Grave Pyramid Mount and the “women’s court” and the Stone of Love. Then, tapping the small circle labeled “Holy of Holiest” on the map, Frank said, “You will not let your shadow fall across this altar. For it shall mean certain death.”

Frank ceremoniously introduced the people who would be walking with me—he had a bad kidney and would slow us down too much, he said. Dudley, a barrel-chested, serious, round-headed neighbor who had worked the archeological site with Frank when they were first clearing and promoting it, took the lead. Stalin, his dreads tucked under a knit cap decorated with a rhinestone skull-and-bones, wordlessly assumed second. Fiu, a neighbor who looked like a Daguerreotype in negative of a full-bearded Darwin, had never been here. He said, “I have not.” We approached, as if he had never left it. Women on moss-covered rocks and narrowly missed hitting my head on a boulder. I heard Dudley say to Fiu, “Cut him one stick.” Some determined whacks and Fiu's outstretched hand proffered a perfect bamboo crutch. The river was cool, cascading over rounded stones, narrowing into water-sculpture steps and pools, with fish chasing away below our feet and, in spots, bright green deposits that Stalin insisted were soft emeralds—the precious stones of 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and Mendaña’s dreams.

We reached a bend with a 6-story-high draping of waterfalls, and Dudley halted us there. The cliff had formed when a side of a cave fell open eons ago, exposing speleothems and nooks where brown bats now hung upside down. Dudley and Stalin rolled tobacco into ripped pieces of notebook paper and sat smoking. Fiu clapped, hollered, and threw stones at the bats to chase them out and allow him to observe them in flight. He said, “Bat cave,” with an approving nod. After rinsing off a first bloom of sweat in the Edenic wash, I asked Fiu how often he’d been here. He said, “I have not.” We were now an hour and a half from north Malaita’s one road.

Above the bat cave, the way got considerably harder. We climbed the river for another two hours before reaching a second stopping point, this one closed over and narrow, where Dudley and Stalin rolled another cigarette. The only noise was the roar of water on rocks. From here Dudley hacked at the brush with his machete on the steep bank until uncovering what satisfied him as a path. From there the climb was vertical, muddy, untrodden, planting the walking stick with every stride, hauling myself up, digging in, planting, hauling, with each step punctuated from above by the rhythmic whack-whack of Dudley’s long knife. It began to rain, but I was already soaked from wading and sweat.

Between exertions, I thought about Frank’s injunction—shadow … altar … death—and found that it had burrowed its way into my brain over the last few hours and had forced me, in the absence of other conversation, into an absurd debate with myself over my own credulity and lack of faith. On one hand, there was Frank’s showman-like flair, his manifest insanity, this great distance. On the other, Kurtz, the world upside down. Faced with the unknown, we invent fictions and cast ourselves as protagonists. But why not just keep your shadow away from the altar?

I awoke from this daydream to find we were no longer climbing, but instead cutting across a small clearing toward a low shelter made of palm leaf and wood. Dudley said, “This is temple.” He gestured to a mound of half-hidden stones. “Here is grave blo dead Jew priest.” There were flagstones paving the refuge and behind it an insurmountable green, tenacious saplings, fresh vines, kudzu-like—the impenetrable thoughtlessness of pure growth. Stalin, lifting the straps of his woven bag over his head, was indicating that there’d be work to uncover the rest. He cut more tobacco and handed a palm-full to Dudley. They sat smoking as the rain grew more insistent.

Then Dudley did a fair bit of whacking, wielding his machete like an extension of his arm. He led me to a low wall, an orderly pile of stones, with what looked like a threshold. Stalin held the map, measuring the world against it. According to Frank’s drawings, this was the entrance to a sacrificial space. Stalin and Dudley cleared the glossy foliage, and mosquitoes rose in swarms. I glopped on DEET, snapped pictures, and nodded while Fiu foraged fern fronds and contemplated the scene. “I am thinking to myself,” he said. “How
did they move these stones? Where did they get them? Must be hundreds, thousands of years.”

Dudley had rediscovered what he was calling an altar stone, a coffin-sized flat slab that sat in the middle of what could have been a room. He tore at vine roots and wiped away black, fragrant mud, and this stone began to stand out against the jade wash. Its shape and location made a fairly convincing case for itself. On the other side of what seemed like a small moat, Dudley whacked the ground, then swatted at mosquitoes buzzing around his bare chest, then sliced saplings in two with such precision that the top part stood for a cartoonish moment before remembering to fall. He paid particular attention to a rocky protrubere there, and dingy his knife off the tip of it, declared it the holy of holies. Then he stood on it, surveying the site, sweating.

“You should not let your shadow fall there,” I said, half joking.

Stalin, nearby, half smiled in reply, shrugged, and pointed his machete at the cloud cover. Dudley, who was in no mood to linger, headed down to the “Females’ Temple,” trying to pinpoint a special rock. His whistles shortly drew the three of us to him, and he and Stalin set to work clearing a stone. It was as big as a tree root and shaped like an automatic transmission, tapering off, with its flat side down. The three barefoot men and I crouched below it and heaved it over, face down to have my legs rubbed with coconut oil. A man approached with a bottle of the fragrant yellowy stuff—he smiled abashedly as we hadn’t met; he was Rex, Anisi “Moses” Maeliau’s son—and then set to work on my calves. “Without this you shall not walk tomorrow,” Franklin said. At first, I was embarrassed, but the massage felt good. I was tired. All we’d eaten were coconuts, navy biscuits, bananas, a “jungle peanut,” imitation Oreos, and some fresh watercress plucked along the trail. Fiu sat in the lower corner with a faraway stare he had picked up at the site and not relinquished since. Dudley, bathed, had donned a faded olive-green bomber jacket against the post-exertion chill. He noted that we’d only barely outrun the river’s rise. Bowls of rice and taro root topped with canned tuna appeared, and the explorers ate hungrily in silence. Light left the sky. A coconut pith was touched to flame to smoke out mosquitoes. The single low-watt bulb was reconnected to the car battery.

Franklin began a soliloquy, a rambling explanation of the site—the only ruin of Oba’s Kingdom—that fluttered in and out of discernable English but never lost conviction. Many of his ideas are summarized more succinctly in the handwritten 2011 treatise he had given to Patrick Taloboe at the MCA, titled “RISE AND FALL OF OBA KINGDOM.” It reads like the handbook of a young fantasy-role-playing gamer—something not dissimilar to inventions I made in my Dungeons & Dragons days—hanging personal, nearly sci-fi whims on the recognizable scaffolds of human religion, history, and society. Section 3 of Daefa’s pamphlet, “Gad the Jew,” begins with a scattering of spelling and grammar mistakes:

While Oba’s Kingdom was yet in its prosperous state, the Jews arrive on trading purposes. At Ofi were cited the minerals the Jews traded for with Malaitans. The Jews made two trips, the latter leaving Gad at Oba Kingdom. Gad at his arrival was accompanied by his wife Jess and his three daughters Ester, Moab and Lena. Ester married Fua, the Priestly King. Gad introduced the Law akwale Taki, which are the Ten Commandments, which was written in the Bible, by Moses. ... Gad’s seal is the Eagle.

And there were other impenetrable beliefs: something about Adam and Eve and the idea that the garden of Eden may yet still exist as Malaita; something about an “Esenic party,” a kind of vanishing twin to an “Edenic party.” Oba himself was a spiritual being made flesh. The Jew arrived 32 generations after another godly figure, Melchizedek, arrived in Oba’s land and “dedicated the altar in the Holy of Holiest room.” Gad introduced sacrifice. And so on, all with the attention to detail of an island L. Ron Hubbard.

“Now this tablet,” Daefa finally asked me. “You saw it. It is Hebrew?”

I hesitated, then just went for it: “I don’t think so, Franklin,” I said.

To my relief, my host didn’t seem wounded. He set his goatee bouncing with laughter and said, “Well, you will believe what you believe.”

The next morning, I shouldered my sack and walked to Kadabina, the site of Yoel Siegel’s development project. Frank had agreed that it didn’t make sense to wait for transport trucks, which might not pass until the next day. Best to get a jump on the heat, he said. It was about 23 kilometers of flat road, three to four hours, but in a region with only one way in and out, and a limited number of vehicles ashore, no point in expecting a miracle. “With the bad road,” he said, “walking will be faster anyway.” He then gave a ceremonious blessing to me and my “firm” and the Jews and all the people of Israel. When I stopped at Grassbird’s to say farewell, he staggered down from his stilted house, wearing shorts and hastily-donned unlaced combat boots, and then walked with me for the first hour, awaking as he strode. There was, as always, plenty of traffic: barefoot or flip-flopped humans on either side of the road, going to the well, going to a small market, going to see someone, or just gathered there and looking up at me, an apparition. My shadow grew shorter, the dew lifted; I began to sweat.

There was no way to sneak in, by land, to northern Malaita. To the right was the forbidding thickness we’d ventured into the day before. To the left, the sea. Along the road coconut groves, then houses, then coconut groves, then copra dryers, more houses, more coconut groves, lean-tos, betel-nut sellers, idlers. Grassbird recognized one of Michael Maeliau’s teenaged daughters, and we stopped and spoke a while. Michael was in Indonesia, at prayer assembly, she said, and wouldn’t be back until next
“A talkhouse, with decorative thatch roofing, had been erected near a small graveyard fenced in flowering orchids. Over it, hanging listless from a white pole, flew another Israeli flag.”

and a quick inquiry about when it was all going to be up and working, when the waet-man was going to be back. The further north I got, the more this friendly curiosity was slowing me down, so I soon took to just hustling through settlements while waving and shouting “Kadabina!” which seemed to do the trick.

My last flip-flopped companion decided to leave his wife at the clinic, a one-room shack, and show me the short cut to the project headquarters. He was young, and kept apologizing for his awkward English. As I didn’t have an appointment with anyone in particular, the man insisted I visit with his uncle first: He was a “chief.” At a roadside shelter we made a right turn into the hilltop clearing where a number of houses perched on stilts. An old Hitachi excavator sat at the end of a newly cut dirt road. A talkhouse, with decorative thatch roofing, had been erected near a small graveyard fenced in flowering orchids. Chickens nosed around the clover. And over it, hanging listless from a white pole, flew another Israeli flag.

In the compound’s reception hut, I took shelter from the midday sun and sat with Moffat Maena for a while, catching my breath. Maena was much younger-looking than the 80 years he said he was. He vaguely resembled a grandfatherly frog, with a broad chest and overlong arms. He whacked open a pair of coconuts with the long knife he was carrying and handed me one. I drank its sweet liquid while he talked of the new construction behind us, which would house the Israeli agricultural and technical assistants on their extended visits, and about how Emmaus Village, as he had dubbed his family’s collection of houses, had providentially been in the right place to be Kadabina headquarters. Maena noted that Emmaus was where Jesus first appeared to two of his followers after his resurrection.

Maena’s father Alan had scouted for American GIs against the Japanese. His uncle and brother died in World War II, killed in the fighting over Guadalcanal. After the war, and a degree in Fiji, Maena worked in the government’s agriculture department, which sent him across the Solomon Islands. He had been to Hawaii once, and Australia once, both for brief stopovers related to ministry affairs. Now the foreigners were coming to him.

He walked us down the road through the project land, which he said used to be Catholic mission land from 1921. “We’re gonna help our brothers,” he said, referring in his pleasantly colonial-style English to the Israelis who had already been here on several “technical visits.” This way, he said, would be the demonstration farm. Over here the aquaculture ponds, dug out to run freely into the sea. Up this way would be drip-technology beds, maybe some husbandry, some chickens. All of this was on the plans that had been drawn up and were posted on the wall of the talkhouse. What we saw in real life were some dry slopes, carpeted with nettles, creepers, and brush, and dotted with straggling coconut palms. By the side of the road was a boulder-sized half of an ancient, giant clamshell. Gesturing to it, Maena said, “Looks like Noah’s ark was here.”

In the talkhouse behind the Israeli flag, laminated sheets stapled to make-shift bulletin boards showed images
of the dedication ceremony that had occurred a few months before, with dozens of pigs slaughtered and a few chickens for the kosher visitors. And a photocopied campaign flyer dated 2001 showed Leliana Firisua's round face framed by wide curls. His platform was three-pronged: “Peace, Prosperity, Israel.” “To enable development to occur in the area North Malaita Constituency law and order must be restored,” it read. “My involvement in the peace process has given me the ability to broker a deal which will satisfy the entire populace in the To'obaita area including our ex-militants.” A map showed the northern part of the island with circles at proposed “development,” “tertiary schooling,” and “agricultural sites.” The back of the flyer read: SHALOM.

Maena Moffat said he was Firisua’s nephew, somehow, but we soon determined he was more like what I would call a cousin. No matter: “If Israel tries to help us,” he said, “I thank God for that.” He put me up in the stilted guesthouse under construction for the Israelis. Before sunset, Maena’s grandson escorted me to a half-mile stretch of unspoiled white-sand coastline where a pack of children had gathered for recreation. The small island of Basakana, no more than a mile across the crystalline, calm waters, took the menace out of the great emptiness—the thousands of miles to next landfall. Besides an occasional paddled dugout skimming across the horizon near the island settlement, there was nothing here but glory. Unflinching children recruited me to play soccer with a coconut pith on the sand. I grabbed my mask and snorkel and swam out over the reefs, waving from nooks. Coral swayed and sweetlips and angels. Lobster antennae speared reef fish from their bucket. (The thing I bought was off sale!) I bought some sweet toast—I bought a Coca-Cola for Sol$9, my first luxury in days. Everything from utility diving masks and car batteries to beauty products and milk toast—I bought a Coca-Cola for Sol$9, my first luxury in days. A thatch-walled house around the bush.” At a frontier-style general store called Lionheart enterprises—selling from behind glass counters everything from utility diving masks and car batteries to beauty products—Maena’s grandson helped me install mosquito netting in one of the three guesthouse bedrooms, I noticed that he was tattooed on the back of his left hand with the likeness of an Israeli flag. And then I saw that he had another, larger tattoo on his left forearm that said MAEKALI. I asked him about it. He said it was his great-grandfather, a great warrior.

“Is Mackali Hebrew?” I asked. “We are all Israelis here,” he said.

It took me a day and a half to make it back to Auki from Kadaabina. Maena and I had gone out to his shelter on the road at 1 a.m. to wait for a cargo truck to come by, but the first two, which churned around some hours later, were “full.” (Maena didn’t press the driver, so there must have been some limit to the number of people who can fit on the flatbed floor and side ledges and cab roof.) No more trucks came that morning, and with no cell-phone service there was no way of finding out if more would come except to stand by the side of the road, which we did for nine hours, taking turns napping, swatting mosquitoes, pacing, looking up at stars in the palm fronds, talking about “California.” I said that I lived 500 meters from a very big river, which in my part of Manhattan is true. How did he picture those skyscrapers, this 80-year-old man whose father fought World War II on Guadalcanal, and who was now working with the honorary consul of Israel, who in turn has shaken hands with Shimon Peres?

At dawn, Maena’s son Micah, a former policeman with a blond afro, came down and was surprised to find us there; he had some coffee and rolls brought, and we ate in sullen disappointment. Kids rode by on bicycles decorated with Israeli flags. After sunrise, a pair of women came round the corner yelling “ON Saaaaaaaaale!” I bought some speared reef fish from their bucket. (The fish were pale, discolored versions of what they showed me underwater the day before.) Micah carried the catch by the tail to Emmaus to have it prepared. By 10 a.m.—when the first of the transports was returning north, loaded with fresh human and material cargo from Honiara and Auki—we gave up and decided to try again that night.

At first, I felt a great empathy for the Israelis, who were trying to turn this kind of inefficiency into a productive farm. Hadn’t this Yoel Siegel read his Conrad? Didn’t he know that all Western enterprises end up swallowed by the jungle? But after the initial frustration, I took the reprieve for a blessing. At the end of the day, I grabbed Maena’s grandson’s Chinese imitation BMX, too small for me, and left his tattooed hand and Emmaus behind, feeling exhilarated by the spackled light and the freedom of anonymity.

I spun north along the empty road parallel to the beach, through potholes, through villages, through coconut groves, past sunken Japanese aircraft carriers. My long legs churned too fast on the tiny cranks. Palm trees arched overhead like a long glorious nave, the only sound the whirr of the chain and the crunch of sand and rocks under the balding tires. Paradise. I waved to wide-eyed locals walking barefoot nowhere, and pedaled to Malu’u to see Suava Bay, where Israeli plans call for an airport and tuna-processing factory. From the broken wharf, it was easy to see that imagining an international airport in this place was like asking Peter Minuit in 1626 to imagine the skyline of present-day New York.

In Malu’u’s central market—a concrete shelter built by foreign aid—just opposite the wide beach and bay, I met 62-year-old Warren Raomalefo, who was peddling deep-fried cakes to schoolchildren on midday break while perusing a religious pamphlet about the Apocalypse. I asked him about Israel. “We don’t know what the future is,” he said. “These things never reach the bush.” At a frontier-style general store called Lionheart enterprises—selling from behind glass counters everything from utility diving masks and car batteries to beauty products and milk toast—I bought a Coca-Cola for Sol$9, my first luxury in days. A thatch-walled house around the corner had a sign painted in lettering with the words “GAZA STREET” next to “JEW,” the star and lines of the Israeli flag, and a pair of decorative
horned cattle skulls. In a sewage-colored mangrove behind the market, a crowd of uniformed youngsters idly taunted an insane man with a single hip-length dreadlock; he brayed at the crowd like an elephant, screamed, and slammed into the water while the mob hooted. Riding back to Emmaus, I slipped off a pedal and scraped an apple-sized patch of skin off my left knee—and with blood streaming down to my toes and flip-flops, must have made a similarly crazed sight.

Back in Kadabina, the wound cleaned up from my depleted first aid kit, I spent the late afternoon snorkeling and collecting shells. During the day, Micah had arranged with a driver to save us seats, and this time Moffat, Micah, and I hopped onto the open flatbed of the truck a little after midnight. The transport made an oasis of light slowly tossing through potholes, stopping every few hours for all 30 passengers to stretch. When it started to rain, a single heavy tarp was rolled out; I held one corner of it aloft as an air intake, until the shower passed. By first light, we were back on graded dirt and by dawn on narrow pavement—rumbling into Auki as birds scattered out of the dawn on narrow pavement—rumbling into Auki as birds scattered out of the dawn.

The next morning, I opened the Solomon Star to find an interior headline heralding “Free Entry Into Israel”: “SOLOMON Islanders does not need a visa to enter Israel.” It was the first newsworthy result of the Malaitan delegation’s diplomatic trip. They were headed home. My journey, it turned out, had only just begun.

As Auki bustled in preparation for the arrival of the Malaysian delegation, Jackson Gege picked me up in an official white U.N. Toyota and drove me to his office in the provincial government compound on the hill overlooking the port. At “around 37”—like many Solomon Islanders he had no registration and unreliable baptismal records—he was trim and fit in his blue jeans and neat knit shirt and belt of holstered cell phones and multi-tools. He worked for the U.N.’s Development Programme, but he had also taken a personal interest in the “Israel issue,” as he liked to call it, ever since a fateful semester in 1998 at the University of the South Pacific in Honiara. It was there, Gege recounted after turning on the patio standing fan in his office cluttered with papers, that he had heard of a Canadian marine biologist and evangelical Christian who had said, “I hear there are people on the Solomons who are Israelites or Hebrews.” Shortly after, the ethnic tensions erupted and the student returned to Canada. Gege’s cousins joined the Malaita Eagles Force, while the bookish Gege laid low. Since then Gege had produced a manuscript exploring Israeli-Malaitan ties. He showed me the Word file on his UNDP laptop, scrolling through images of green stones that may or may not be unformed emeralds.

“In Hebrew ‘go’ is lecha, and in Kwaio ‘go’ is lecha,” Jackson said. “It just makes you think. ‘Yes’: ken, keu. I want to write, like digging. Going deeper and deeper. People are making fun of all this, but Malaitans will always look at Israelis like a brother.”

In the summer of 2010, through the work of the ambitious politician Leliana Firisua, Gege was sent to Hebrew University in Jerusalem to further his environmental-planning studies. He was also charged specifically with finding a consultant or a friendly Israeli who might be persuaded to come to Malaita to work toward improving the lot of the people there. One of the courses he took was with Yoel Siegel, an international development and aid expert with a dozen years’ experience working for an Israeli outreach program called TAG, which works in far-flung places like Azerbaijan, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Kenya, Jordan, and Indonesia. As Gege told it, he had asked a number of his professors if they or anyone they knew might be willing to set out for the South Pacific. None of the professors were available, until he went up to Siegel after class. Might he consider coming to Malaita and helping them achieve their development dreams? Siegel said yes.

Jackson handed me a VHS cassette of a “documentary film” titled The Lost Temple Discovery! Part One, from Liberty Productions, PO Box 1, Auki, Malaita. The credits went to “Frank Daefa of A’ama, North Malaita and Anisi Maeta’a of Central Kwara’a,” who “both claim to be of Jewish descendant through the line of Zadok the priest during the time of king David and his son Solomon,” the jacket copy read. The plastic case had a pixilated image of a pile of rocks, “G” for “General Exhibition,” and the tag line: “...tucked away in the mountains of North Malaita, the ruins of this sacred site of once a religious community is being discovered. Who could be the builders... and to what god was it build for?”

Israel’s own plans for the Solomons may someday attract similar wonderment. The US$20-million plans for the “Kadabina Proposed Demonstration Farm and Industrial Park” include—among other amenities drawn up by Aaron Weingrod of Weingrod-Abrahamson Architects of Jerusalem—an “Organic Restaurant on Cliff−Sea View.” Near Buma village, if land could be negotiated from the Ailakwa tribe, a regional center was set to host a pineapple-juice-processing plant, pineapple plantations, eco-timber milling, and a cattle farm to supply Honiara with meat. The 39 hectares of the Kadabina site would host drip-technology tomatoe, dwarf mangoes that allow for easy harvesting, chickens, and—after dredging a pair of destroyer-sized basins into what were currently coconut flats across from the ocean—advanced aquaculture. “High value crops,” directly from Israeli
He also recalls that Peres told him, ‘On this boat if you ask your neighbor and your neighbor cannot able to give you a biscuit, or a glass of water, go around the boat!’

As a teenager, the year before he left for Honiara to attend King George VI high school—Leliana Firisua recalled to me as he chomped on a huge piece of dry pound cake in his office following his return from the delegation trip to Israel—he was hungry, lacking for food, wondering where he might manage to find sustenance. One day, when he was feeling lonely, a sweet mango fell out of a tree, clattered off some tin roofing, and then bounced into his lap. “It didn’t roll to me. It jumped, up off the ground, into my hand,” he said. “I thought about it. At this time I thought perhaps God had a purpose for me.” From 1985 to 1987 he went on scholarship to Abingdon College in Oxfordshire, England, training for a “Diploma in Financial and Cost Accounting.” The winters were difficult. On the BBC World Service he heard about Operation Moses, and later Operation Solomon, airlifting Ethiopian Jews to Israel. When he came home, he joined the auditor-general’s office, then he managed a public credit union, married, had four sons, and ran for local office, where he decided that a friendship with Israel was Malaita’s sole viable path to development. He then started corresponding with the Jewish Agency for Israel.

At odd hours online, Firisua underwent “advocacy training”—led, it turned out, by a young foreign-service officer, Daniel Taub, who would later go on to be the Israeli ambassador to London—and received a diploma. “From there on,” he said, “there was no turning back.” Within less than 10 years, he was named honorary consul of Israel in the Solomon Islands, given a pair of brand-new white Toyota Prados with diplomatic plates (CC7, for his main vehicle), and set up with an office in one of the third-floor shops of the Hyundai Mall, off Mendana Ave. The storefront glass had a huge mural picture of the Jerusalem skyline and the name Emanah, or faith.

In November of 2011, at a gathering of 45 distant honorary consuls in Jerusalem, Firisua decided he wanted to go to the Holy City. While there, he skipped out on a programmed visit to the Israel Museum and instead met up with an Israeli marine biologist and fisheries consultant he’d met in the Solomon Islands, who worked at the time for the NGO WorldFish. “Come, I want to go the Wailing Wall,” Firisua said. “What are you going to do there?” the Israeli said. Firisua called him a “backsliding Jew, the most backsliding Jew you have ever seen.”

“No,” Firisua said, “I just want to go and pray. I think I have a message there.” They went together. Firisua prayed at the wall, but the message did not arrive. “Come, come,” his friend said. “I will take you in. There’s a tunnel that goes this way under, and there’s so many Orthodox praying in there.”

“You sure?” Firisua said. They went in. On the left, he noticed a sign marked with a verse from Isaiah 56: “My house is a house of prayer for all people.” The Israeli wanted Firisua to look at the excavated wall of the temple, and how deep it went underground. Firisua said, “No, no, no need. I have found what I was looking for.” The message was expansive; Firisua felt vindicated and reinvigorated: “This is the Israel I was looking for,” he said. He also met Shimon Peres, who told him, “Today you do not need to have your own captain. Or to build your own boat. Today we are now in a global boat.” He also recalls that Peres told him, “On this boat if you ask your neighbor and your neighbor cannot able to give you a biscuit, or a glass of water, go around the boat!” Recalling this made Firisua laugh. “There are people in the boat, that maybe they can spare a piece of bread.”

As we spoke, I flipped back and forth between snorting at him in disbelief and finding myself almost buying into his incredible and improbable Horatio Alger tale: From North Malaita to meet the patriarch of Israel, President Peres. He said I could meet Jimmy Rasta, no problem.

Reading an encyclopedia in prison, Jimmy “Rasta” Lusibaea discovered that the Six Day War started on a June 5. This is the same date, he said, sitting in the consul’s office on the third floor of the Hyundai Mall on Mendana Avenue, that the Eagle Force “took off” the armory, the make-or-break gambit that cemented the power of the militia. Interpreting this as a sign, on the delegation trip to Israel, he put in a request to see the bunkers in the Golan
He observed the machine-gun riggings and admired their versatility and easy withdrawal. He convinced a female IDF soldier to pose for pictures with him. Tanks performed exercises. Lusibaea called it “really a beautiful place” and took notes to relay to his Lion Heart Security servicemen.

Lusibaea—whose wife was campaigning in the by-election for his parliamentary seat vacated because of a conviction on 10-year-old assault charges, which he was appealing to the High Court—was wearing a military-green fishing hat, black slacks, and a black knit polo unbuttoned to reveal a large Jewish star pendant. He had a Cobra tattooed on his right bicep and an eagle over his heart. At 42, he had the paunch and thrust of a sprightly 50-year-old, and to me he seemed demonstrably aware, as people who have done time can be, of the seriousness of existence and its limits. In Lusibaea this awareness translated into a palpable charisma. “It’s a dream of my whole life,” he said. “One day I’ll set foot in the Holy Land.” Firisua, who was sitting behind his desk and lightly monitoring the diplomacy of Lusibaea’s recorded interview, reminded him that he had indeed set foot in the Holy Land, removing his shoes and socks to wade in the Jordan.

Before the tensions, Lusibaea had been working security at the Gold Ridge company mine. “They start chasing out all of the people from outskirts of Gualcanal,” he recounted. “The police force in this country, they failed, because they kidnapped about 18 of us civilians from Malaita.” The mine shut down. Some observers of the lawlessness, corruption, and anarchy of that period say it amounted to a “failed state” condition, but a more accurate description is that since independence, the Solomons has remained unformed, never managing to consolidate into a functioning system of any kind.

“When they start to rape our women, our girls,” Lusibaea said, “that was when we start to form up the boys.”

“How did you have the idea to raise an Israeli flag to strengthen your fighters’ hearts?” I asked.

“I was thinking that if this is our big story,” Lusibaea said, “that we are migrated from Israel, and when we see all this Arab wars around the Israel, they don’t like Israel, so we just thinking that this is like Solomon Island here. The other eight province they don’t like us, so we must be the same.”

Surrendering in 2003, he said, under the impression that he’d be granted amnesty from his participation in the Peace Accords and in the new climate of RAMSI’s arrival, Lusibaea was instead arrested, accused of murder and bank robbery, tried by Australian judges, and sent to prison.

When we were done talking in Firisua’s office, Lusibaea drove me in his tinted-window Toyota Landcruiser down Mendana Avenue toward Honiara’s light-industrial outskirts, where neighboring villages had been swallowed up by a miniature form of urban growth. Lusibaea pointed to the Lawson Tama national soccer stadium, where FIFA’s Oceania confederation was holding a World Cup qualifier tournament. “Some of the boys on the national team are mine,” he said, adding that he’d be attending in the VIP box, where I would be welcome to join him. Lusibaea was released from prison on bail in 2007, and in 2008 he was baptized in Malu’u. He then cobbled together a construction crew to give his demobilized but still-loyal fighters a chance at employment. They did some earth-moving and began to enter competitions for government contracts. Lusibaea called the company “Lion Heart.” As a result, he now had “boys” everywhere: a cement crew laying sidewalk along an anonymous stretch of the highway we were driving down—his “boys” on contract for the upcoming Festival of Pacific Arts. Their allegiance, he allowed, helped get him elected to parliament as the representative of North Malaita in August 2010.

Driving past mega-churches, he pointed to a modern building on the left: “Ministry of Fisheries,” he said, naming the portfolio that he had held under Prime Minister Danny Philip, and that he still hoped to recover one day. “Should have been mine.” He blamed his loss of the ministry not on his militant past, but on his hard line on tuna prices, which Japan, China, and Taiwan had managed to keep artificially low for the last 20 years through a mix of leverage, targeted investment, and bribery.

In November 2010, Lusibaea had been convicted of unlawful wounding and assault—the court said he had shot an unconscious man in both knees and struck a policeman with a pistol following a gunfight at a nightclub in September 2000—and was facing two years and nine months in jail. Riots broke out after sentencing, and less than two months later, he had been released, but was still unable to resume his parliamentary role.

“Australians, Australian press,” he said, “they want to interview me all the time. I don’t talk to them. I don’t bother with them anymore. I went to this Townsville peace agreements not expecting to be arrested”—he put the accent on the “ah”—“then they put me in jail. But you are Jewish and we are brothers.” He turned his eyes away from the road to lock into mine and solemnly announced that he was speaking off the record, then started banging on the wheel as he launched into a harangue that didn’t seem to require much in the way of direct quotation. Australians! Inviting him to peace talks under amnesty and arresting him on the spot. Taiwanese! Wanting to cheat him out of Solomon’s tuna stock. His enemies in parliament!

He softened to express admiration for his Australian lawyer, a woman who earned his respect by explaining that she had as much to gain from taking his demobilization case as he did—a kindred spirit, he said, returning to a more conversational tone. Together, in what Lusibaea now considers a sign from God, they decided to plead guilty and do the time. He presented this as a clever maneuver that left doubt about who had done what and what had actually happened. Lusibaea had one murder count dropped and was acquitted of the murders of two special constables who were allegedly killed in his yard. He served some of a five-year sentence for robbery in an Australian-built prison in Honiara, lifting weights, reading the Bible, finding God. Even off the record he refused to talk about his treatment, “You are lucky you are not Australian,” he said. “You would not be in this car.”

We arrived at a dirt road under
construction, with tar drums set up as barriers. A worker in an orange reflective vest and hard hat rolled one out of the way. Lusibaea pulled over to him. The window came down, some words were exchanged, and a wad of bills several inches thick was handed over. “These are all Malaitans,” he said, the A/C racing to chase the blast of midday heat that had flooded the jeep. “My boys.”

Down the desolate warehouse-lot industrial-park feeder road, past two more checkpoints, was the compound of Lion Heart Plant Hire Road Construction and Heavy Machinery. We pulled in through a high gate into a football-field-sized yard, piled high with timber, strewn with broken-down and half-functioning diggers, shovels, graders, and dozers: late 1990s Korean and Japanese dinosaurs.

At the center was a shelter, with more “boys” at work molding cement blocks. (Of some 3,000 Eagles Force fighters, he explained, a good hundred and thirty, “plus many commanders,” still worked for him.) A few boats sat on trailers, one with an Israeli flag riding atop. That orange Toyota dump truck over there, Lusibaea said, was his first war vehicle, and later his first business truck. “My boys.”

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Jimmy’s brother was there, a former lieutenant in the Eagles Force, wearing dark aviator glasses. When he greeted me, standing in front of his jacked-up 4×4 with a heavy array of field lights and surfing stickers, his lit cigarette bounced like a diving-board between his lips. At Jimmy’s insistence, I snapped a photo of them together, both flexing.

That afternoon, Lusibaea and I watched the soccer match pitting the Solomon Island Bonitos against the Fiji Bula Boys from the VIP box, a lazily cordoned-off central section of the 10-row covered grandstand. Despite the crowd rousing from a broiled slumber to lackadaisically rally “Go! Solo! Go!” the Bonitos missed a number of opportunities to score, drawing nil-nil. In the VIP parking lot, Honiarans streaming out came up to Lusibaea to shake his hand, calling him “Chief, Chief.” One of Lusibaea’s entourage handed me a copy of a printout, saying he had written and submitted it for publication in the Star. It was titled “Relationship,” and began “The Trip to Israel has drawn some very important destiny to all beloved Malaitans.” Before dropping me at Mother’s Union, Lusibaea told me about seeing Jerusalem’s lights from the Dead Sea and how because of visa trouble, he had had to fly through Fiji, separate from the rest of the delegation, who had gone through Australia. When I thanked him, he gave
me a wink, flashed a smile both charming and menacing, and said, “No worries, mate. We are brothers.”

On the wide resthouse balcony, shoes off and showered, I read my Conrad, sipped tea, and ate pineapple, papaya, and four different varieties of banana, each sweeter, softer, and more fragrant than the next. The Pacific Islander II, a black Bali Hai cargo freighter flagged Panama, had pulled in to port and was being unloaded by scurrying men and machines. To the west, Savo sat brooding. Ferries and powered canoes set out on their final evening runs. I noticed that my nails had gone soft from lack of milk. I’d also taken to wearing like a talisman the shell necklace I’d bought at the Auki market.

The moment you believe the myth that the tropical island is a paradise, Conrad suggested, is precisely the moment that the island has driven you insane. Over the next few days in the capital, I caught what few sights there were to see, including the American-built Parliament building. I met several times with Firisua, representatives of the South Seas Evangelical Church, Jonathan and his cohorts. I ran into Pastor Kenneth on the street and made plans to go scuba diving.

Firisua liked to go to the Kokonut Café, an ocean-front compound with multi-level open-air restaurants, a beer bar, and a cove with captive dolphins who shared a swimming hole with schoolchildren. (A sign on the gate read, “Upon entry, all rules must be followed to ensure the safety of reptiles, mammals, staffs and customers.”) The place belonged to a Chinese immigrant whom Firisua admired. He was known around town as the Red Devil, owner of Red Devil Enterprises, which competed in many of the same areas of Jimmy Lusibaea’s Lion Heart Enterprises. Firisua liked to order a “light meal” there and relax with the view. “Most of the things we are looking at now,” he had said, “they are all forming based on a personal dream, a journey. Look at Jimmy. He knows more about Israel and the wars than me, because he read a lot of books about Israel. He has his own journey. This place”—sweeping his arm over the ocean, which was scattering a warm star-like reflection of sunlight—“where you are sitting now—is a long dream.”

Over lunch one day, Firisua, wearing a blue safari suit as big as a sail, gave me his best self-amused and pensive look and said, “Matthew, you must buy something here now, before the Solomons become the center of the world. You can live here with the dolphins.” He also explained to me his theory of self-effacement, part of which entailed him instructing his four sons to intermarry with other races, so that “there will be very little remnants of Firisuans on the island.” He proudly noted that one son was dating a Malaysian. A second liked a Dutch New Zealander. “If it goes according to plan,” Firisua said, “then there will be no more Firisua face. I will basically disappear. Just as Israel will physically change the place I am from. My wish is that after me there will be no Malaita and no Firisua left.”

He struck me as full of contradiction: He wanted to disappear but was physically enormous. He had no time but had spent the better part of several days showing me around. “Everyone loves Israel here,” he had said once when describing his plans for a consular building to replace the Emunah office in the Hyundai Mall. “It will have the highest security and a helipad.”

Me: This idea I heard from the North, that people were descended from Jews? What’s your position on that?

Firisua: In actual fact I am not in that line of thinking. First of all although there were scribblings or something that were sort of seen in the mountains or that type of worships and all that. I don’t work up into that. Because my idea of thinking is that whatever is there will be revealed at a later time, not now.

Me: How do you deal with that idea when you talk to the people in the north?

Firisua: It’s not just started. It’s started thousands of years ago. It has been coming through generations and generations that we left of port Yemen, maybe 400 or 500 years ago.

Me: You don’t believe that yourself, personally.

Firisua: No. What I’m saying is leave those things to surface at a later time. Because I don’t want to intertwine these sort of stories with what the government is doing and what my office is doing.

He went into a darker description of the challenges of island life. “Development aid has ruined us,” he complained. Asian timber concerns, fishing licenses, bribery, mining, corruption, thoughtless nascent tourism, the damage done to local culture. He ranted about Gold Ridge and about how the mines were extensions of the colonial domination that had been perpetuated by copra production systems set up to be unfair to the Islanders.

“When did the tensions start?” he asked. “Why did Malaita Eagle Force happen? They happened right after gold was found in the mine. It was no accident, Matthew. In the chaos that followed, all the gold left, and the mine has been shut down since.” He mopped his sweaty brow with a neatly folded handkerchief.

“Everything here happens because of outside business interests,” Firisua said, narrowing his gaze. “Look into it.”

Eight

At the dive shop, a dozen Taiwanese — recent arrivals, young couples: aid workers, and merchants — were gearing up to complete their open-water scuba certification course. They were going to be led down by an acne-covered, unhealthily skinny German who’d washed
up here. For my private tour, I’d been assigned Victor Ono, a mustachioed, jovial Kermit of a man. Victor was an officer in the Royal Solomon Police Force, part of the submersion team charged with handling unexploded ordnances, examining new finds (a previously undocumented World War II wreck was spotted off Florida the month before), and recovering dumped bodies.

Driving to Bonegi, our dive site, in a flatbed cargo truck, we talked about the separatists on Malaita. Victor found the whole thing ridiculous. Malaitans, he said, were “like beaten dogs after the tensions,” making noise. “They thought they were invincible,” he said. “And then we had enough and chased dem out of here.”

“But they took up arms,” I said.

“Yes, but what have they gained?” he said. “And these plans they are talking about? People they make fun of Malaitans, especially from the North. About them they say, ‘What is this bullshit they are saying?’”

We turned off the main road. Victor paid a “kastom fee” to some red-eyed betel-chewers at a bamboo gate, parked on the beach, and geared us up. He reviewed our safety checks: buoyancy, air, and releases. We waddled into the light surf, swam past the first reef, and then descended, squeezing air out of our ear canals, breathing as easy I could, settling into weightlessness and the rhythmic bubbling of precious gases. Ahead, the stern of the Hirokawa Maru took shape, leaning on its side. I followed Victor down along the massive steel vault, into a cargo hold, past a gun turret and coiled chain, all covered in living coral, nudibranchs, giant barrel sponges, sea fans. At 30 meters depth we weren’t yet to the ship’s mid. Victor pointed to a sea turtle flapping carelessly around the wreck. A tuna’s silver hide flashed a reflected ray and then faded back into the blue.

On the beach, Victor checked my pressure gauge and laughed. “You were sucking it down!” I told him it’d been a while since I’d been below. We chatted about the hundreds of ships in that bay and around the waters of the Solomon Sea—their holds still stuffed with unsalvaged oil and World War II cargo, their nameless dead, and the commemorative wreaths solemnly sunk there every August by returning veterans. He rhapsodized about other dive sites, like the one near Florida, where Manta rays flock to drift tunnels to feed. He said he loved his work. “Every day I wake up and thank God for another day in Paradise.”

If the Solomon Islands aren’t paradise, I thought to myself, forgetting for a moment about the sunken carnage in front of me, then there is no such place on earth.

On my last night on the island, at Mother’s Union resthouse—the influence of Malaria pills and the rack of celebratory SolBrems I’d treated myself to at the Kokonut Café—I dreamt I fell off a boat, fully dressed, weighed down by all my packed bags. I sank, watching my notebooks soak, the ink lifting off the page and dissolving in beautiful black smoke-like swirls. In the morning, Firisua drove me to the airport, early enough for us to share a last cappuccino at an empty house disco. He wore a crisp blue shirt and tie and was headed to a ministerial meeting that day, he said, to press for one of his Memoranda of Understanding.

“Israelis and Jews will have a place,” Firisua said, making his final pitch. “They will have a synagogue here, feel the openness and the freedom. The Jews should have a second home, why not on the opposite side of the Earth?” Through his arrangements, his oldest son, 21, would be headed to Sde Eliyahu, a religious kibbutz in northern Israel, after living with a Jewish family in Australia for six months. “He might become the first convert,” he said.

I thanked him, said goodbye, and stepped through airport security. Once on board, I began to shiver and sweat; I’d surfaced from my last dive on Iron Bottom Sound with a late-blooming fever. Over the course of four flights, I begged each brutal leg of the trip brought me closer to home.

At LAX the U.S. immigration officer in my line’s glass booth briskly waved through the morning rush from the Pacific rim. When I stepped forward, he slowed down. “Solomon Islands,” he said, wryly. “Where’s that?”

“Yeah. Exactly,” I said. Nothing I’d heard for weeks had been face value.

“No, really,” he said, looking suddenly more stern. “Where is it?”

“The South Pacific?” I said. “North-east of Australia?”

He softened and then shook his head in disbelief. “Solomons. I’ve only ever heard of it from storybooks.”

In the following months, back in New York, I received periodic missives from the void, reminders of having experienced, as opposed to having dreamed, this other Israel. From Patrick Talbooe, the man with tribal scars on his face: “There seems to be more for the world to know about our Malaita province.”

From Firisua, written in a formal but off-key 19th-century colonial bureaucratic, with cordial inquiries after my health, and with every number followed by its numeral in brackets: news of the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding [MOU] at Rarotonga; news of Kate & Will’s royal jubilee duical visit: “the people were so excited and so many happenings throughout the three [3] days. I was invited for the official dinner at Government House and it was truly an Island feast.” His self-effacement worked: As time passed I found it harder to conjure his girth and jollity, his lumbering, flip-flopped realness. As his message grew in me, his massive frame shrank, much the way a returning astronaut, having set foot on the moon, then sees its horizon recede into a globe, then a marble, then a single dot.

I received a handwritten cursive A4 letter via Solomon Royal Post, in an onionskin airmail envelope edged red and blue, signed by Franklin Daefa. It was headed CONCEPT REPORT underlined with a ballpoint against a straight edge. “After your visit to me and our sacred site, land,” it began, “our House of Hosts Committee met to evaluate our discussion.” I was officially “approved” as an “appropriate link for the Jews of the U.S.A. and even the Land of Israel.” A list of recommendations followed:

1: Your firm will act on our behalf in contacting a prominent Jew in U.S.A., to delegate our messages. 2: Our first message to our brother Jews consists of our
confidential standby assistence (sic), when Jews are confronted. This message is sent by the House of Hosts to assure the Jews in Israel, that help that exceeds all material supernatural powers in coming, after arrangements had been finalized.

And so on. I was told to treat “paragraph 2B” as “very confidential,” and warned to “delegate to your most trusted Jew person,” so as not to be exposed to threat.” But Franklin also had grievances to air. Against the consul in particular, with increasing aggression and resentment: “Our last request is a suggestion,” he wrote. “It would be for our Solomon Consul - Malaita people for the Government of the Holy See. The United States and Israel to replace our Solomon Consul - Malaita by-election, becoming only the second woman to serve in the nation’s parliament; she was promptly muzzled by her husband from speaking with the Australian press. That week’s Star also ran a report on the visit of a prominent Papuan evangelical leader, under the headline, “Solomon Islands Will Prosper, Says Man of God.”

In late November, 188 of 193 United Nations member states voted on a symbolic resolution to raise Palestine’s status to “non-member observer”—that of the Holy See. The United States and Israel vigorously opposed the measure. The Solomon Islands’ U.N. envoy, Ambassador Colin Beck—sent to New York a month after delegates from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Solomon Islands Ministry of Home Affairs signed a Memorandum of Understanding, touting bilateral ties—was expected to vote with Israel, as did Canada, the Czech Republic, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, and Panama. Instead, Beck went rogue, voting with the majority. Two weeks later, he was recalled to Honiara. Firisua was quoted in the Solomon Star as saying, “It is truly a sad day regarding the friendship Solomon Islands share with Israel.” And in February, a tsunami killed at least nine and left hundreds homeless.

The handful of postcards I had sent from Auki never arrived. But I was most eager to finally watch the tale promised in Franklin’s documentary, The Lost Temple Discovery! Part One. I delivered the VHS cassette Jackson Gege had given me to a professional digital transfer joint in midtown Manhattan. Later that same day, I took a worried call from a clerk there. “I’ve tried everything,” he said. “But now I’m certain. There is nothing on this tape.”

The greatest voyages are genuine leaps of faith that propel explorers across the emptiness. Voyages of discovery set out to find not what is lost or buried but what is yet to be found. Often in the history of human adventure, we launch in anticipation of one thing only to stumble onto something else entirely—something equally unknown and equally wonderful, which is also a version of ourselves.

In my mind, the globe, in all its full roundness, grew a new axis: a rod running from Jerusalem through to the middle of the South Pacific, a mere 3,000 nautical miles east of Honiara. But the more I thought about the strangeness of the Israeli-Malaitan ties—despite the evident realpolitik advantages, the logic of missions, and the generosity, if not moral engagement, of foreign aid—the harder it was to grasp their origins. The conviction that Yoel Siegel and Leliana Firisua seemed to so effortlessly display never moved me, except to marvel at. I occasionally fashioned Malaitans as antipodean versions of the settlers of the West Bank, reclaiming ancestral land and pride in the way rock by coral rock they piled into the lagoon to make their village of Langa Langa. (In fact, Israel had recently suggested building an artificial island off the coast of Gaza.) And hadn’t the State of Israel, in the last decade especially, made physical separation a guiding principle of its security? In 2005, two years after the first continuous segment of the West Bank Barrier was erected in response to the Palestinian uprisings of the Second Intifada, IDF engineers proposed a 2-mile, 25-meter-deep moat along the Gazan border with Egypt, to thwart smuggling tunnels there. It was never built, but the idea of Israel as an island in a sea of hostility remains a powerful and oft-used metaphor. On Rosh Hashanah of 2012, in the wake of the surging upheavals of the Arab Spring, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toasted a gathering of his political party by calling Israel an “island of stability amidst the storms.” That parallel to the Solomons— island nations, island peoples—held me for a while, but then, as I worked through what little relevant Melanesian material I could dig out of the archives of the New York Public Library, and re-read Conrad’s Victory, the notion lost its strength. “An Island is but the top of a mountain,” Conrad wrote. Sometimes, his character said, “It seems as if everything that there is had gone under.”

What had drawn the Malaitans and the Israelis together? Israel was shoring up support in a dangerous world and trying to spread a little prosperity, grooming a back-up protein supply, maybe even nurturing a future vacation spot, while piggybacking on a strange confluence of myths and beliefs. Yet two things in particular stood out, awaiting their proper explanation. The first was how Firisua had said, “The Jews know all along there are blood ties on this island.” The second was the tattoo on young Moffat Maena’s grandson’s arm—not the Star of David, but the name in large print on his forearm: Matakali, the name of the warrior who prompted the Maenas to proclaim “we are all Jews.”

One afternoon in the NYPL reading room, under the high vault of its tropical-colored ceiling clouds, I was handed a slim volume titled Lightning Meets the West Wind: The Malaita Massacre, by the anthropologists Roger M. Keesing and Peter Corriss. By its card I was the first to check it out since 1982. When I sat down to read it, I quickly discovered...
to my amazement that Maekali was in it. So were the blood ties.

At the heart of what Keesing and Corris recount is a story of a people in “partial isolation,” living in a world both timeless and continuous, with mortal enemies just a valley away, in a realm broadened by cosmic myth. An island people will see themselves as the center of their universe, until forces that build beyond the horizon appear unannounced and doom them. From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, white masters “recruited,” coerced, or kidnapped natives of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, and the rest of Melanesia to pitilessly work the sugarcane fields of Queensland, which became part of Australia. This human traffic was known as Blackbirding, and it engendered blood vengeance for lost kin, enough that in later years the ships that plied these trades were known to spill broken glass on deck to discourage surprise attacks by barefoot warriors. Besides the brutality of forced exile, the spread of disease, and indentured servitude if not outright slavery, Blackbirding also left a shortage of labor at home that kept early Solomon Islands colonial plantations from flourishing. British administrators—“small men with myopic vision,” as Keesing and Corris call them—dealt with unruliness through punitive actions.

On both sides, murderous human hunting expeditions sought to settle accounts. But a dark business such as this is never settled. On Malaita, an island regarded in Victorian England as the wildest place in the whole of the British Empire, the cycle of death and reprisal dates back to at least the 1880s. Jack London, who sailed a yacht to Langa Langa in 1907, was one of many adventurers to spread lurid tales of white men being “tomahawked,” bloody slaughters, “village massacres,” and “vessels burning.” (“His head remains in Malaita.”) The Perth Western Mail of Sept. 28, 1907, for example, corroborates in a typical item in a round-up of Commonwealth news: “A good deal of unrest prevails at Malaita, one of the Solomon group,” it reads. “As the result of a punitive expedition an islander was killed by shell there, and the natives swore to be avenged. An order was sent forth that a white man’s head was wanted.”

From the “native” side, revenge was most often carried out by a *rama*, a kind of warrior-leader-assassin, who was part of a customary triumvirate of clan leaders, together with a priest and a feast-giver. *Ramos* were feared, and they worked for hire, or for bounty. “Most often, killing on Malaita began with the violation of the rigid sex code—with seduction or adultery,” Keesing wrote.

In 1927 a sympathetic district officer named William R. Bell prepared, as part of his bureaucratic duties, for a modest show of strength in the Kwaio region of central and north Malaita. On Oct. 4 of that year, a Tuesday, with his collection team in place north of Auki, Bell invited the gathered Kwaio, led by the warrior Basiana, to pay what Her Majesty was owed. According to Keesing’s retelling, Basiana paid first. Then he gathered his rifle from a pouch nearby, tucked it under his arm, and rejoined the line to await a second turn at the collection table. Once there, Basiana lifted his weapon over his head and smashed the butt down into Bell’s skull, exploding it.

Exactly how many Malaitans died in the official punitive expeditions and brutish justice that followed is hard to establish. At least 60 Kwaio and To’abaita were shot by marauding, drunken, mercenary “people hunters” who could not be contained by poorly equipped naval escorts from the capital at Tula-gi. Malaitans had never seen such horror. Village constables and neighboring tribes were suddenly and immediately forced to choose between rebellious alliance with the Kwaio’s outgunned warriors, or complicity with the powerful colonial forces. People were herded into talkhouses only to be hanged from the rafters. Holy sites were desecrated, ancestral skulls paraded as trophies, shrines toppled, causing a massive disruption in the tribe’s sacred relations with the past. Those like Basiana who ran soon realized the limits of the territory; they surrendered, were captured, jailed, and hanged, or summarily killed. As one 80-year-old quoted in the book recalled, “When they destroyed our shrines and villages, they destroyed all the good things in our lives.”

As ruin was brought down on Malaita, Maekali, one of Bell’s former village constables, was caught between his British overlords and his own kin. As Keesing notes: “A few [of the constables and former police] remained staunchly loyal to the British, keeping small bands of followers; they and their factions have been liberally rewarded ever since with development schemes, schools, and other benefits.” A few days after reading this, I checked with Moffat Maena that the Maekali tattooed on his grandson’s arm was the same of the Bell incident. It was, he said. He called Maekali a warrior, a chief. Micah’s great-grandfather remembered—and was in his way a participant in—the massacre of 1927, which had inked his great-great-grandson’s forearm with a mind-spinning mix of pride and shame. Maekali rests now in a family burial plot, under a flat cement vault, behind a fence made of orchids, in the center of Emmaus Village, next to a 20-foot flagpole that flies the colors of the modern-day State of Israel.

What I learned from my journey was not, as I expected, that Joseph Conrad was right about islands and the darkness that lives inside of our fantasies of paradise. Rather, that from the seeds of history, a single tree grows. World War II washes ashore, prophesied by tribal ancestors and evangelists alike, as fore-shadowed in photographs of white soldiers grinning at Malaitan skulls. Blood feuds became “land disputes.” Anglican missionaries became Anglican missionaries. Capable colonial administrators like Bell became international technical and agricultural advisers—Taiwanese, Australians, New Zealanders, Japanese, Israelis. Constables became honorary consuls. *Ramos* became warlords. The Malaitans read their own history in the history of Israel because they, too, in living memory, had suffered a physical and spiritual Holocaust. As the ancestral saying goes, “Bukales I Fouango e sula no’o”—a sapling once bent, springs back; forces set in motion must carry to their conclusion, even to the ends of the Earth.

This article was originally published on March 21, 2013.
Bear Man is a mountain of a person who stands about six and a half feet tall and often weighs upwards of 300 pounds, and there is nothing particularly civilized about his appearance or his behavior. He combines a generous nature with the physical and spiritual appetites of a Tolstoyan nobleman poised to inherit a large estate seven versts north of Spasskoye-Lutovinovo. Just imagine a mountain, like in a Van Gogh painting, with starry eyes and a curly red beard. He is smiling at you, at the same time as he maybe wants to tear off your limbs or eat you. That’s Bear Man.

Anyway, Bear Man and I were sitting together at the Russian bath in Brooklyn where we meet once a week to praise our wives, who by the time the weekend rolls around are generally glad to get us out of the house. Bear Man was grumbling as usual about how we should buy us some shotguns (me a Beretta bird gun, and him a Remington 870 12-gauge) plus a compound with its own generator and a year’s supply of oil and grains. In our compound, no one would be allowed to cut their hair or beards, and we would dose ourselves with mescaline and acid and home-school our children.... His wife is a saint for putting up with this crazy talk. I imagine living with this gigantic good-humored craziness-generator is like living next door to an amusement park where the roller coaster never shuts down.

In Bear Man’s mind, he owed me a favor. A few months earlier, in order to give his wife a break, I had invited Bear Man to a Rolling Stones concert, because he had never seen the Rolling Stones play live. We had spent a pleasant evening together in the muggy Meadowlands watching Charlie Watts lay down crisp, perfectly timed drum strokes with the air of a man ordering his dinner—I’ll have the roast chicken, please, with the asparagus well done, and the béarnaise on the side. There was Mick Jagger, the humble, hard-working billionaire CEO, who made his bones by fucking black chicks who taught him to dance, and who now gets shot up with goat glands; Ronnie Wood, a craftsman who enjoys practicing and demonstrating his craft; Keith Richards, a French pirate with a chateau on the Riviera, who lazes about all day long and then ends the night’s carousing with a shot from his blunderbuss.

The Rolling Stones are the ultimate survivors, which is why I am a fan. What bound them together for life, and made them superstars, was their lack of self-pity. Only rich people can afford the privilege of self-pity, I suggest, further elaborating my theory of the Rolling Stones (I have a theory like this for every iconic rock band). Bear Man nodded. “Self-pity eats your brain,” he opined. “It’s really the worst emotion imaginable.” He then placed one large paw on his shoulder of my waffle-knit gold-und-purple robe—which is not an item I would buy for myself. It was a gift from the banya owner, who gave me the robe on the same occasion that he bestowed upon the Bear the Napoleonic tricorned felt hat he is wearing with a pair of purple bathing trunks, because there aren’t any robes large enough to fit the Bear Man except maybe in Samoa. So there we sat, on a late morning in December, with frosted glasses of Baltika #7 beer along with the pickled vegetable plate, a delicacy that is permitted by the kosher diet that Bear Man adopted about a year ago because God told him to.

“It might do you some good to get out of this shithole,” Bear Man opined. A few days in Switzerland sounded like a great idea, I agreed, this being back in the days before the coronavirus, when I could fly through the air wherever and whenever I wanted like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince on an economy class ticket along with 189 other similarly adventurous souls. Bear could do his banking, while I drowned my sorrows in a tub of fondue.

The banya owner is a Soviet immigrant to Brooklyn. He loves Donald Trump, and proudly wears the MAGA hat, which the Bear Man bought for him in return for the gift of Napoleonic headwear, and the pleasure of our time at the banya. The banya owner loves to butt in on our conversations. What he sees on television these days hurts his feelings in a particular way that only makes sense to Russians who found the strength to endure deprivation by imagining that freedom existed elsewhere.

Why do Americans hate freedom so much? he wonders. We longed for freedom in the Soviet Union even more than we yearned for bread. Who wants a thousand little Hitlers telling you what you can say, where you can step, who you can talk to, what books you can read, what movies you are allowed to watch? What people on Earth would choose to live that way voluntarily? It was Stalin who turned us into a nation of snitches and frightened little mice. America was different. What was so wrong, so evil about an America in which Jews who did well building houses or selling shirts took Christmas vacations in Miami, where their children drank fresh-squeezed orange juice by the pool?

I do my best to answer him. None of us is entirely innocent, I explain. No institution is entirely immune.

“You sound like those stupid morons on television,” he says, grumpily.

It’s the fault of the women, I assure...
him. The night Trump won, the husband of every professional-class, Hillary-worshipping female achiever in America knew the score: They would sing from the hymn book, louder, and then loudest, or else the entire structure of their high-pressure, 36-hours-in-a-day, two-career existence, which had become ever more of an emotional and financial high-wire act with the advent of iPhones, which turned every home into a two-career virtual office, would collapse. Decades of simmering resentment would go nuclear—and if I catch you texting with that young junior associate again, Mister, I’ll #MeToo your ass myself.

Sure, the anti-Trump was the construct of a set of political operatives who stumbled their way into more or less staging a coup against a duly elected president who, for his part, and for the good of the planet, would have been better off ruining a nice Scottish golf course. But the fuel for the machine they built came from the retributive fantasy world of a nation of women whose nerve endings had been rubbed raw by the demands that they be CEOs and sex goddesses and stay-at-home moms at once, well into their 50s, while competing in the workplace with both men and younger women and finding their places on the slippery totem pole of victimhood usurped by every kind of newcomer. That ocean of bad female juju wasn’t going anywhere.

And who could blame the women? Just look at the man in the White House, look at how vulgar, crude, disgusting, and mean, and openly incompetent, not to mention horrifyingly racist and sexist, he is. The world is coming to an end. We’re the good guys. Just put us back in power, ladies, and you can go powder your noses, and everything will go back to the way it was, when life was, uh ...

Bear shrugs in agreement. “You’re coming with me to Switzerland, yes?”

According to the most reliable and up-to-date rankings, Switzerland is in fact the happiest nation on Earth, and since I have zero desire to pick a fight with either the science of statistical measurements or with the Swiss, let’s stipulate here and for the rest of my journey that Switzerland is indeed happier than any other country, despite the often dour facial expressions of the Swiss, and the infrequency of outward public shows of happiness like spontaneous singing or dancing. I think we can all agree that happiness is less a matter of dramatic outward show than a steady burning state of satisfaction that radiates outwards from some internal re-doubt of calm, peace, and safety.

It is even possible to posit that a surfeit of happiness may be the reason why, aside from a single 20th-century painter of surpassing genius, Paul Klee, there are few Swiss artists or writers of any note, and no one watches Swiss superhero movies or relaxes with mellow Swiss jazz. (I would argue that Paul Klee was in fact a great German artist, in the same way that Rousseau, the architect of the modern idea of happiness, who himself grew up in Geneva, was a great French philosopher—though recent scholarship on that point is interestingly split.) The Swiss national genius expresses itself in mathematics, a field in which happiness is not known to be the rule; in making great watches; and in the person of Roger Federer, who plays tennis like a Swiss watch tells time.

And so it was decided. Our trip would begin in Geneva, where Rousseau invented happiness and Lenin plotted the Bolshevik Revolution; we would end in Basel, where Herzl outlined his solution to the historical exile and suffering of the Jewish people in Der Judenstaadt, thus proving that the Enlightenment was just another chapter of an age-old story that began with the Greeks and whose larger moral is that humans are not strictly rational animals. My answer, dear reader, was yes.

“The swans in Lake Léman shit everywhere,” Bear confided with glee halfway through our journey by airplane from New York City to Geneva. Having unbuckled his seatbelt somewhere in the middle of our flight, he had begun roaming around the airplane cabin, in which we were more or less the only passengers—a comfort to which Bear appeared to be insensible.

Bear’s general lack of interest in his surroundings, which I have noticed before, is in part the product of his weird upbringing, which oscillated between extremes of wealth and deprivation. It also a privilege that he enjoys thanks to his oversize physique, which is capable of plowing through large obstacles without any visible damage, but which experiences human-size artifacts like beds or chairs as a form of mild torture. Navigating the world, physical and emotional, is different for Bear than for other people, which is why I like accompanying him on his journeys.

It is worth it, if you have never done so, to take an airplane to Geneva simply to see the rivers of white clouds flowing through the Alps. From a height of 30,000 feet, it’s a view that Alexander the Great or Hannibal or Lord Byron or any painter of the 19th century would have killed for, the white clouds flowing in and out of high mountain passes with peaceful Alpine villages and dark forests poking through to provide the viewer with a train-set miniature sense of scale. From a height of 25,000 feet, you feel like God. A moment later, the model world below disappears into a cloud bank that is packed so thick as to give the impression of solid ground along which the plane’s shadow skims like an image cast by a light box. Then the clouds return again like fluffy white bunnies in springtime.

There are few natural sights that are
so uplifting as a clear, sunlit morning flight over the Alps, but the Alps alone are not enough to guarantee happiness. Rather, it is the ability to harmonize spectacular natural beauty with apocalyptic forebodings, as cultivated and practiced over five centuries of highly civilized existence, that has allowed Switzerland to maintain its position as an island of peace and tranquility in a continent that spent most of the past century choking on its own blood. The Swiss do not take their responsibility toward their national inheritance of happiness lightly. All Swiss men between the ages of 18 and 34 who are deemed “fit for service” are given a gun and trained in its use.

A bird’s-eye view of the geography of northern and central Europe confirms the extent to which the Swiss are truly a people apart, protected by some of the highest mountains on the planet, which they have spent decades fortifying and mining against the possibility of a land incursion by their German, French, and Italian neighbors—the Swiss themselves being a mixture of all three peoples, who formed a covenant among their 26 cantons that will doubtlessly survive the European Union and possibly even the United States. The durable Swiss covenant came about in response to one of the history’s most destructive double-whammies. The first of these was the Black Death, which killed approximately a third of Europe’s 70 million people. The second was the subsequent continentwide religious conflagration colloquially known as the Thirty Years’ War, which remains the most deadly and destructive largescale bloodletting that Europe ever inflicted on itself, including WWI and WWII. In the German-speaking principalities to Switzerland’s east, up to 50% and 60% of the population were killed by roving armies, starvation, and disease, which helps explain why the Swiss are inclined toward cleanliness, which keeps away diseases, and also toward heavily armed neutrality, which keeps away armies. These habits have allowed the Swiss to spend the successive eras of revolutions, wars, and pandemics doing things like making fine watches, socking untold quantities of gold away in vaults, and otherwise fortifying themselves against nuclear, chemical, and biological apocalypse.

An important part of the Swiss strategy for fending off the apocalypse is building bunkers. In 2006, there were 5,100 large public fallout shelters in Switzerland containing places for 1.1 million people, in addition to 300,000-plus shelters located in private Swiss dwellings, institutions, and hospitals that provide an additional 7.5 million places. These shelters are built in accordance with Articles 45 and 46 of the Swiss Federal Law on Civil Protection, which decrees that “[e]very inhabitant must have a protected place that can be reached quickly from his place of residence” and that “apartment block owners are required to construct and fit out shelters in all new dwellings.” Altogether, the Swiss shelter network provides protection against a nuclear strike, aerosolized plague, or other annihilating events for 8.6 million people, which is 114% of the actual Swiss population. No other nation on Earth even approaches 100% shelter coverage.

Every once in a while, though, the vigilance of even the Swiss can flag. On March 9, 2011, for example, gripped by a fit of optimistic giddiness accompanied by predictable blather about the end of history and the repeal of all laws that had formerly governed the conduct of human beings on this planet, the Swiss Parliament repealed the country’s “shelters for all” law. Two days later, on March 11, 2011, a 9.0 earthquake accompanied by a large tsunami hit Fukushima, Japan, leading to the partial meltdowns of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant and the release of 18 quadrillion becquerels of radioactive cesium-137 into the Pacific Ocean—and the Swiss Parliament’s swift reversal of its hasty and unwise decision.

There must be a spiritual factor at work among the Swiss too, Bear suggests. There must be. “Without some idea of God, or an equivalent for God—meaning God—life is both utterly meaningless and also infinitely depressing,” he meditates out loud, as the plane takes a steep plunge through a bank of gray clouds, jogging my memory of the Swiss airline pilot who drove a plane full of passengers straight into the side of one of these mountains. “Otherwise, it’s just all chocolate bars and porn.”

Bear can be a hard person to figure out, starting with exactly what he does for a living, and extending to the large overseas fortune he may or may not someday inherit. He is a polymath, possessed of a towering Germanic work ethic and the ability to engineer utterly mediocre schemes for paying clients, which he uses to fund his untiring generosity to friends and also to strangers. His foolishness and his holiness are of a piece, like a Russian prince or an 18th-century Hasidic master, which together summon up a pretty good visual of my friend.

A few seconds later, we had touched down in Geneva, where a disheveled Bear wandered off to find his Hermes luggage set and plunder a newsstand. He popped up again by my side at the rent-a-car counter, waving his credit card like the rich kid in school who buys candy bars for everyone because he is lonely. “There’s a great fondue place near the cathedral where I used to go with my father,” he pleads. “Can we have lunch there?” Of course we can. I am also tired, and in need of a nap.

After a short drive, we arrive at our hotel in the center of Geneva, across from Rousseau’s island, where the great philosopher of happiness sits alone in the center of the river. The hotel is pretty much the only thing about Geneva I remember from my last visit to this city more than 25 years ago, during the Bosnian war. The lobby is currently being demolished by jackhammers. We drink beer in the café and wait for our rooms, which in compensation for the jackhammers, are exceptionally large and clean, of a class that I would have otherwise been unable to afford.

Bear unpacks his belongings,
grumbles a bit, and goes off to attend to some personal business at a Swiss banking establishment whose name sounds suspiciously like “Bear.” I take the opportunity to lie down on the impeccably laundered bed in my room. If you’ve ever worked in a hotel (I’ve helped to open two of them), you know how disgusting hotel beds are, vomit being arguably the least objectionable of the bodily fluids that one is likely to find there; I always laugh when I hear people talking about wanting a bed “just like in a hotel.” Anyway, almost immediately, I fall into a long, dreamless sleep from which I awake to find a copy of an oil portrait of John Calvin staring back at me from the wall, but with no more concrete sense of why I accepted Bear’s invitation to come here. I would say that I was getting away from getting away from it all, except I wasn’t really, and certainly not here.

Swans are vulgar, menacing creatures, and the swans on Lake Geneva are no exception to that rule. Their long, freakishly muscled necks curl back and forth under the direction of their brains, which are seamlessly integrated with their neck muscles. Darting back and forth and twisting to the side and then around, in patterns that suggest a highly cultivated malevolence toward all non-swansize lifeforms, their dinosaurlike skulls make one grateful for the mercies of evolution and miniaturization. It’s better to let one of them eat half your sandwich than to lose an eye.

On the other side of the Rhone is a little amusement park with a fairgrounds and park benches where readers of higher-end European spy novels might expect to find an older Russian man resting with his head to the side, and with what might appear on closer inspection to be a puncture wound in his neck. The plaza immediately to the left is overseen by a noble bronze bust of Gustave Ador, president of the International Committee of Red Cross between 1910 and 1928, which means that Ernest Hemingway rode in one of his ambulances.

The question I am left with, after all my reporting in Europe, I tell Bear, has to do with the ubiquity of electric towel warmers. Go into even the most ordinary apartment in Geneva, or Lyon, and you will find a heated bar that keeps your bath towel warm. Thirty years ago, I found them in every hotel in the Balkans in the middle of a bloody civil war, along with black-and-white television sets bolted to the corner of the ceiling, so you could lie in bed and watch the news.

“Baths,” Bear says. In the days before indoor plumbing, he explains, a bath was a major production; private baths were the province of the urban middle and upper classes. Warm towels were the unimaginably thick and luxurious icing on the cake.

As we chat, Bear Man answers me in French, then in German, then switches to Hebrew with no discernible change in accent or facial expression. His ability to speak six or seven languages without any noticeable accent is the product of a peripatetic childhood looked after off-and-on by people who, whatever their faults, were better equipped than his parents. I have bits and pieces of languages from Japanese to Serbo-Croatian from reporting on the Balkan wars and some memorably indecent love affairs.

The paradise of running water, warm towels, and good chocolate, Bear Man informs me, has no room for a convenience that is personally important to him: kosher meat. Under the Swiss constitution of 1848, it was declared impossible to be both Swiss and a Jew. To continue this premise of irreconcilability between Judaism and the Swiss, kosher slaughter is still legally banned in Switzerland. Observant Jews must either become vegans or else figure out ways to bring in meat from other countries, which means that the Bear’s diet here will be limited to cheese and fish.

Luckily, Bear continues, the general Swiss aversion to Jews, Judaism, and all things Jewish has never applied to Jewish money. During WWII, he says, the Swiss gladly took tens of thousands of deposits from desperate Jews seeking to protect any fraction of their life’s savings from Nazi seizure. These deposits were so precious to the Swiss that, in the wake of the Holocaust, they devised an incredibly intricate set of practices, which became known as the Swiss Code of Obligations—which is a truly wonderful name, exemplifying what I take to be the uniquely Swiss sense of humor. Under the Code of Obligations, the Swiss government permitted Swiss banks to stonewall inquiries from concentration camp survivors for 10 years, at which point the banks were legally permitted to destroy all correspondence related to these accounts. Because the accounts were therefore officially dormant, the banks were obligated to sell the assets in their care in order to pay the sky-high fees they assessed to maintain a class of accounts they had systematically and legally orphaned. The most outstanding watchmaker in Geneva could not have designed better clockwork for a system of stealing money from people who had already lost everything.

Yet miraculously, despite the genius of this almost-clinical system for reducing Jewish accounts in Switzerland to zero, the value of abandoned Jewish accounts somehow continued to rise each time they were audited, Bear continued, with a mischievous air. When I asked him how this was possible, he smiled. “It’s because the Swiss have a magic touch when it comes to money,” he answered.

I found plenty of numbers to support Bear’s assertion. The first audit of abandoned Swiss bank accounts possibly belonging to dead Jews after the war found only a few hundred unclaimed accounts with a total value of 862,000 Swiss francs. In 1962, the Swiss parliament passed a very narrowly circumscripted law under which another 739 accounts with an additional 6.2 million francs in assets were discovered. In 1995, a self-audit by Swiss banks showed an additional 775 accounts with 28.7 million francs—more than four times the prior total. A mere two years later, in the wake of the appointment by the Swiss government of a commission of “eminent persons” led by former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, a second self-audit found 5,570 accounts containing 74.5 million francs. The Volcker commission then found an additional 53,886 accounts, whose value, in 1945 Swiss francs, was put at roughly 700 million. In constant dollars, the Swiss had therefore achieved
an increase in capital held by dead Jews of over 10,000% in a mere 50 years—a result that any banker would envy.

“That’s why I do my banking in Switzerland,” Bear Man concludes, looking quite pleased with himself after a delicious prix fixe lunch. Next we will visit St. Pierre Cathedral, the largest cathedral in Geneva, built on the model of St. Peter’s in Rome, he promises. We will sit there quietly, and all my questions about the need for this trip on either of our parts will be suitably answered. As we get up from the table, he gladly accepts my offering of tangerine-flavored THC gummies I brought through customs and pops an entire handful into his mouth.

Bear Man and I are very different people. One of us was born rich, namely him, and the other—me—was born poor. One of us is a creature of gargantuan size and appetites, and the other—me again—is a person of slightly below-average height with ascetic tendencies, except in cases where I want something very badly, like an Alex Katz drawing. Still, we have plenty in common, like our shared love for the rapper Biggie Smalls and for baseball, and the fact that we both dabbled in the unsettling religious literature of the Reformation in graduate school. Bear, because he was a big reader of Heidegger, and me as a budding student of America whose best friend in graduate school was a heroin addict who loved reading crazy Cromwellian pamphlets when he was high.

It was the Puritans, first in England and then in America, I tell Bear, who laid out the passage from subjects to saints to citizens that the rest of the Western world would later follow, citing Michael Walzer’s great book The Revolution of the Saints, which my heroin-loving friend introduced me to in graduate school. Geneva was therefore the birthplace of modernity, and perhaps a good place to look for clues as to the future direction of that unsettled and unsettling project.

The great altar piece of the Cathedral St. Pierre is fortunately preserved in the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire, where we saw it earlier that same morning, along with the remnants of the fabulous stained-glass windows of St. Pierre’s, which include a perfect grunge rock album cover Magdalene. Luckily for us, and the rest of posterity, the windows and the altar piece were removed before John Calvin and his followers vandalized the cathedral, smashing the remaining windows, beheading statues of the saints and otherwise turning the once-gorgeous Catholic sound-and-light show into a monochromatic monument to anxiety and repression.

What remains of the cathedral’s interior nearly 500 years later is the bare stone, whose effect reminds me of the concrete riot-control architecture of the 1970s that still dominates public spaces, government buildings, and university campuses in cities like Newark or St. Louis. Stripped of color and ornamentation, with the sole exception of Calvin’s own pulpit, the brutalist interior of St. Pierre faithfully reflects the product of the Puritan search for inner perfection, a sterile and inhuman space that denies a wandering eye anyplace to rest.

“The brutalist interior of St. Pierre faithfully reflects the product of the Puritan search for inner perfection, a sterile and inhuman space that denies a wandering eye anyplace to rest.”

Bear Man’s eyes go wide, as a weird Alan Parsons Project-type organ riff fills the space of the cathedral. To make things even weirder, a children’s choir pops up beneath Calvin’s spiral pulpit and starts to sing “Let It Be.” When the youth choir is done with the Beatles, they launch into a Swiss Gospel version of “Let My People Go.” They seem like nice kids, and they are trying hard, but it is impossible to fill this space with anything human.

It’s all too perfect, I am telling Bear. It’s the same subject-position, 500 years ago and today. We are here because we are living in the age of techno-Calvinism, which was created by the merger of Puritans and iPhones—with the history of slavery and anti-Black racism in America providing the necessary modern-day substitute for the Calvinist emphasis on original sin.

All the statues of the saints must again be smashed. Mark Twain, for racism; Edward Hopper, for whiteness; John Singer Sargent, for making sexism sexy; Miles Davis, because he was too friendly to Jews; John Coltrane, for not being political; Thomas Pynchon, for being a believer in popes; Stanley Kubrick, for selling indulgences; Jimi Hendrix, for antinomian heresy; Steely Dan, for exploiting Black artists; Eddie Murphy and Hugh Grant, for transphobia; Margaret Atwood, for not believing in women; J.K. Rowling, for saying that women exist; Quentin Tarantino, for allowing his characters to say a word that my editor won’t even let me type though it is a part of history and language that is repeated dozens of times in Tarantino’s movies and many thousands of times a day in rap songs. The America of the seekers and its Catholic aesthetic of wild hybridity is gone. In its place is the New Church of the Techno-Calvinists.

And just as Protestants used the miracle of the Gutenberg press to spread their doctrines, the Techno-Calvinists use monopoly speech platforms designed by Silicon Valley engineers to spread their doctrine of an all-consuming flatness spread out like an open book beneath God’s single, all-seeing eye. Flatness is cheap manufactured goods, Uber rides, bad take-out food. Flatness is Airbnb and Tinder dates. People with
professional credentials consume flatness as politics or as jobs in global banking. For “organizers,” flatness means the promise of “social justice.” Flatness means monopolizing the book industry, the diaper industry, the news industry—you name it. It’s all flat.

Flatness is an aesthetic strategy. Flatness is a political strategy. Flatness is business strategy.

Flatness is where money and power come from. Flatness is baked into the systems that run the global economy, in which poor people in distant countries are paid pennies per hour to produce crap at the expense of American workers, and the disintegrating communities they live in.

Flatness animates the work of shitty graphic designers like Shepard Fairey, who thought that Soviet poster art was unironically cool. It was Fairey who created the iconic image of Dear Leader Barack that hung in a thousand dorm rooms next to its black-on-red inspiration, the famous poster image of Che, the greasy, stoned jungle rat. Che was a loser and a failure, and he spent his afterlife as a sullen witness to 10,000 stoner dorm-room conversations that all went nowhere, until Barack Obama came along. Now that was a guy the squares could also like, while he winked at the cool kids and read Philip K. Dick.

Above all, though, flatness is a religion, which in the Calvinist framework means a pattern of surveillance and social control that leaves no part of society untouched. Tech lords lay off the work of organizing social reality to the consistory of organizers, who distribute worthless plastic beads to their tribes. Flatness dialectically creates the world of identity politics, which in the Calvinist framework is neither easier or harder to explain than the women in hooded cloaks and muskets and long pointy lances fill the square playing “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

The Puritans who sailed to America may have carried with them copies of John Knox’s Bible, printed in Geneva, but they were not members of Calvin’s Consistory. They were from England, a land from which Jews had been expelled in the 13th century, and therefore might as well have been unicorns. After leaving England, these English Puritans settled in Amsterdam, where the local Protestants tolerated Spinoza. From there, they sailed to America, where they founded a New Jerusalem and lived out their own chapter of the Bible. Unlike John Calvin and his followers, who lived just across the Alps from the Pope, the English Puritans, now Pilgrims, were free to identify with the Israelites, and to teach their children Hebrew, and, in ways that are hardly insignificant, either then or now, to become Israelites themselves.

All Americans are Pilgrims, whether we like it or not, just as Americans Jews are Pilgrims, because we’ve got that Pilgrim DNA. Anyone who denies the urgency of the writings of our Pilgrim forefathers and foremothers, especially now, in these uncertain times, should probably crack open a book or two. Try this sermon on for size, from the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards:

The greater part of those who heretofore have lived under the same means of grace, and are now dead, are undoubtedly gone to hell; and it was not because they were not as wise as those who are now alive: it was not because they did not lay out matters as well for themselves to secure their own escape. If we could speak with them, and inquire of them, one by one, whether they expected, when alive, and when they used to hear about hell, ever to be the subjects of misery: we doubtless, should hear one and another reply, “No, I never intended to come here: I had laid out matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I should contrive well for myself: I thought my scheme good. I intended to take effectual care; but it came upon me unexpectedly; I did not look for it at that time, and in that manner; it came as a thief: Death outwitted me; God’s wrath was too quick for me. Oh, my cursed foolishness! I was flattering myself, and pleasing myself with vain dreams of what I would do hereafter; and when I was saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction came upon me.

Edwards was the James Lee Jamerson of New England sermon-makers; you can feel the earth move when he takes up his instrument. So please stop and read the passage over again, because a more profound or searing description of what it means to be an American has yet to be written:

I never intended to come here.
I had laid out matters otherwise.
Preach it to the cows and the chickens!

It is time for us to get out of here, Bear urges me. The THC gummies are hitting him harder than he expected, which is not my fault. I only ate two, but this place is freaking me out too. It’s time to go outside, and breathe some fresh air.

But outside, Geneva only gets weirder. In the square, groups of women are wearing colonial bonnets and dark robes and selling cider, like extras in The Handmaid’s Tale. Just as I start to point the women out to Bear, the music starts, and a fife-and-drum corps marches into the square playing “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

“See!” I delightedly exclaim to Bear. History is on the march! The fife-and-drum corps is proving my point about the Techno-Calvinists!

Bear pats my arm indulgently with his large paw. I am hallucinating, and he is also hallucinating, which makes sense given the number of gummies we ate. The music stops and is replaced by the tramp and clank of men in armor approaching from a nearby street, which is neither easier or harder to explain than the women in hooded cloaks and the fife-and-drum corps.

Ranks of armed men carrying ancient muskets and long pointy lances fill the square in front of the cathedral. A woman with long flowing red hair, in a white Elizabethan collar, approaches me on a horse whose insanely golden-colored...
palominolike mane makes me think of one of the more outlandish members of my daughter's My Little Pony collection. The combination of the two hairdos is too outrageously emo. I doubt my imagination is capable of this particular vision, but moment by moment, I’m being proved wrong.

The red-haired rider is a terrific horsewoman, keeping her horse’s head pointed away from the blasts of the muskets so that it doesn’t start or bolt. I admire her cool. She’d look better on a poster, with her head tilted bravely toward the future, than Barack Obama. From a side street, perhaps 15 men and women mounted on horseback come riding in. The entire troupe lines up behind the red-haired woman, as the square in front of us fills with shooting and gun smoke.

At this point, I am experiencing too high a degree of sensory overload, and I can’t accurately report on whatever is happening around me. Whatever it is, it feels unpleasant, like an actual battle, minus—I hope—any actual bloodshed. Nor does there appear to be any way out, as both the main street and the side from which the horsemen came are now filled with men in armor, marching in formation. Every five steps or so, they stop, lift muskets to their shoulders, and fire—the source of the smoke. It is impossible for me, an experienced drug-taker who has been high as a kite since he the man was supremely unimpressive, to seriously reckon. In addition to being dirty, brutal, ignorant and plague-ridden, the medieval universe was a pluralistic place, filled with spirits and angels linked together in a great and harmonious chain of being that was animated by the spirit of a loving God. By contrast, John Calvin’s world was ruled by arbitrariness, a wasteland of sin in which God’s “fearful shakings and desolation,” as one Puritan writer put it, were the goal of transforming the people of Geneva into saints. “The saint was a new political man,” Michael Walzer wrote in Revolution of the Saints. “His activity was systematic and organized; in some fashion he was already obedient to the discipline of the new order he envisioned.”

Yet the transformation of saints into citizens came at a price that is difficult for we moderns and post-moderns to seriously reckon. In addition to being dirty, brutal, ignorant and plague-ridden, the medieval universe was a pluralistic place, filled with spirits and angels linked together in a great and harmonious chain of being that was animated by the spirit of a loving God. By contrast, John Calvin’s world was ruled by arbitrary power, a wasteland of sin in which God’s “fearful shakings and desolation,” as one Puritan writer put it, were the sole rightful inheritance of mankind.

To make the new system work, families would be reconstituted, not on the basis of natural bonds of affection, but according to Puritan doctrine. The family would become the state, writ small. The Puritans brought with them what Walzer aptly describes as “a fierce antagonism to the traditional world and the prevailing pattern of human relations.” Yet even if Calvin’s God required “an obedience so precise and total as to be without precedent in the history of tyranny,” Walzer argues, he freed men from all sorts of other authorities, thus paving the road to the nirvana of secular citizenship—which still carries with it a faint whiff of both sainthood and gunpowder.

Yet it is also possible to see the Puritans not as fanatics whose zeal helped
bend the arc of history toward some greater justice but as wicked and de-
structive, smashing statues and paint-
ings in a Taliban-like orgy of psychotic
disenchantment that paved the way for 20th-century totalitarian move-
ments that murdered tens of millions of people—just as the 17th-century re-
ligious wars did in Europe. Throughout
the Middle Ages, one historian wrote,
“even those who commented in the
heat of political passion never identi-
fied their enemies with Anti-Christ.”
The Puritans did. Speaking in 1644 to
the soldiers in Cromwell’s Parliament,
the relatively sedate Puritan divine Ste-
phen Marshall asked bluntly if they “do
now see that the question in England is
whether Christ or Anti-Christ should be
lord or king.”

What unites Puritans and totalitarians
is their drive to eliminate space for hu-
man freedom by dividing humanity into
two opposing camps: believers and the
Antichrist. The Saints were revolution-
aries, recognizable as such to us, even
though we would seem unimaginably
wicked to them. “The saints attempted
to fasten upon the necks of all mankind
the yoke of a new political discipline—
impersonal and ideological,” Walzer
writes. In Calvin’s Geneva, law and or-
der were maintained through “mutual
surveillance.” Church members (ide-
ally all Genevans were church members)
“watched, investigated, and chastised”
each other. The Puritans carried this dis-
cipline to England, where it took hold
in some places, like the Kidderminster
parish of the Reverend Richard Baxter
who gladly reported that enforcement
of the new order was made possible “by
the zeal and diligence of the godly peo-
ple of the place who thirsted after the
salvation of their neighbors ...”

The role of the Jews in Puritan cos-
mology is also worth looking at. There
were no Jews in Oliver Cromwell’s En-
gleland during the 17th century, of course;
the entire community having been mas-
sacred and expelled some 400 years ear-
ier. Nor were there any living Jews in
Calvin’s Geneva, the entire Jewish com-
munity of the city having been shoved
out into the snow to freeze to death
during the particularly brutal Swiss
winter of 1491, which coincided with
the eve of the mass expulsion of Jews
from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella,
the royal couple who united the Iberian
peninsula under Catholic rule and then
sent Christopher Columbus off to dis-
cover the New World.

Still, Calvin, who trained as a lawyer
rather than a theologian, did not spare
the ghosts of Geneva’s Jews from his in-
vective-rich tirades. Jews were “sheep,”
“pigs,” “dogs,” and “brutes,” whose rejec-
tion of the truth of Christianity made
them “blind,” “stupid,” and “foolish.” As
a people, Jews suffered from a species
of “madness” or “insanity” which leads
them to “stupidly devour all the riches
of the Earth with their unreasoned
 cupiditv.” The Jewish biblical commen-
tator Abravanel was “an impostor,” “a
dog,” and guilty of “hallucinations.” As
for Jewish commentators on the Book
of Isaiah, Calvin noted that “Jews mix
in here stupid fables and invent miracles
which never occurred. This is the result
not merely of their ignorance but also
their audacity.”

John Calvin’s own translation of the
Book of Isaiah was not without
flaws, though. He translates “Almah”
as “virgin,” which is wrong, and then
insists that it is derived from the root
“to hide,” which he claims that virgins
do—a derivation that is also wrong.
He also insists that fathers in the Bible
are always assigned the right to name
their children, an assertion disproved
by the story of Eve, which comes near
the very beginning of Genesis, the
first book of the Bible. In an essay ti-
tled “John Calvin’s Contribution to an
Understanding of the Book of Isaiah,”
the scholar Simon J. De Vries passes
what feels like a fair judgment on Cal-
vin’s distinctive qualities as a reader
of sacred texts: “His hubris and urge
to control drive him into reproducing
how each actor behaves, and why—and
then into moral judgement upon each
individual’s behavior ... his theology of
history, as exhibited in his interpreta-
tion of these two chapters, is wooden,
driven and utterly doctrinaire.” Missing
in Calvin’s reading, De Vries concludes,
is any sense that human beings might
enjoy pleasure on earth. “Calvin does
not seem to realize that this great pas-
sage of Scripture is ... designed to make
its readers joyful.”

Maybe America is the new Geneva, I
suggest to Bear Man.

“Why did that happen?” he wonders.
“Because the American churches are
gone now,” I explained. “Churches nor-
malize religion and make it banal. No
one really believes anything. Without
the churches to restrain and channel
their religious manias, Americans have
stopped being Pilgrims, and have gone
back to being Puritans.”

I am very impressed with my theory
of Pilgrims and Puritans, which I made
up on the spot. Bear Man doesn’t appear
to be listening, though. Instead, he is
gesticulating with one of his meaty paws
at the ornately carved grave marker sit-
ting directly in front of the bench where
we’ve been sitting for the past hour and
a half without either one of us giving it
a second glance.

“Do you see who is buried there?”
Bear suddenly asks.

“What?” I ask Bear.

“Jorge Luis Borges,” he replies.

Oh God. He’s right. The grave that
we have been conversing before for the
past hour and a half belongs to the great
Argentine fabulist who, like John Cal-
vin, was a believer in the power of the
Word, but otherwise was Calvin’s exact
spiritual and literary opposite. Borges’
headstone is nicely carved in what look

“What unites Puritans and totalitarians is their drive to eliminate space for human freedom by dividing humanity into two opposing camps: believers and the Antichrist.”
almost like runes from a Led Zeppelin album cover.

In contrast to Calvin's lonely, fenced-off plot, Borges' gravesite is lush and well tended, and it is filled with flowers left by recent admirers. As a child, Borges came to Geneva with his parents on a visit to Europe, which was interrupted by the outbreak of WWI; the Borges family was trapped in neutral Switzerland until its conclusion. In his old age, Borges fell in love with his secretary, who was Genevan, and returned here, thus earning a spot in the city's most exclusive civic burial ground. The gravesite next to Borges belongs to a woman whose tombstone proclaims her to have been a prostitute.

I'm a Borges fan, but I had no idea that he was buried in the same cemetery as John Calvin. It was here, I tell Bear, that the idiotic Chilean communist writer Eduardo Labarca saw fit to urinate on Borges' grave, an act he photographed and then put on the cover of one of his programmatic Marxist novels. "Borges was a giant as a writer but I feel complete contempt for him as a citizen," Labarca explained, only partially blind to the self-serving assumption that political virtue trumps art. "As an old man, almost blind, he came to meet the dictator Pinochet in the days when he was busy killing."

"I love Borges," Bear Man answers.

It is easy to see why Jews preferred America to Switzerland, I tell Bear the next morning over a hearty hotel breakfast in the empty hotel lobby delivered by a waiter who returns to our table after half an hour with a gentle warning: In another 15 minutes, we are warned, the jackhammers will start up again, taking more chunks out of the gilded walls. It is time to hit the road.

While the endpoint of our journey is Basel, we are planning to stop for lunch in Bern, the birthplace of Paul Klee. I have a special fondness for Klee's zizical characters, whose bodies look like they are outlined in yarn, and the odd balance of humor and loneliness in his work has spoken to me since I was in college. Klee's characters, I explain to Bear, are balanced somewhere between philosophical investigations and cartoons, which is a place I feel entirely comfortable.

Perhaps Paul Klee's most famous fanboy was the great German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin, a writer of essays filled with brilliant insights, any one of which could be a great novel, if Benjamin had been capable of imagining minds other than his own. He was great on architecture, though. From the time that Walter Benjamin was a young man, until the day he died, his most beloved possession was a Paul Klee drawing of a dancing, lionlike figure that the artist called "Angelus Novus." Benjamin purchased the drawing while living in Munich circa 1921, and he famously described the drawing thus:

There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at, his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. This is how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his fee.

Benjamin's beloved angel of history traces a revealing set of connections among some of the 20th century's greatest and most notorious minds. Between 1921 and 1940, Benjamin kept the drawing in his bedroom. Fleeing Paris in 1940, Benjamin left his prized possession in the care of the post-modernist French writer and critic Georges Bataille, who hid it in the pornography section of the French National Library. After the war, the "Angelus Novus" reached Theodor Adorno, who kept it until his death in 1969, whereupon it passed into the hands of Gershon Scholem, the great scholar of the Kabbalah and Benjamin's lifelong friend and correspondent. Scholem hung the painting in his study in Jerusalem, where it lived until the scholar's death in 1982. Scholem's widow then deeded the painting to the Israel Museum.

It was in Jerusalem, one afternoon during the Second Intifada, that I paid my respects to Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus." My visit followed a particularly gruesome terror-bombing by a Hamas cell at a coffee shop called Café Moment where I had been sipping coffee an hour earlier. It was one of the more upsetting experiences of a frightening month—the most frightening month I had lived through up until that time, which included several years of going back and forth to the Balkans. What made Jerusalem different is that I felt like the killers were targeting me specifically. While I retained sympathy for the Palestinian activists I knew, I understood in that moment that I was not interested in dying for someone else's cause, which more and more resembled a death cult.

When I arrived at the museum, I was met by the director, a familiar New York art-world type in a pink-hued suit. He was a friend of some wealthy people I knew in New York. We spent a few minutes chatting together in front of the famous painting, before he took a respectful step back, to afford me a measure of privacy as I communed with the work. "I know it's important to you," he said.

I looked at the painting, but something felt off. The colors seemed oddly flat. Klee's line, which I felt like I could draw with my eyes closed, seemed somehow distorted. I felt an absence of any emotional or aesthetic connection to a work that had occupied a special place in my mind for well over a decade, since I was in graduate school at Princeton, when I loved and lost a girlfriend from college, under circumstances that I felt had nothing to do with me, or the strength of our bond, but I could find no way to alter. In the grip of our tragically doomed romance, I spent late nights marking passages in Walter Benjamin essays. It had been a long day. Suddenly, I knew what I was looking at.

"It's a fake," I blurted out.

The museum director looked at me quizzically, weighing my choice of words, and his own. "The original is being restored," he admitted, after a brief pause. His answer was inflected in a sensitive way that acknowledged my palpable shock while denying that the museum had any responsibility for the unpleasantness that I had suffered. Parsing his tone, my emotional state became even more precarious now that I...
Bear nodded, his eyes fixed on the turnoff to Bern. “That’s a great story,” he told me. “I also have a story about the Angelus Novus.”

“What?” I asked him.

“Do you know who the angel is?”

“No,” I answered.

“It’s a drawing of Adolf Hitler,” I was stunned. “What?” I asked.

“Klee was living in Munich in 1921, remember?” Bear reminded me, quite matter-of-factly. “So was Hitler. In fact, he was already quite well known in town. He used to give speeches outside the café where Klee used to go in the morning, so he drew him. In fact, lots of artists went to the same café, and drew Hitler.”

“That’s bullshit,” I answered. But there was something about Bear’s off-hand manner that shook me.

“Sadly, not,” Bear answered airily. “It’s in a book in German by a writer named J.K. Eberlein. The case he makes for the story I just told you is entirely convincing. Walter Benjamin was an adolescent fascist who knew next to nothing about painting. He was what the Japanese would call an otaku. He worshipped this angel his whole life, but he had no idea who the angel was and what prophecy it carried. His angel of history was in fact the angel of death.”

Which is a very profound and also quite alarming idea that was entirely lost on Walter Benjamin, who wound up dead on the French-Spanish border. Neither Adorno nor Gershom Scholem recognized the angel in the painting either. Suddenly, I feel sad that Gershom Scholem spent the last years of his life with a drawing of Hitler in his study.

Bear turns to me. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

“It’s not that I don’t believe him, I explain. It’s that his story made me feel sick.

“Graduate school is a waste of time,” he assured me. “Don’t sweat it.”

It’s fine for us to skip Bern, I tell Bear. Instead, we decide to stop off in Gruyères, where we can buy some fresh cheese and bread. Correcting course, I have found a two-star Michelin restaurant 15 minutes away overlooking a stunning mountain pass, according to my iPhone. Bear likes the idea. “And there’s the Giger Museum,” he adds happily. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Who’s Giger?” I asked innocently.

“Hans Giger,” Bear Man explains. “He’s the maniac who created the monsters in Alien.”

The town of Gruyères is a storybook Alpine village at a high elevation with outstanding views of the surrounding mountains and of the rich valley below. There are several excellent fondue places, and souvenirs and cheese shops that line a kind of upward-sloping central street that is shaped something like a gravy boat, widening out in the middle into a town square that is shaped like a cello. Midway up the street is a church, which still displays a crèche. A little further up is Giger’s house, which has been turned into a four-story museum.

While not exactly a cripple, Hans Giger had various physical difficulties that prevented him from doing much hiking or skiing in the mountains. Instead, he spent most of his time indoors, looking out at the scenery. The Giger Museum is filled with terrifying visions of alien lifeforms, depicted in posters, drawings, and also in the form of a full dining room set, complete with chairs made out of alien skeletal remains, which looks like something that Amon Goth might have assembled at Plaszow. Interspersed with this array of horrifying artifacts are stunning picture-window views of the Alps.

There are also displays of memorabilia and correspondence, including a letter typewritten in English from Giger to Alien III screenwriter David Giler, dated 17/9/90, enthusing over the possibilities...
of the new film. I have cleaned it up only slightly:

*A sound of a long, overlaid organ chord. All of a sudden, pointed cries of a retained trumpet, this all visible under the translucent skin. Then a sudden wake-up of the ALIEN by a strange sound.*

The ALIEN is getting up and sneaking toward the point of disturbance. You can hear the hollow beat of the heart, see an extension of an organ in the heart area, where you can find also the intensive florescent brightness of the whole body. Going with it a whistle, which is getting louder. The brain-fingers start to move rhythmically, and are bending more and more backwards, then the rattling of the longest organ and the swelling of the chest....

The ALIEN’s long tongue shoots out from a crocodile-like denture."

The sublime perfection of the Alps was Giger’s subject, only in reverse. He was captivated by the contrast between the snowcapped mountains and the stuff inside, which leads men to acts of hideous, insectlike cruelty. In the acid visions of late-1960s poster art, he found an expressive form that was visceral enough to make his point: Humanity is a predatory monster. No one, not even Walter Benjamin, could ever buy a Giger drawing and have any illusion about what they were looking at.

On our way out, I notice a red-lit room that we missed in our first trip through the building. Inside is Giger’s idea of a bordello. In one canvas a red-hued woman with a grinning, rotted-out face lies under the translucent skin. Then a sudden wakeup of the ALIEN by a strange sound. How many kernels of grain are in a bushel of wheat? Such is the minute inspection of our souls by God. Reading Puritan sentences is like riding up and down in a superfast elevator, accelerating to the upper reaches and then plunging downward to granular levels of awareness with dizzying velocity.

American English even has its own unique tense, which I call the future-present, which contains the defining American idea that what is contains what will be—and that the future can therefore be traded upon. Think, for a moment of a peaceful, tree-lined suburb for which only the plans exist, and which so far, to be honest, is actually only a desolate parcel of swamp somewhere off the interstate, which is only a line on a map. Americans can talk about these places if they are features of an already existing landscape, and therefore buy and sell them, and then abandon them half built—and by the time the entire mess sinks back into the swamp, or erupts into a race riot, they have moved on somewhere else. I’m not condemning it or blaming anyone for it. It’s just how Americans are.

To be an American is to inherit the gift of living with one foot in the present and one foot in the future, while the rest of humanity has one foot in the present and one foot in the past. Then, every 20 years or so, we trash whatever tenuous equilibriums we have cobbled together and leap off again into the unknown. So it is, and forever will be, until the oleanders bloom outside my door, and California tumbles into the sea—which might be any day now.

To exist in the everlasting now of becoming is the American birthright, which means that you will inevitably be surprised by the hard inevitability of death, as everything you worked and strived so hard for collapses back into ruin. Yes, it was all so promising, back in the days before the election, or the explosion, or the riots, which were followed by war, and then by depression, then the cattle dying off, and the dissolution of the republic, and the erecting of temples to false gods at the county-wide recycling center.

But maybe, just maybe, with the help of the experts, we can cast all this doom
and gloom aside. We can put the train of progress back on its tracks, and cash in those free tickets to heaven. Surely, the long lists of our failures and defeats must contain some wormhole of redemptive possibility, which in turn will show that everything that has transpired thus has unfolded exactly according to God's plan. Because, if not—who are we, and what are we doing here?

Bear is unperturbed. In Basel, he promises, we will stay at the Trois Rois, which is the best hotel in the city, with a great bar. Theodor Herzl drank there. As a top-drawer Viennese journalist, Herzl stayed in all the best hotels.

The Trois Rois is indeed the finest hotel in Basel. The bar is equally excellent. When Bear Man orders a quart of White Russians for us to sip by the fireplace, the bartender barely bats an eye.

Staying at the Trois Rois is an illuminating experience. For example, the famous picture of Herzl standing on the hotel balcony had always led me to assume that the Zionist leader was grandly addressing his followers on the quay below. But the only thing beneath the hotel windows is the Rhine. What was he looking at?

In my reading, I have discovered something truly horrible about Basel, which I reveal to Bear as payback for his story about Paul Klee drawing Hitler. In 1349, I tell him, the entire Jewish community of Basel was burnt alive on an island in the middle of the Rhine. In fact, dozens of Jewish communities were burned alive during that year along the Rhine, including more than 2,000 Jews in Strasbourg in a single day. Did Herzl know what happened to the Jews of Basel when he chose to host the First Zionist Congress in 1897 at the Stadtca-sino, around the corner from our hotel?

The world in which the Black Death struck was poor by our standards, but it was a world filled with angels. When the plague hit, the idea of God came crashing down, leaving behind the ruins on which our world was built.

“When the plague hit, the idea of God came crashing down, leaving behind the ruins on which our world was built.”

he explains. “Because trauma can also breed strength.”

The particular Jew responsible for spreading the Black Death throughout Germany was named Rumboldus. He killed with poisoned drinks, and he poisoned wells with incantations. In Elbing, the Jew Rumboldus, who claimed to have been baptized, was responsible for the deaths of no less than 9,000 people on the 12th of April, 1349. We know of Rumboldus today because a full record of his crimes was preserved in the liber civitatis of Braunsberg. Other towns had other accounts. The Jews who aided Rumboldus confessed that the motives for their crimes included hatred of Christianity, the desire to wipe out all Christians, and the inherent lust of their race for global domination.

Despite these confessions, not every-one in Europe subscribed to notions of Jewish plague-guilt. In England, the Jews were rarely if ever blamed for the plague, because the country had expelled its entire Jewish population a century earlier. Pope Clement VI, born Pierre Roger, the fourth of the Avignon popes, addressed suffering Christendom, large parts of which had become additionally afflicted with the brain-eating conspiracy theory known as anti-Semitism, in a papal bull that proclaimed theories of Jewish plague-guilt to be obviously false. “It cannot be true that the Jews, by such a heinous crime, are the cause of feeling and seeing makes him happy. I can see that the thought of the Black Death, and the terrible fear that must for me most wonderful feature of the Bear's great brain is that imagining other places and time and alternative ways of feeling and seeing makes him happy. I can see that the thought of the Black Death, and the terrible fear that must have infected the survivors, who might catch the disease from any chance encounter with a stranger or a loved one, makes Bear want to cry.

“The Black Death upsets you,” I venture.

Bear nods. All those dead people probably smelled awful. And then there are the survivors themselves. Trauma can inflict devastating injuries, which can be passed on through families and communities for generations, Bear adds.

“That's how Jews were created,”
and progressives, of the Women's March and Black Lives Matter, Pope Clement wrote that those who blamed the Jews for the plague had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil." Members of the medical college of the Université de Paris agreed with Clement, connecting the spread of plague with the drinking of polluted water, and the Jews of Avignon and Italy who survived the plague did so under Clement's protection. In Regensburg, the town's 237 long-standing residents affixed their names to a scroll absolving local Jews of any responsibility for the deaths of their neighbors. Mostly, though, the Jews were burned alive or otherwise massacred, especially in Germany.

What is odd about most textbook accounts of anti-Jewish plague violence is that the perpetrators are portrayed as ignorant peasants, though the violence took place in large cities like Strasbourg and Mainz, where Jews actually lived. Scholars of the period know better. According to the historian Alfred Haverkamp, for example, "the initiative and decisive impulse" for anti-Jewish violence in the Rhine region came from junkers and patricians in the towns, and also sometimes from local princes. In an article titled "The Black Death and the Burning of Jews" in Past and Present, which is the best journal devoted to historical studies on the planet, the great Scottish Jewish historian Samuel Cohn concluded that "of 1,029 towns, villages and regions surveyed in the volumes of Germania Judaica for the Black Death period, citizens and peasants (but even here not the rabble) appear to have carried out Jewish persecutions against the will of ruling elites in only one case—the town of Halle. The source for that claim, however, comes from the archbishop's own records."

What the historical record plainly shows is that anti-Semitism is a tool used by elites, who are not motivated by ignorance or even necessarily by greed. If anti-Semitism functions as a conspiracy theory, and is utilized as a tool to gain power, it is experienced as a form of pleasure—an expensive one, Bear points out

“The Germans only burned Jews alive twice over a period of 700 years, and the second time it almost killed them,” Bear says. “You want to live in Germany?” I query. The perversity of the impulse fits with his character.

“Oh, my family lived in Germany for hundreds of years,” he says airily. “They were very distinguished. I could probably get citizenship there if I wanted to. But God help me if I ever set foot in that country. I’d rather have a Swiss passport.”

Race is a modern invention, a pseudoscience that reared its head in the 19th century. Nearly 2,000 years earlier, Roman legionnaires drawn from the defeated Jewish armies of Judea and Samaria are recorded as guarding the gates of Cologne. The first Jewish community of Basel, which is mentioned as early as 1225, was destroyed during the Black Death. The second Jewish community of Basel, which helped rebuild the city after the devastating earthquake of 1356, were physically expelled from the city around 1400.

While Jews survived for hundreds of years in villages surrounding Basel, they were formally excluded from the city except for the occasional physician or Hebrew printer. The ban on Jewish settlement in Basel proper lasted until Napoleon's invasion of Switzerland in 1798. The modern Jewish community of Basel was founded shortly thereafter, in 1805. When Herzl arrived in Basel, he received a warm welcome from the city's Christian elite, which believed the ingathering of the Jews to be a precondition of the Second Coming.

Herzl didn't bat an eye, because the truth is that Basel wasn't particularly bad for Jews, by local standards. The Jews of Vienna, Herzl's hometown, were burned alive en masse in 1420, and the survivors were then expelled. A second expulsion of Jews from Vienna occurred in 1670. Jewish life in Vienna was severely restricted until the 1780s, and the great influx of Jews to Vienna began only after 1848. In historical perspective, what is startling was not either Herzl's desire for a Jewish state—every nationality in Europe wanted a state—or the Holocaust, which had happened, albeit on a smaller scale, hundreds of times before, but rather the widespread Jewish faith in the promises of modernity.

Some sources claim a total of 600 Jews were burned alive in Basel. Yet according to Nadia Guth Biasini, a historian president of the Jewish Museum of Switzerland, the Jews of Basel were living in 19 buildings, none of them particularly large, in the year 1290, and had only one synagogue, suggesting a Jewish community of less than 400 people. Another historian I consulted estimates the total size of the Jewish community of Basel in 1348—49 at a maximum of 100–120 people. It is not possible to be precise about any of these numbers since the city records of Basel were mostly destroyed by a fire after the earthquake of 1356—as a Jew, I prefer to think of it as God's revenge.

According to available historical sources, the Jews of Basel were burned alive on an island in the Rhine. But when I ask the concierge of the Trois Rois about where I might find the island, he professed to have never heard such an unpleasant story, and to have no idea where such an island might be located, if indeed it existed.

Ms. Vogel, an older black-haired woman who I meet at the Jewish Museum, which operates under armed guard, has lived in Basel all her life, and has never heard of the island either. She has an idea of where it might be, though. "It would be in the south," she says, "in the place where the two rivers meet, there's a kind of half-island. Murderers and criminals were often hanged there."

To reach the island where the Jews of Basel were burned alive, she instructs us, we should take the bus down to the "Street of Refuse," near the docks, and walk from there—it should be easy to find. On the other hand, it is possible that the original island no longer exists, since the banks of the Rhine have shifted repeatedly since the 14th century. Still, it's worth a shot.

Bear Man and I take the bus, and then exit, and walk along the river, until the city starts to thin out. We cross over a stream that is wide enough to merit a footbridge. To our right is a community garden, with sheds and lean-tos marking individual plots. Hand-drawn
If America ceases being American, then Jews are no longer particularly relevant. Without the American religion, Americans are just another quarreling bunch of mutts with fleas.”

banners of the kind you see at a food co-op hang on the walls, one of which reads “Free Palestine.” On the other side of the bridge are gray apartment blocks. The children playing outside are darker-skinned than any Swiss—they appear to be mostly Turks, but some are speaking Arabic. A dog barks.

“Not bad for a ghetto,” Bear remarks.

It is dusk. In front of us is a park, which is mostly a field of grass, with a notable depression in the center. There is something odd about the place. New trees have been planted here and there, but none of them seem particularly eager to grow. I have seen similar depressions in parks, beneath freshly planted grass, with young trees, in places like Babi Yar. Maybe we should say Kaddish here. Bear stands and closes his eyes, and recites the ancient Jewish prayer for the dead.

A moment later, I look up, and I realize that the island isn’t here. It’s over there, in the place where two rivers come together. It’s an actual island, where a large power plant has been sited.

What’s most striking about the island is how empty it is. Not one park bench. Nothing. A guy is showing his girl how to fly a drone.

In the far corner of the park, where the shadows are deepest, someone has parked a caravan. Perhaps 40 yards away, three dark-skinned children are playing soccer without the benefit of a net. From the outside, the caravan looks abandoned. I sit and wait. Ten minutes later, two adults and a child emerge from behind the caravan, and head for the sidewalk.

Discreetly, Bear and I follow them. They are talking in a language that is either Romanian or Gypsy, Bear decides. Both the parents are dark, while the child is dark-skinned, with blond hair. Both the parents are dark, while the child is dark-skinned, with blond hair. They are all going together to use the public bathroom. They emerge with faces washed, and head back to the caravan.

This is the place, I tell Bear. I can feel it. Why else would you put a power plant here, and have a park without a soccer net, or even a single bench? Where else would Gypsies live, without anyone bothering them? We say Kaddish again. I remember flying into Vienna from the Balkans during the Bosnian war, and picking up a newspaper, and reading, in my now-defunct German, a short item about a family of Gypsies that had been burned alive in a trailer in a park, which probably looked more or less like this one.

On our walk back to the bus, which takes a little less than half an hour, Bear tells me his favorite Herzl story, which has been excised from most official biographies of the Zionist leader. At the age of 10, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Herzl, who was then a boy in Vienna, and spoke words that never left him: “You’re the one we’ve been waiting for.”

America, too, was a deeply religious idea masquerading as a form of secular citizenship. The American idea was big enough for everyone because, in the end, it had some idea of God at its core. Let’s call it the American God, the thing that let Americans mix freely and easily with each other. There were exceptions to that easy mixing, of course. Some, often those with lighter skin, and who spoke English, mixed more easily than those with dark skin, who were forced to ride at the back of the bus, and sometimes lynched. But even then, the particular virtue of Americans was their ability to get along with different types of people, equitably or not, and launch plans and projects. Behind that ease was a common ability to sense and communicate some kind of shared purpose that seemed compelling enough for people to have kids and start new businesses and towns. Irish, Italians, Pakistanis, Koreans, Jews, Africans, Mexicans—however fucked up their histories were, and whatever they suffered, they all believed in the dream long enough to buy houses and cars, and pay taxes that built basketball courts and swimming pools. Without the American religion to save them, Americans regressed back to Calvinist guilt and suspicion of their neighbors. Thinking that they had escaped the gravitational pull of Americanness, they got sucked into a regressive historical vortex containing the most toxic elements of their cultural gestalt.

In the new American nightmare, which we are living in now, Jews have become Europeans, and are therefore repositories for the guilt of the people who expelled and slaughtered them—if you believe in the idea of historical virtue or guilt, which I don’t. If America ceases being American, then Jews are no longer particularly relevant. Without the American religion, Americans are just another quarreling bunch of mutts with fleas. The Spirit of History will have moved on someplace else.

Bear left early the next morning for London, and I flew back to New York. But our conversation, and in fact our entire trip, stayed with me throughout the winter months in New York, during which I kept waiting for it to snow, from before New Year’s until the middle of January, when my oldest friend died of cancer in the hospital. After the surgeons rushed her into surgery for the second time, and drilled a hole in her skull to relieve the pressure on her brain, she didn’t remember the names of any of the Beatles, or who Kurt Cobain was. She couldn’t remember my name, or the other old friend at her bedside, whose first name was the same as mine. The last time I visited her, she squeezed my hand, and then held it for half an hour, before getting back to the work of dying—which is like digging your way out of a jail cell with a bent spoon, except in reverse. It took until mid-February for me to realize that the snow wasn’t coming this year.
Strange things happen to the soul in summertime. Rudolf Steiner, whose books I’ve read by the score, wrote that in summer nature passes out, goes unconscious, lies in a deep sleep. You would think that it slept in winter, which is barren, all its faculties frozen. On the contrary, winter is a season of intense consciousness or wakefulness. It’s in the prolific summer that the earth is overtaken by sleep, yielding itself in a swoon to fertility. If the soul had by sleep, yielding itself in a wakefulness. It's in the prolific -summer months.

_Saul Bellow_
“What justice means is that your parents’ store will be burned down or smashed up and you and your loved ones will be beaten to death by a mob.”

you find them everywhere. You can have England without Jews, or France without Jews, but you can’t have America without Jews, which is why the expulsion of Jews from the American mythos would be the end of America.”

Walzer looks interested by this last point. “Give me an example?” he asked.

“OK,” I answered. “I happen to be obsessed with Louis Armstrong, who was the creator of modern American jazz music, right? He was a modernist genius, like Picasso, in an idiom that he invented, and in which nearly all of the most outstanding creators were African American, but which is truly an outstanding example of American cultural hybridity, which in turn is the root source of the particular African American genius, which is in turn an American cultural product.” Walzer nods.

Emboldened, I continue. “Louis Armstrong wears a Jewish star around his neck his entire life. What did it mean? Well, as a child, at 9 years old, he was taken in by the Karnofsky family, who were junk dealers in New Orleans. Every Friday he ate Shabbat dinner with them, which is why, when you listen to Louis Armstrong play blues notes on his trumpet on the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, which are modernist masterpieces where Armstrong invents jazz, you can hear some Yiddish inflections there. I’ve heard interviews with Armstrong where he talked about that sound, which sounded like other sounds he heard in his neighborhood, and so he combined the two sounds into his own sound, which was original to him.”

“I won’t say that’s wrong” Walzer answers. “But the left political culture from which Jews are being pushed is in part a Jewish creation also, right?”

“I don’t think that’s important,” I answer. “Because what people call anti-Semitism on the left is a theological demand. We don’t mind Jewish biology, but if you insist on Jewish particularity, you pose an insuperable problem for us and so we need to rid ourselves of you, because salvation comes only from God’s grace. It cannot come from merit and deeds, which is the foundational Jewish belief. And in the most vulgar sense, here’s a people who have been oppressed as often, and worse, than anybody in Europe, culminating in the 20th century’s largest and most brutal episode of mass murder, which aimed at the extermination of an entire people, some of whom are still alive. And yet, Jews refuse to be victims. They show none of the hallmarks of having been oppressed. And so, as long as they exist in any identifiable, corporate form, they pose a problem for all theories of oppression by negating the supposed results of oppression, which is embarrassing. It shows everybody else up, and so, we’d like to get rid of you, and move you over to the oppressor category, which means abolishing history, and also America. And they’re fine with that.”

Truthfully, I’m fine with it, too. I will make my own hejira. I spent my life as a reporter, in the days when reporting was a way of life. It was a way of approaching other people, in order to better understand the intersection of your subjectivity with their subjectivity in a way that might help to illuminate that tenuously shared space that empiricists refer to as reality.

One thing I have noticed in my work, though, is that the people who yell the loudest are usually full of shit. And if the enlightened few get their way, well—there’s no telling what might happen. I’m not being hyperbolic. Anything can happen. Those are the facts. For those of you who weren’t there, it was called the 20th century, and my family lived through it, like most families on the planet—in Russia and China and Germany and Ethiopia and Iraq and Bosnia and dozens of other places on earth, or maybe most places on earth. Guatemala. El Salvador. Rwanda. Burundi. Uganda. What justice means is that your parents’ store will be burned down or smashed up and you and your loved ones will be beaten to death by a mob or lynched or burned alive with napalm or shot in the back by your friends or locked up in a psychiatric hospital or sent off to die in a labor camp.

So happy birthday, America—the golden land of steak and butter, where every man can live like a king and take the kids to the Polar Bear after dinner for soft-serve ice cream, and where people only rarely lose their jobs because of the misdeeds of their relatives.

God bless Americans, in all colors, shapes, and sizes.

God bless George Washington, who defeated the British redcoats who sought to usurp American liberties under the direction of the Mad King.

God bless Thomas Jefferson, who fathered the Bill of Rights and helped bring an end to the international slave trade. God bless Abraham Lincoln, who kept the Union together while abolishing slavery.

God bless Ulysses S. Grant, the swift and terrible sword of the Union, and William Tecumseh Sherman, his partner in crime, who burned down half the South and then annihilated the Western Indians, allowing Americans to span the Rockies with steel rails, and telegraph wires and fiber optic cables, leading to the rise of the largest-ever planetary concentration of military, technological, and economic power, which Americans have used, overall, for good.

God bless General George C. Patton, the fearsome war-fighter and vicious anti-Semite who liberated the Nazi death camps and cried at what he saw.

God bless America’s national parks system, which was the creation of none other than Teddy Roosevelt, who
defeated the Spanish slavers in Cuba and founded the Museum of Natural History in New York City, and guaranteed safe water and medicine and the right of working people to organize. If you take my advice, you’ll get in your car, or borrow someone else’s car, and drive to one of our national parks, and gaze out upon the manifold wonders of God’s creation. You won’t be disappointed, I promise. And if you’re craving some excitement afterwards, you can stop by any roadside strip club and see our nation’s beauty from another angle.

Back that ass up, America! Makes an old man wish for younger days.

My point is that history rarely moves in a straight line. It shudders and starts, and then reverses itself, before going off at weird angles to whatever came before. Which is to say that history moves dialectically, with each movement engendering an opposite if not always equal reaction. When the action and the reaction meet, they combine together in the form of the next new thing, and then the whole process begins all over again. That’s history in a nutshell—and anyone who starts talking about Original Sin is a dangerous Puritan nutcase.

As Americans, we all drink from the same water fountains. I am James Fenimore Cooper and Ralph Ellison. I am Satchmo and Willie Mays. I am Betty Boop and Donald Duck. I am Chuck Jones and Mo Ostin and Kool Moe Dee. I am Duane Allman and Absalom, Absalom! I am Stonewall Jackson and John Lewis. I am Brian Wilson and Kanye West. They all speak through me, whether I like it or not. As an American, I contain all of these geniuses, and you do too, which means we are lucky.

Wokeness, the scourge of contemporary American souls, is only a pale imitation of the existential dread contained in one of John Updike’s 1970s suburban novels, which themselves contained only the thinnest echo of the heavy existential bass lines that Jonathan Edwards was laying down.

Oh, Americans! The hour is getting late, and you have nothing to recommend you to heaven aside from the mercy of an angry God.

The gift of the virus is that it has made visible the underlying sickness of the digital age that is killing off the Americans. Wear a mask in public. Keep six feet away from other people. Open wide for a robot swab. Obey the experts. Masks don’t protect you. Everyone must wear a mask. Avoid crowds, because they spread disease. There are only two types of people, anti-racists, and racists, just as there are an infinite number of genders. If Americans were told by their new minders to strip naked and all wear ball gags and feather headdresses outdoors, half the country would be posting selfies of themselves tricked out like clubgoers at the Mineshaft while the other half would be using their burner phones to rat out their neighbors to the cops, who will be replaced next week by committees for public virtue.

I know exactly what Hans Giger’s subject would be today. The great God of the present moment and no doubt for many centuries hereafter unveiled herself at noon on a Sunday in June before 15,000 worshippers dressed confusingly from head to toe in white, the color of innocent purity and also of the most vile and systemic racist oppression that has distinguished America since her founding as a slaver nation in 1619, who gathered in front of the great proscenium arch of the Brooklyn Museum in Park Slope, to celebrate Year Zero. Bear Man wasn’t there, having fled the city for a nice patch of forest just south of the Adironacks where he practiced every morning with his Remington and baked delicious blueberry pies, but he couldn’t get over what he saw on the tiny screen in the palm of his hand. Throng of earnest Park Slope lawyers and NGO types, rightfully and self-righteously appalled by the killing of George Floyd and eager to make amends, carrying corporate bottled waters and $5 bake-shop muffins and brownies, with cute socially distanced kids in their cute little fair trade face masks, with no Zoom classes or meetings scheduled because it was Sunday, the day of rest, to witness her arrival. After the intoxicating guilt of the original hashtag had worn off, it seemed like a good idea to maybe add another letter, in order to keep the party going. With no school and no work to structure anyone’s days, the failing downward American leisure class had been deregimented, let loose on their last great holiday.

And so HerZe, as I call her, was born, under the hashtag #BTLM, symbolizing the conjunction of these objects of traditional veneration, Ze Dong and Ze Ass, joined in one body before the white-clad worshippers, because America is a white supremacist nation, while gender is a social construction, which means that race is real but there is no such thing as gender—

I can’t. It’s all just such insane rubbish that at some point you have to laugh out loud, or get high, or piss and shit all over this grotesque vision of humanity, like Hans Giger did. Not because there is anything less than human about any person, regardless of race, class, gender or sexual preference, but because the worshippers in the New Church are zombies. Their God is a projection of the stupidity and guilt complexes and psychiatric disorders of a class of people who, let’s face it, are dangerous to their own kids, and to any half-functional society. This is America, folks. Everyone should be free to dress up like a dragon, or live in Park Slope, or believe themselves to be a unicorn warrior for any cause. Except, these people are members of a cult, and this fall, they will be taking over the schools, as well as the entire country, and the alternative is a pyromaniac Rodney Dangerfield with double the meanness and none of the charm—

Someone please make it stop. It all smelled the same in Jonestown after Jim Jones and his followers drank the Flavor Aid. No more happy hour. Bear Man is gone.

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Cities of Ice
A dispatch from frozen Harbin, where Jews once flourished—and melted away

BY DARA HORN

ne of my strange and vivid memories from my first trip to Israel, when I was 9 years old, is of a brief cartoon I watched at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. The cartoon described the travels of Benjamin of Tudela, a 12th-century Spanish Jewish merchant who documented his six-year journey traversing the known world, across the Mediterranean to Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia, and reporting on India and China, and sharing crowd-ed boats and wagons in-between. The Diaspora Museum has since been revamped and rebranded as the Museum of the Jewish People, but in 1986 it was a dark and openly depressing place, its dour displays all leading to a “Scrolls of Fire” atrium describing how hapless Jews were expelled or burned alive.

But the cartoon was bright and curious. Benjamin was a ridiculous bowling-pin figure with googly eyes, bobbing across the screen and cheerfully reporting on thriving Jewish communities around the world—the Jews in France who inexplicably lived in a castle, the Jews in Babylonia who had their own googly eyed king, the Jews in Yemen who joined local Arab armies and stam-ped with them in a cloud of dust, the Jews in Syria who pacified wiggly eye-browed assassins with free silk scarves. For reasons I could not articulate at the age of 9, I was utterly enchanted.

I notice the differences between myself and the inhabitants, and the more alienated, uncomfortable, and anxious I become. Yet colorful photos of exotic places on TripAdvisor lure me every time.

So it is not surprising that I was eager to make my way to a city called Harbin in a remote province of northeastern China, south of Siberia and north of North Korea, where the temperature hovers around minus 30 Celsius for much of the year, and where every winter, over 10,000 workers construct an entire massive city out of blocks of ice. I’d seen photos and videos of the Harbin Ice Festival, which dwarfs similar displays in Canada and Japan by orders of magnitude, its enormous ice buildings laced through with LED lighting and sometimes replicating famous monu-ments at or near life size. It attracts over 2 million visitors a year, because it’s the kind of thing that needs to be seen to be believed. As I considered whether a trip to Harbin was worth it, my mindless travel-industry scrolling took me to a list of other local tourist attractions, including synagogues.

Yes, synagogues. Plural. And then I discovered something deeply strange: The city of Harbin was built by Jews.

Only later would I discover that the ice city and the Jewish city were actually the same, and that I was being actively lured to both, in ways more disturbing than I could have possibly imagined. Like a googly eyed Benjamin of Tudela, I had to go.

Jews have lived in China for more than 1,000 years, which is as long as they have lived in Poland. But Harbin is a special case. The story of the Jews of Harbin, and of Harbin itself, begins with the railroad. Before the railroad, Harbin did not exist.

Like most Chinese cities you’ve never heard of, Harbin today is larger than New York, with a population around 10 million. But as late as 1896, there was no Harbin, only a cluster of small fishing villages around a bend in a river. That year Russia received a concession from China to build part of the Trans-Siberian Railroad through Manchuria—the traditional name for the vast, frigid, and at that time, barely populated region of northeastern China. Building this route would shave two weeks off the trip from Moscow to Vladivostok, making every railroad tie worth its weight in gold. The route would also include a branch line deeper into China, requiring a large administrative center at the junction—essentially, a town. Mikhail Gruliov, a Jew who had converted to Russian Orthodoxy in order to become a general in the Russian army, selected the site that became Harbin.

With an enormous investment to protect, railroad officials quickly realized that they could not depend on local warlords or Siberian peasants to create this not-yet-existent town. They needed experienced Russian-speaking entrepreneurs. But who would ever want to move to Manchuria? That was when the railroad’s administrator, General Dmitri Khorvat, hit on a genius idea: the Jews.

Russia’s crippling anti-Semitic laws and violent pogroms were already driving hundreds of thousands of Jews to America, including my own ancestors. Khorvat argued that getting capital and talent to Manchuria was a piece of cake. Just tell the Jews that they can live free of anti-Semitic restrictions, he argued to the regime in St. Petersburg, without learning a new language or becoming bottom feeders in New York’s sweatshops. The only catch was that they’d have to move to Manchuria.

The regime reluctantly agreed. So did hundreds, and then thousands, of Russian Jews.

The first Jews arrived in 1898 and incorporated an official community in 1903, by which time this plan was working splendidly. A 1904 National Geographic article written by a U.S. consul to Manchuria reported, wide-eyed, that “one of the greatest achievements in city construction that the world has
ever witnessed is now going on in the heart of Manchuria,” and that “the capital for most of the private enterprises is furnished by Siberian Jews.” These Jewish entrepreneurs created Harbin’s first hotels, banks, pharmacies, insurance companies, department stores, publishing houses, and more; by 1909, 12 of the 40 members of Harbin’s City Council were Jewish. These initial entrepreneurs were joined by Jewish refugees fleeing the 1905 pogroms, then by even more refugees fleeing World War I and the Russian Civil War.

At its peak, Harbin’s Jewish community numbered around 20,000. The “Old” Synagogue was built in 1909, and by 1921 there was enough demand for a “New” Synagogue a few blocks away, as well as a kosher slaughterer, ritual bath, and matzo bakery, not to mention a Jewish elementary and secondary school, a hospital, a charity kitchen, a free loan association, an old-age home, multiple magazines and newspapers, performances of Jewish music and theater, and Zionist clubs that were the center of many young people’s lives. Harbin hosted major international Zionist conferences that drew Jews from all over Asia. Zionist parades were held in the streets.

You already know this story has to end badly. Like almost every place Jews have ever lived, Harbin was great for the Jews until it wasn’t—but in Harbin, the usual centuries-long rise and fall was condensed into something like 30 years. The flood of refugees from the 1917 Russian Revolution included many non-Jewish “White” (anti-Communist) Russians, whose virulent anti-Semitism was soon institutionalized in a fascist party that burned the Old Synagogue in 1931. That was also the year the Japanese occupied Manchuria, noticed rich Jews there, and decided they wanted their money. Conveniently, White Russian thugs were ready to help.

The Japanese gendarmerie embarked on a partnership with White Russian criminals, whom they used to target Jewish business owners and their families for extortion, confiscation, kidnapping, and murder. Later they manipulated the Jewish community for their purposes, sending Abraham Kaufman, a respected physician and the community’s elected leader, off to two separate audiences with the Japanese emperor, and forcing him to publish official statements from Harbin’s Jewish community announcing their love for Nazi-allied Japan. Things did not improve when the Soviets took over in 1945; the first thing they did was round up the city’s remaining Jewish leaders, including Dr. Kaufman, and send them to gulags. Dr. Kaufman endured 11 years in a gulag and then five years in exile in Kazakhstan before he was allowed to join his family in Israel. He was the luckiest; no one else survived. Then again, dying in a gulag was less dramatic than the fate of some Jews under the Japanese. While retreating from the Manchurian town of Hailar, the Japanese military beheaded its Jewish residents.

By 1949 Chinese Maoists controlled Harbin. The thousand-plus Jews still in town were gradually stripped of their businesses and livelihoods, while Israel’s government made secret contact with Harbin’s remaining Jews and began arranging for them to leave—a process that mostly involved submitting to extortion. As one Israeli official explained, “It is obvious that the Communist government is keen to clear the country of the foreign element. However … the authorities make things very difficult as long as the person who wants to leave is still in funds, and lets the person go only after making quite sure that his personal funds are exhausted.” The last Jewish family left town in 1962. After that, only one Jew remained in the city, a woman named Hannah Agre who refused to leave. Leaning into the crazy-old-lady motif, she moved into a tiny room in the Old Synagogue (by then the building, its interior subdivided, was being used as government office space) and died there in 1985, the official Last Jew of Harbin.

She wasn’t quite the last, though. Today there is one Jew in Harbin, an Israeli in his 70s named Dan Ben-Canaan. Ben-Canaan was covering the Far East for Israeli news media when he decided to go native, getting himself a job at a local university and settling permanently in Harbin in 2002. Ben-Canaan is a busy man, not only because of his university responsibilities and his work editing local English-language news programs, but because his enormous research into Harbin’s Jewish past has made him indispensable to the local government as they restore Jewish sites—the result being that he is also basically employed as the semi-official One Jew of Harbin.

Instead of traveling the world and visiting Jews, you are visiting their graves. Ilya Milstein

Ben-Canaan spends enough of his time being the One Jew of Harbin that when I interview him over Skype, he has his one-liner ready: “I’m the president of the community here, which consists of me and me alone. It’s great because I don’t have anyone to argue with.” Ben-Canaan’s interest in Harbin’s Jewish history, stemming from his days as a journalist, intensified when he learned that Harbin’s government owns the Jewish community’s official archives—and keeps them under lock and key. “I tried to get them to reopen the archives, and they refused,” he tells me. “I’ve been given two reasons for it. One is that it contains politically sensitive material, and the other is that they’re afraid of being sued for property restitution. There were some wealthy Jews here whose property was worth millions.”

The lack of access motivated Ben-Canaan to re-create the archives himself by collecting photographs, memorabilia, and testimony from over 800 former Harbin Jews and their descendants around the world. As a result, as he puts it, “I’ve become an address” for Harbin’s Jewish history. When the provincial government decided—for reasons that only gradually become clear to me—to spend $30 million to restore, renovate, or reconstruct its synagogues and other Jewish buildings, they hired him.

The One Jew of Harbin speaks with me for nearly two hours, because that’s how long it takes him to describe the Jewish sites whose refurbishment he has supervised. There is, it seems, a lot to see. Being no chump, the One Jew of Harbin spends his winters in southern China. But he sets me up with a former student of his who now works as a tour guide, to see the sights.

There is a tourist-industry concept, popular in places largely devoid of Jews,
called “Jewish Heritage Sites.” The term is a truly ingenious piece of marketing. “Jewish Heritage” is a phrase that sounds utterly benign, or to Jews, perhaps ever so slightly dutiful, suggesting a place that you surely ought to visit—after all, you came all this way, so how could you not? It is a much better name than “Property Seized from Dead or Expelled Jews.” By calling these places “Jewish Heritage Sites,” all those pesky moral concerns—about, say, why these “sites” exist to begin with—magically evaporate in a mist of goodwill. And not just goodwill, but goodwill aimed directly at you, the Jewish tourist. For you see, these non-Jewish citizens and their benevolent government have chosen to maintain this cemetery or renovate this synagogue or create this museum purely out of their profound respect for the Jews who once lived here (and who, for unstated reasons, no longer do)—and out of their sincere hope that you, the Jewish tourist, might someday arrive. But still, you cannot help but feel uncomfortable, and finally helpless, as you engage in the exact inverse of what Benjamin of Tudela once did: Instead of traveling the world and visiting Jews, you are visiting their graves.

Harbin is enjoying a heat wave when I arrive, a balmy 10 below with a wind chill of a mere minus 18. I only need to wear a pair of thermals, a shirt, a sweater, a fleece, a parka, a balaclava, a neck warmer, a hat, gloves, three pairs of socks, and three pairs of pants to go outdoors.

My first stop is the city’s Jewish cemetery, billed by tour companies as the largest Jewish cemetery in the Far East—except that it’s not a cemetery, since cemeteries contain dead bodies, and this one doesn’t have any. In 1958, Harbin’s local government was redesigning the city and decided that the Jewish cemetery, home to around 2,300 dead Jews, had to go. The city offered families the option of moving their dead relatives’ graves to the site of a large Chinese cemetery called Huangshan, an hour’s drive outside the city, for the price of about $50 per grave. Many Jewish families were long gone by then, so only about 700 graves were moved—and, as it turned out, only the gravestones made the trip, since city authorities saw no reason to move the bodies, too. The human remains from the old cemetery are now in what the Chinese call “deep burial”—that is, the space containing them has been paved over and turned into an amusement park. “It is nice for them to be there,” my tour guide—who I’ll call Derek to keep him out of trouble—says of the dead Jews under the rides. “They are always with happy people now.”

The drive to Huangshan takes about an hour through industrial wastelands and frozen fields, culminating in a grandiose toll plaza with enormous Russian-style onion domes and then several miles more of abandoned warehouses, with a few bundled people by the roadside selling stacks of fake money to burn as offerings—because Huangshan is a vast Chinese cemetery, filled with endless rows of identical shiny white tombstones on miniplots containing cremated remains. After driving past tens of thousands of dead Chinese people, we find the entrance to the cemetery’s Jewish section, pay our fee, and enter the gates.

The Jewish section is compact and stately, with gravestones elaborately carved in Hebrew and Russian, along with many modern metal plaques sponsored by former Harbin Jews whose relatives’ original stones weren’t moved. Many of the original grave markers have ceramic inserts with photographic portraits of the deceased, which would have been intriguing if every single one weren’t shattered or removed. The damage is clearly deliberate, which might explain the cemetery employee following us around. The idea that Jewish cemetery desecration is currently in vogue in Harbin is a tad depressing, but to my surprise, this snowy Jewish Heritage Site doesn’t feel at all lonely or bereft. In fact, it’s rather glam.

Inside the gate is a plaza with a massive granite Star of David sculpture, next to a two-story-high domed synagogue building festooned with more Stars of David. The synagogue’s doors are locked, but through its windows I can see that the building is a shell, with nothing inside but some scattered tools and junk. When I ask what it’s for, Derek laughs. “They built it for Olmert’s visit,” he explains. “Now it’s just used by the cemetery workers to stay warm.” Ehud Olmert, a former Israeli prime minister who served prison time for corruption, has roots in Harbin. His father was born here, and his grandparents, or at least their gravestones, are in Huangshan—markers that have now been outdone by a 12-foot-high black marble obelisk. The obelisk, crowned with yet another Jewish star, is carved with greetings written in English in Olmert’s handwriting and painted in gold: “Thank you for protecting the memory of our family, and restoring dignity into [sic] the memory of those who were part of this community and [illegible] a reminder of a great Jewish life which a long time ago was part of Harbin.” The words are a dashed-off scribble, suggesting that Olmert didn’t quite expect them to be set in stone. His grandparents’ gravestones have been replaced with black-and-gold marble ones to match the obelisk, outsourcing the plebeians with their smashed ceramic photos. Near their graves stands a trash can designed to look like a soccer ball.

Olmert’s visit to Harbin in 2004 as Israel’s deputy prime minister was a big deal, but the (fake) synagogue built in his honor at the (also fake) cemetery was

“The human remains from the old cemetery are now in what the Chinese call “deep burial”—that is, the space containing them has been paved over and turned into an amusement park.”
just one part of an enormous and expensive project on the part of the local provincial government to restore Jewish Heritage Sites. The government’s explicit goal is to attract Jewish money, in the form of both tourism and investment by foreign Jews.

In our interview, the One Jew of Harbin had only praise for these efforts, in which he is deeply involved. “The restoration cost $30 million—it’s unheard of here. Everything was of the highest quality,” Ben-Canaan told me, adding that Harbin’s Jewish Heritage Sites have the same official designation as Chinese landmarks like the Forbidden City. One of the many sources on Harbin he shares with me is a long 2007 news article from a Chinese magazine by a journalist named Su Ling, who he describes as one of China’s rare investigative reporters. The article, titled “Harbin Jews: The Truth,” traces a very particular history: not Harbin’s Jewish Heritage, but the Heilongjiang provincial government’s attempts to capitalize on that Heritage.

The story begins innocently enough, with a social-scientist-cum-real-estate-agent named Zhang Tiejian, who discovered the prior Jewish ownership of many historic homes that he was supposed to demolish for a city-planning project in 1992. Taking an interest, he studied the Jewish graves in Huangshan cemetery, translating their Russian text with the help of a computer program. His timing was auspicious: 1992 was the year China established diplomatic relations with Israel, and in 1999 China’s premier made his first official visit to Jerusalem. Also auspicious: Heilongjiang province, long reliant on declining industries like coal mining, had hit an economic slump. Zhang Tiejian seized the moment in 1999 to publish his brilliant idea, in an article for a state news agency titled “Suggestions for the Study of Harbin Jews to Quicken Heilongjiang Economic Development.”

This article made its way to the province’s higher-ups, who dispatched an official to Heilongjiang’s Academy of Social Sciences to “intensify the study of the history of Harbin Jews.” A Center for Jewish Studies was established, complete with a massive budget. “Develop[ing] the travel industry and attracting business investments,” the center’s original website announced, was “the tenet of our existence and purpose.” A boondoggle ensued, with unqualified people producing minimal research while enjoying trips abroad. In the years since, the government’s $30 million has produced more tangible results, including not only the cemetery refurbishment, but also the transformation of the New Synagogue into a Jewish museum, the reconstruction of the Old Synagogue and the Jewish secondary school, and the landmark-labeling of formerly Jewish-owned buildings in the city’s historic heart.

This attempt to “attract business investments” by researching Jewish history seems, to put it gently, statistically unsound. Among the tens of millions of tourists to China each year, 40,000 annual Israeli visitors and even fewer Jewish tourists from elsewhere amount to a rounding error. And the idea that Israeli or other Jewish-owned companies would be moved to invest in Heilongjiang Province out of nostalgia for its Jewish Heritage seems unlikely. The only way to understand this thinking is to appreciate the role Jews play in the Chinese imagination.

Most Chinese people know next to nothing about Jews or Judaism. But in a 2009 essay reviewing trends in Jewish studies in China, Li Hong Song, a professor of Jewish studies at Nanjing University, points out a common pattern in what they do know. “My students’ first association with Jews is that they are ‘rich and smart,’” he notes. Those students didn’t get that idea from nowhere. “The shelves of Chinese bookstores,” Song explains, “are lined with best-sellers on Jewish subjects.” What Jewish subjects might those be? Well, some of those bestselling titles are Unveiling the Secrets of Jewish Success in the World Economy, What’s Behind Jewish Excellence?, The Financial Empire of the Rothschilds, Talmudic Wisdom in Conducting Business, and of course, Talmud: The Greatest Jewish Bible for Making Money. Song claims that this is not anti-Semitic, but rather “some sort of Judeophilia.”

At a 2007 “International Forum on Economic Cooperation Between Harbin and the World’s Jews,” held in Harbin with dozens of invited Jewish guests who ranged from the Israeli ambassador to a group of Hungarian Jewish dentists, Harbin’s mayor welcomed participants by citing esteemed Jews such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller (neither of whom was Jewish). He then announced that “the world’s money is in the pockets of the Americans, and the Americans’ money is in the pockets of the Jews. This is the highest acclaim and praise to Jewish wisdom.”

Former Harbin Jews often remember Harbin as a kind of paradise. “They owned the town,” Irene Clurman, a daughter of former Harbin Jews, told me, describing the nostalgia that many “Harbintsy”—ex-Harbiners—expressed for their beloved city. “It was a semicolonial situation; they had Chinese servants and great schools and fur coats.” Or in the words of her grandmother Roza (later Ethel) Clurman in a 1986 interview, “Harbin was a dream.”

It’s also worth noting here that Roza Clurman’s husband—Irene Clurman’s grandfather—was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered in Harbin during the Japanese anti-Semitic reign of terror, after which his lucrative business (he introduced indoor plumbing to Manchuria) and his high-end rental building were confiscated, leaving his family with nothing. But let’s focus on the positive: After all, Roza Clurman was 5 during the 1905 Odessa pogrom, hiding in an attic for days on end while the neighborhood was ransacked and her neighbors murdered. True, her husband also wound up murdered—but “my grandmother absolutely had a nostalgia for Harbin,” Irene Clurman insists. In her interview, Roza Clurman admits that “everything changed” in Harbin, but she spends far more time describing its glory: the steaks the family ate, their household staff, the children’s private lessons.

The ascent from pogroms to private lessons was dizzyingly fast, obscuring the community’s equally precipitous decline. One Harbintsy descendant, Jean Ispa, told me how her father, an orphan, made his way to Harbin alone solely to study music, since Russian conservatories didn’t take Jewish students. “He was 16 when he made this journey,” Ispa
tells me in wonder. “He gave concerts in Harbin. I even have the programs he played.” Another Harbin exile, Alexander Galatzky, was 8 during the pogroms of the 1919-1920 Russian Civil War, when he and his mother repeatedly barricaded themselves in their apartment in Ukraine and listened to the screams of their neighbors being murdered and raped. When the ship fare his father sent from New York was stolen, their only hope was to go east to Manchuria. In reminiscences he wrote down for his family, Galatzky described boarding a cattle car to leave Ukraine: “Mother has a bundle of old clothes with her. The soldier on guard of the cattle car is trying to take it from her. She clutches at it, crying, kissing the soldier’s hand. We have no money or valuables and the old clothes can be bartered for food en route. Without them we would starve.” After a life like that, Manchuria was paradise.

Of course, one could tell the same story about Russian Jews who emigrated to New York. But in Harbin, where Russian Jews created their own Russian Jewish bubble, their sense of ownership and pride was greater—and that pride turned the story of their community’s destruction into a footnote. Of the Harbintsy descendants I interviewed, most mentioned friends or relatives who were kidnapped, tortured or murdered during the Japanese occupation. All had their family’s hard-earned assets seized by Manchuria’s various regimes. But in the next sentence they would tell me, again, how Harbin was “a golden age.” An entire organization in Israel, Igud Yotzei Sin (Association of Chinese Exiles), exists solely to connect homesick “Chinese Jews” around the world with each other through networking, social events, scholarships, and trilingual newsletters which run to hundreds of pages. Until recent years, members gathered weekly in Tel Aviv to play mahjong, drink tea, and reminisce. Teddy Kaufman, who ran the organization until his death in 2012, published a memoir titled The Jews of Harbin Live On in My Heart, extolling the Jewish paradise. His father was the community president who wound up in a gulag.

Harbin’s Jewish “golden age” lasted less than one generation. Even before the Japanese occupation, things were unpleasant enough that leaving was, for many, a foregone conclusion. Alexander Galatzky, the boy whose mother bartered old clothes to feed him on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, kept diaries as a teenager from 1925 to 1929 that his daughter Bonnie Galat recently had translated. The diaries reveal assumptions that most happy teenagers don’t live with: Everyone plans to leave, and the only question is where to go. He counts off his friends’ departures—to Palestine, to Russia, to Australia, to America—and waxes nostalgic about leaving, as he capitalizes in his diary, “FOR GOOD.”

Many came to recall the community’s destruction as if it were almost expected, like snow or rain. Alex Nahumson, who was born in Harbin and emigrated in 1950 at the age of 3 with his family, reports only “very happy memories” discussed by his parents, like most Harbintsy I spoke with. “The Chinese never did anything bad to us, just the Russians and the Japanese,” he tells me by phone in Hebrew from his home in Israel. This memory is remarkable, considering that his family’s assets were plundered by the Maoist regime. “When my parents talked about Harbin, they only talked about their dacha [country home], the theater, the opera,” he avers. The fact that his parents’ memories also overlap with the Japanese occupation is equally remarkable. When I bring up the kidnappings, he verbally shrugs. “That’s just crime,” he insists. “Crime happens everywhere.” Later in our conversation he mentions, almost casually, that his own grandfather was kidnapped and tortured by the Japanese.

It is hard to describe what, exactly, is wrong with Harbin’s New Synagogue Jewish Museum—or as it says on my ticket, the “Construction Art Museum.” One feels the overwhelming need to applaud this (mostly) Jewish museum’s mere existence, to carefully delineate its many strengths, to thank the locals for their bountiful goodwill. For it does have enormous strengths, and the goodwill is abundant. Still, from the moment I arrive at the large domed building and enter its wide-open space with an enormous Star of David decorating the floor—it only occurs to me later how ridiculous this detail is, since the floor would have been covered with seats when the synagogue was in use—I feel that creeping “Jewish Heritage” unease. But then, my actual Jewish heritage kicks in, consisting of centuries of epi-genetic instincts reminding me that I am only a guest. I smile, and snap pictures.

The Jewish history exhibition fills the second floor—the women’s gallery of the synagogue. Here, in vast arrays of photographs, smiling well-dressed people build synagogues, celebrate weddings, attend Zionist meetings, patronize a library, pose in scout uniforms, work in a hospital, rescue neighbors from a flood, and skate on the river. The displays are informative enough, even if their translated captions sometimes descend into word salad. Beneath one portrait of a man wearing a tallis and a tall clerical hat, for instance, the English caption reads: “Judean assembly of a mark in harbin choir leading singer gram benefit maxwell minister radical.” I ask Derek what the original Chinese caption means. He smiles apologetically and says, “I’m not sure.”

It’s all admirably thorough, if a little garbled. But toward the far end of the gallery, on the part of the floor that has
been constructed over the alcove where the ark for Torah scrolls once stood (the actual alcove for the ark is now a foyer leading to a restroom), I enter a set of little rooms whose content puzzles me. The first room is dominated by a large wooden desk, with a life-size white plaster sculpture of a bald and bearded Western man seated before an ancient typewriter. The brass plaque in front of him reads, “Real workplace of Jewish industrialist in Harbin.” Confused by the word “real,” I ask Derek if this is supposed to be a specific person. He glances at the plaque and explains, “It is showing a Jew in Harbin. He is doing business.”

In subsequent rooms, more tableaux of frozen Jews unfold. There are life-size plaster Jews frozen at a grand piano, a life-size plaster Jew frozen in a chair with knitting needles, and two child-size plaster Jews frozen on a bed, playing eternally with plaster blocks. This, the brass plaque informs me, is “The display of the Jews’ family in Harbin.” The plaque continues: “At the first half of the 20th century, not only was the display of the Jews’ family simple, but also practical and the children lived a colorful life there.” The children’s blocks, like the children, are devoid of color. Later I discover the unnamed inspiration for this display: Harbin’s annual Snow Sculpture Park, full of figures carved from blocks of manufactured snow.

After the rooms full of frozen Jews, the parade of mostly dead Jews resumes, dominated by photographs of “real Jewish industrialists” who “brought about numerous economic miracles” in Harbin, including the founders of Harbin’s first sugar refinery, first soybean export business, first candy factory, and China’s first brewery. The wall text explains how Harbin “offered the Jews an opportunity for creating new enterprises and providing a solid foundation for their later economic activities in Europe and America.” This is true, I suppose, if one thinks of Harbin as a kind of business-school exercise, rather than a place where actual Jews created actual capital that was subsequently seized, transforming them overnight into penniless refugees, if they were lucky.

One enterprise prominently featured in the museum, for instance, is the Skidelsky Coal Mine Corporation. The Skidelskys were among the “Siberian Jews” who provided the initial capital for Harbin—although “initial capital” is an understatement. In an account of his family’s holdings in Prospect magazine, Robert Skidelsky, a member of the British House of Lords and a Harbin native, described how his great-grandfather Leon Skidelsky held the contract in 1895—prior to Harbin’s founding—to build the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Manchuria to Vladivostok. The Skidelskys were one of only 10 Jewish families allowed to live in Vladivostok, since the railroad desperately needed them. They owned 3,000 square kilometers of timber in Siberia and Manchuria, and enough mining property to make them one of the region’s largest employers. They continued supplying the railroad as it changed hands from the Russians to the Chinese to the Japanese. In 1924, Leon’s son Solomon even charmed a local warlord into selling him a 30-year lease on a mine, by repeatedly and deliberately losing him in poker.

In 1945, Solomon Skidelsky was still nine years shy of running out the lease when the Soviets sent him and his brother to die in a gulag, and Communists—first Soviet and then Chinese—seized the mines. Decades later, Lord Skidelsky filed his claim. “In 1984,” Lord Skidelsky recounts, “I received a cheque for 24,000 English pounds in full settlement of a claim for compensation that amounted to 11 million pounds.” When he visited Harbin in 2005, local TV crews trailed him and presented him with flowers, which were worth somewhat less than 11 million pounds.

When I express my sense that this museum is only telling part of a story, Derek raises an issue that Ben-Canaan brought up with me repeatedly, that this museum focuses exclusively on wealthy people—thus underscoring the idea that Jews are rich. “Obviously there were poor Jews here too,” Derek points out. “The building across the street was the Jewish Free Kitchen.”

It is only as I am leaving, through the enormous mezuzah-less door, that I look back at what was once the sanctuary and understand what, exactly, is wrong with this museum. Above the first-floor paintings of Russian churches, the museum is dominated by an enormous blow-up photograph of a 1930s farewell banquet, its rows of Harbin Jews in their tuxedos gathered to say goodbye to yet another Jewish family fleeing, as Alexander Galatzky put it, “FOR GOOD.” Suddenly the Jewish Heritage miasma melts away, and I realize the blindingly obvious: Nothing in this museum explains why this glorious community no longer exists.

Harbin is a rather hideous city, its Soviet-style apartment blocks stretching as far as the eye can see. But the city’s historic heart has been restored so thoroughly that if not for the Chinese crowds and street signs, one could imagine being in Europe. The historic tree-lined Central Avenue has been transformed into a pedestrian mall that doubles as an outdoor architectural museum, where each original building—80 percent of which were once Jewish-owned—is labeled with a plaque describing its past. The restoration also included installing loudspeakers that constantly blast high-volume Western music that someone decided was atmospheric. When I arrive, they’re playing “Edelweiss”: Bless my homeland forever. The music makes it hard to think.

Derek points out the various restored buildings on Central Avenue and elsewhere in the neighborhood: the Jewish-owned pharmacy, the Jewish Free Kitchen, the Jewish People’s Bank, and many private homes, all now occupied by other enterprises. The “Heritage Architecture” plaques affixed to each historic building couldn’t be more direct: “This mansion,” a typical one reads, “was built by a Jew.”

The most impressive Central Avenue building “built by a Jew” is the Modern Hotel, a building whose story captures the Harbin Jewish community’s roller-coaster of triumph and horror. The Modern Hotel was built by the Jewish entrepreneur Joseph Kaspe, and from the moment it opened, in 1906, it was the height of Manchurian chic. The Modern wasn’t merely a high-class establishment frequented by celebrities
and diplomats. Its premises also included China’s first movie theater. Kaspe also created other Modern-labeled luxury products like jewelry and high-end food. In other words, the Modern was a brand.

When the Japanese occupied Harbin, they immediately set their sights on the Modern. But Joseph Kaspe was one step ahead of them. His wife and two sons had moved to Paris, where they had acquired French citizenship—so Kaspe put the Modern in his son’s name and raised the French flag over the hotel. He assumed the Japanese wouldn’t risk an international incident just to steal his business. He was wrong.

In 1932, Kaspe invited his older son, Semion, a celebrated pianist, back to Manchuria for a concert tour. On the last night of his tour, Semion was kidnapped. Instead of paying the bankruptcy-inducing ransom, Joseph Kaspe went to the French Consulate. It didn’t help; the kidnappers uppied the ante, mailing Kaspe his son’s ear. After three months, Semion’s body was found outside the city. When Kaspe saw his son’s maimed and gangrenous corpse, he went insane. Friends shipped him off to Paris, where he died in 1938. His wife was deported and died at Auschwitz three years later. His younger son escaped to Mexico, where he died in 1996, refusing to ever discuss Harbin.

The Modern Hotel is still in operation today, though at a few stars lower than the Holiday Inn where I’m staying down the street. The large pink stone building with its glamorous arched windows and turrets still dominates Central Avenue, its girth expanding for an entire city block. Cyrillic letters spelling out “MODERN” running down one corner of its facade. Outside, a long line of people winds its way down the street toward one end of the hotel, the hordes queuing in minus-10 degrees. The line, Derek explains, is for the Modern’s famous ice cream. “In Harbin, we love eating cold foods at cold temperatures,” he grins. It’s true; the streets of Harbin are lined with snack stands selling skewers of frozen fruit. The Kaspes figured this out and created China’s first commercially produced ice cream. Passing up the frozen treats, I go inside.

The Modern Hotel’s lobby today is shabby and nondescript, except for an exhibit celebrating the hotel’s illustrious history. It begins with a bronze bust of Joseph Kaspe, with wall text in Chinese and English describing the accomplishments of the Modern Corporation and its founder, “The Jew of Russian Nationality Mr. Alexander Petrovich Kaspe.” (The “Alexander” is inexplicable; Joseph Kaspe’s actual first name appears in Russian on the bust.) As the wall text explains, this impressive Jew founded this “flagship business in Harbin integrated with hotel, cinema, jewelry store, etc.” “In recent years,” the text continues, “the cultural brand of Modern is continuously consolidated and developed.” It then lists the numerous businesses now held by this storied company—including the Harbin Ice Festival, which belonged to the Modern Corporation until the provincial government took it over a few years ago. “Currently,” the wall text gloats, “Modern Group ... is riding on momentum, and is shaping a brand-new international culture industry innovation platform.” Mr. Kaspe’s descendants would no doubt be proud of this Heritage, if any of them had inherited it.

But let’s put the mean-spirited cynicism aside. After all, the Modern Hotel clearly honors its Jewish Heritage! Here on its walls are enlarged photos of Joseph Kaspe’s family, including his murdered son, sexy in his white tie and tails, frozen over his piano. Here, under glass, are Real Historic Items from the Kaspe family, including silver candlesticks, an old-timey telephone, and a samovar! And here, in one particularly dusty glass case near the floor, are the Kaspe collection of household utensils of Judaism sacrificial offerings, including an actual Seder plate!

I squat down for a closer look at this display, and see that there are two plates inside it. The Seder plate has a bronzey Judaica motif suspiciously familiar from my own American Jewish childhood. I squelch my skepticism until I see that it is carved all around with English words. The second plate, a ceramic one, sports an Aztec-ish design, with the word “Mexico” painted across the bottom—a 1980s airport souvenir. At that moment was lovely: clear and sensual. Buried in the early morning cool was the growing heat that would spread itself hour by hour across the sunny summer day. I felt pierced to the heart. There were other ways to spend this day! Other lives to live, other people to be. I did then what was never done: I began to daydream. I saw myself standing in the same morning light somewhere else, under a great shade tree of a kind we didn’t have in the mountains. Beside me, on the grass, sat a group of strangers, graceful, beautiful, intelligent, animated by clever talk and sophisticated laughter. They invited me to join them, even made a place for me on the grass. I longed to sit down. I felt that I knew these people, that I belonged among them. Suddenly and without warning, a space seemed to open between me and the image in my mind. The space lengthened into a road. It was clear that I would have to walk the road, step by step, to get to my people. The movie in my mind stopped running. I could not see myself on the road. I could not imagine the steps, taken one by one, that were necessary to close the gap between me and the people I was daydreaming. Inside, I began to congeal. Then all inner movement ceased. I stood on the lawn and stared at my own dumb longing.

—Vivian Gornick

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**Beach Reads**

*From Approaching Eye Level*

One morning at seven o’clock, as I was walking from the barracks to the kitchen door, I stopped to smell the air on the great hotel lawn. The moment was lovely: clear and sensual. Buried in the early morning cool was the growing heat that would spread itself hour by hour across the sunny summer day. I felt pierced to the heart. There were other ways to spend this day! Other lives to live, other people to be. I did then what was never done: I began to daydream. I saw myself standing in the same morning light somewhere else, under a great shade tree of a kind we didn’t have in the mountains. Beside me, on the grass, sat a group of strangers, graceful, beautiful, intelligent, animated by clever talk and sophisticated laughter. They invited me to join them, even made a place for me on the grass. I longed to sit down. I felt that I knew these people, that I belonged among them. Suddenly and without warning, a space seemed to open between me and the image in my mind. The space lengthened into a road. It was clear that I would have to walk the road, step by step, to get to my people. The movie in my mind stopped running. I could not see myself on the road. I could not imagine the steps, taken one by one, that were necessary to close the gap between me and the people I was daydreaming. Inside, I began to congeal. Then all inner movement ceased. I stood on the lawn and stared at my own dumb longing.

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“A Chinese string quartet walks up to the bimah in front of the ark, and instead of bowing before the ark, they bow before me.”

Slot in the seat in front of me, reaching for a prayer book that isn’t there. I almost can’t stop myself from reciting all the words I’ve recited in rooms like this, the words I’ve repeated my entire life, the same words recited by all the people who have gathered in rooms like this over the past 20 centuries, in Yavneh and Pumbedita and Aleppo and Rome and Marrakesh and New York and Harbin, facing Jerusalem. I am awed, googly eyed. In that moment I suddenly know, in a vast sense that expands far beyond space and time, before whom I stand.

Then a Chinese string quartet walks up to the bimah in front of the ark, and instead of bowing before the ark, they bow before me. The lights drop, and they play, spectacularly well, Brahms’ “Hungarian Dance No. 5,” and Tchaikovsky’s “Romeo and Juliet,” and inexplicably, “Cotton-Eyed Joe.”

And suddenly I am very, very tired.

Somewhere in between the synagogues, the Belle Époque-style bookstore named for Nikolai Gogol, the pool carved out of the frozen river with people swimming in minus-30-degree water, and the hundreds of dead Jews, I find myself in a “Siberian Tiger Park,” where 700 of the world’s remaining tigers loll behind high chain link fences or pace in isolation cells, in what resembles a tiger re-education camp. Here, after riding the requisite bus painted with tiger stripes through bare icy yards full of catatonic-looking tigers, I am encouraged to buy slabs of raw meat—since, as Derek explains, the facility only provides the animals with meager rations, with the assumption that tourists will make up the difference. This potent combination of novelty and guilt, which feels strikingly similar to the uncomfortable emotions I experienced at Harbin’s various Jewish Heritage Sites, brings me to a woman selling buckets of raw pork slabs, which visitors feed to the tigers with tongs through the chain-link fencing. The woman selling the slabs also offers a crate of live chickens which I could alternatively purchase as tiger food; this would involve buying a live chicken and thrusting it into the tiger enclosure via a dedicated chicken chute. For the first time in my life, I buy pork.

As I struggle to pick up slippery pieces of meat with the tongs, I remember a moment in the Talmud (The Greatest Jewish Bible for Making Money) when the rabbis claim that the last thing created during the week of creation was the world’s first pair of tongs, since tongs can only be forged with other tongs—a story whose haunting image of human limits transcends its lack of logic. When I succeed in wielding the meat, the otherwise catatonic tigers pounce against the fence at me in a cartoon-like fury, rattling the Soviet-style barriers to an unnerving degree as they battle each other for the scraps of flesh. Watching these almost mythic captives feels oddly similar to my other visits on this trip, throwing guilt-induced scraps at something beautiful trapped under glass. Much later, I come across a National Geographic article claiming that this “park” is in fact a tiger farm, where these endangered animals—only seven of which still exist in the northeastern Chinese wild, outnumbering Jews in the region by 700 percent—are bred and slaughtered for trophies and traditional medicines. It all feels like an elaborate con. Or if not quite a con, a display.

The Harbin Ice Festival is the greatest display of all, surpassing my most fevered expectations. It is much, much
larger and more elaborate than I imagined from the photos and videos that lured me to Harbin. I’d been amply warned by online strangers about how difficult the festival is to endure, since it requires long periods outside, at night, in punishing temperatures. But once I’m here, I’m shocked by how easy it is. All I needed were long underwear, three sweaters, one fleece, one parka, a scarf, a hat, a balaclava, two pairs of gloves, three pairs of pants, one pair of ski pants, three pairs of wool socks, hand warmers stuffed into my gloves and boots, and ice cleats, and I’m good to go. I had been told that I wouldn’t be able to bear the cold for more than 40 minutes. I stay for three hours, in the company of my approximately 10,000 closest friends who are also visiting that evening, a number that in the vastness of the festival scarcely even creates a crowd.

Among the ice castles and ice fortresses clustered around a snow Buddha the size of a high school, I recognize shimmering tacky neon versions of places I’ve visited in real life, cataloging them in my brain like Benjamin of Tudela: the Wild Goose Pagoda of Xian, the Summer Palace outside Beijing, the gate to the Forbidden City, Chartres Cathedral, the Campanile tower near Venice’s original Jewish ghetto, the Colosseum built by Jewish slaves brought from Jerusalem to Rome. I wander around and through these flashing structures, their colors changing every few seconds as the LED wiring blinks within each ice block, passing over bridges and through moon gates and up staircases and down slides that wind their way through castles of ice. China is a place full of enormous, gaudy, extravagantly impersonal monuments made possible through cheap labor, from a 2,000-year-old tomb filled with 10,000 terra cotta warriors in Xian, to the medieval Great Wall outside Beijing, to the 1994 Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai. The Harbin Ice Festival is the gargantuan fluorescent opposite of intimate or subtle. It is mind-blowing, and mindless. It is the most astounding man-made thing I have ever seen.

What is most shocking about the Ice Festival is the bizarre fact that all of it is temporary. In another month, this vast city will begin to melt. But unlike what I ignorantly assumed, the ice city does not simply vanish on its own. Instead, when the melting begins, 10,000 workers return to hack apart the millions of ice blocks, remove their electrical wiring, and then haul them out and dump them in the river. Like all cities, there is nothing natural about its creation, and also nothing natural about its destruction.

Nothing simply disappears. As I leave Harbin, I think of Hannah Agre, the last Jew of Harbin—the crazy old lady who refused to leave the city after every other Jew had gone, dying alone in 1985 in an office space that she had rejiggered into an apartment on the second floor of the Old Synagogue, 23 years after the last Jewish family left. It occurs to me, as I pass through the industrial wastelands and endless high-rises on my way to the airport, that maybe she wasn’t so crazy. Maybe she didn’t like being told to leave. Maybe she was physically enacting what all the other Harbintsy spent the rest of their lives trying to do, as they gathered in San Francisco and Tel Aviv to play mahjong and share photos of their samovars and fur coats. Maybe she wanted to keep the castle her family had built, preserved in ice.

By the time I reach the airport, the Harbin Holiday Inn’s breakfast buffet of dragon fruit and lychee nuts is a distant memory, and I’m hungry. Fortunately, right next to my gate there is a hip-looking eatery, the kind of place with historic black-and-white photos framed on trendy brick walls. Its sign reads: “Modern 1906.”

I almost can’t believe it, but yes, here it is once more: Joseph Kaspe’s business. As if responding to my private disbelief, a giant flat screen on a brick wall flashes a photo of Kaspe’s family, then one of Kaspe’s face. I stare at the photos before they blink away, looking at this murdered family and then at Kaspe, the man who built a city only to lose his son, his property, and his mind. I suddenly feel shaken by the “success” of this business that has apparently endured through magic since 1906, by the sheer chutzpah of this open bragging about a corporate “Heritage,” by the enduring quality of stolen goods. It’s 20 below outside, but I buy an ice cream in a flavor labeled “Original.” The sweet frozen cream melts in my mouth, gone before I even put away my Chinese change.

I’m in the last row of the Air China plane leaving Harbin, and the only Westerner on board. There’s an intense smell of barbecued pork as someone in the row in front of me celebrates the Year of the Pig. I think of Alexander Galatzky leaving Harbin “FOR GOOD,” boarding the train to Shanghai and then the boat to Ceylon and on through the Suez Canal, nine years after he first traversed the world as a child on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, with his mother and her bag of old clothes. A cheerful animated panda on the screen in front of me explains the many safety features of this aircraft, including what to do if we should require, as the awkward English translation puts it, “Emergency Ditching.” I think of the Clurmans, the Kaspes, the Nahumsons moving between the raindrops, ditching as needed, ditching as expected. I watch the animation and remember Benjamin of Tudela, the chipper cartoon of the perilous journey around the world, where every Jewish community is documented and counted and marveled at, full of cheery animated people who never feel the need to ditch, where cities never melt away.

Within two minutes of takeoff, Harbin is no longer visible. Outside my window, I see only snow-dusted farmland and the gleam of sunlight on the frozen river. The land is vast and empty. The enormous city is gone.

This article was originally published on April 19, 2019.
The Afterlife

Alexander ‘Sasha’ Pechersky led a successful prisoner revolt at the Sobibor death camp. His story of extraordinary courage was also the story of millions of Soviet Jews who lived and died in a country that refused to acknowledge their fate.

BY DAVID BEZMOZGIS

In November of 2018, at the National Arts Club in New York City, I attended a screening for the film Sobibor, which was described in the program as “First Russian Oscar Contender About Holocaust” (sic). The screening was part of a promotional campaign to secure a nomination in the best foreign film category, and was presented by the film’s producers, along with the Alexander Pechersky Foundation and the Russian American Foundation. Annexed to the auditorium where the screening was to happen was a small exhibition about Alexander “Sasha” Pechersky and the uprising he led at the Sobibor concentration camp, which was the subject of the film.

Konstantin Khabensky, the film’s star and director, had come to the screening from Russia. A panel of historians and experts was convened. The audience consisted of members of the local Jewish community and the Jewish press, not a few of them Russian-speaking. A group of elderly Russian Jewish war veterans, some in uniform, all decorated with their medals, were seated near the front of the room. Among them was a woman who wore a yellow star button on her blouse to identify her as a Holocaust survivor.

In opening remarks, a scholar of Soviet Holocaust cinema commended the producers for making a Russian film about the Holocaust, a suppressed subject for most of the Soviet period. In fact, any acknowledgment of the unique nature of the tragedy experienced by Soviet Jews in painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, history, public monuments and other forms of remembrance was practically forbidden. In a nation that suffered so profoundly, with as many as 27 million citizens perishing during the war, the official position was that it was wrong to divide the victims. At sites of mass killings, if there was any commemoration at all, it memorialized “peaceful Soviet citizens” who had died at the hands of “the German occupiers.” Sobibor might therefore be regarded as the Russian equivalent to Schindler’s List.

Films are subjective things and it’s not my intention to engage in criticism of a film released two years ago. Also, the quality of the film is of negligible importance to the larger story of Alexander Pechersky’s life and legacy. But there were many people in the auditorium who were moved to tears by the film, gasped at acts of brutality or laughed at an incident of comeuppance against the Nazis, just like they were watching a regular movie. Unless they’d read the literature about Sobibor and Pechersky, none could have detected the places where the film departed from historical fact, though a partial list would include: Leon Feldhendler (spelled “Fehlender” in recently-discovered archival documents), one of the leaders of the camp underground, wasn’t killed during the revolt; Pechersky didn’t carry the corpse of a young woman named Luka out of the camp in his arms; a Nazi named Frenzel wasn’t shot by Pechersky; there was no crematorium smokestack in Sobibor; and Shlomo Szamajzner, a young Polish prisoner, didn’t, as the end titles assert, hunt down and kill Gustav Wagner, perhaps the camp’s most notorious brutal SS officer, and 17 other Nazis in Brazil.

At the conclusion of the film, one audience member did inquire about historical accuracy, in response to which the gathered historians offered a general defense of the artist’s right to bend documentary truth for the sake of the emotional one. The Holocaust survivor, a small but pugnacious woman in the Russian Jewish mold, rose to praise the film, which she had now watched for the second time, though it caused her pain in every cell in her body. “Never again!” she proclaimed. One of the veterans took the floor and affirmed that the film showed what had happened in his generation and hoped it would serve as a lesson for the future. He proceeded to make some observations about Arab aggression and, after meeting with a mixed response, resumed his seat.

Nobody in the audience subjected the film to the kind of scrutiny it met in the more exacting corners of the Russian Internet. A widely circulated op-ed written by a commentator on Garry Kasparov’s website accused the filmmakers, and by extension the Russian state, of evading the truth about Sobibor and the heroes it pretended to celebrate: Where was the reference to the Soviet citizens who filled the ranks of the camp guards? What of the local population’s complicity with the Nazis? How about the Soviet Union’s merciless attitude toward its own POWs? And might they have spared a word about the tribulations Pechersky experienced after the war on account of both his captivity and his ethnicity?

While it can be easily argued that most of these points fall outside the parameters of the story of Sobibor and the revolt, it could also be argued that if the end titles could include false information about Nazi-hunting in Brazil, they could have included correct information about how Pechersky’s life unfolded after October 1943. But to understand why the film took the form it did, it is necessary to ask a different question, which is why, after so many years of disregard, the story of Pechersky and Sobibor received the financial and political support of the Russian state at all. Russia, like any country, has no shortage of neglected and forgotten heroes. So why Pechersky and why now?

The answer to this question boils...
down to an ecosystem of Pechersky revivalists—intellectuals and historians—mostly but not exclusively Russian, who have been working over the past decade to nudge Pechersky and Sobibor back into contemporary consciousness. The Russians in particular have delved into newly accessible Soviet archives and debunked myths that have long adhered to Pechersky. Unsurprisingly, all these people don’t share exactly the same view of Pechersky, and there is among them some amount of professional rivalry.

The commonly agreed upon facts of Pechersky’s life include the following: On Oct. 14, 1943, Alexander “Sasha” Pechersky, a Jewish Red Army soldier, led a revolt at the Sobibor death camp, which was located, like all other Nazi German death camps, in Poland. During that revolt, prisoners armed mainly with axes and knives killed 12 SS officers and several guards before overcoming barbed wire fencing and crossing a minefield to reach the surrounding woods. Of some 600 prisoners in Sobibor at the time, approximately half took the opportunity to escape. Fifty-seven survived to the end of the war. Their leader, Pechersky, was one of them.

Practically from the time of the revolt until his death in 1990, Alexander Pechersky devoted himself to trying to inform the world about Sobibor. But for reasons both calculated and circumstantial, the existence of the camp and the facts of the uprising remained largely unknown. Today, there remains considerable disagreement about the facts of Pechersky’s life in part because he was disinclined to write or speak about aspects of his biography not connected to Sobibor, in part due to gaps in the archival record, and in part due to people’s tendency to interpret the existing facts subjectively, in line with their own inclinations and beliefs. In other words, Pechersky has come to mean different things to different people. Was he fundamentally a Soviet, a Russian, a Jewish or a universal hero?

To even approach the question demands that one possess an understanding of what Sobibor was and how it came to be, as well as an adequate grasp of the peculiar and erratic social and political conditions in the Soviet Union during Pechersky’s lifetime, before, during, and after the Second World War, especially as they related to Jews.

Pechersky represents, as well as anyone, the complications and contradictions of the Soviet Jewish character, which remains little understood by people in the West. Of course, ignorance about the predicament of Soviet Jews isn’t as distressing as ignorance about the Holocaust—although the two are related. Recent polls and studies suggest that people, particularly the young, don’t know nearly as much as one would hope. In Moscow, I was told about an apparently well-known example of this: Some girls in provincial Russia, when asked by a television program if they knew what the Holocaust was, confused it with the name of a wallpaper glue.

Before I was 6, growing up in what was then the Soviet Union, I knew that in the forest behind our apartment complex in Riga, where we went cross-country skiing in winter, Germans had shot Jews. I knew what fate awaited my Latvian grandfather and my Lithuanian grandmother had they not left their shtetls before the Germans arrived, and what almost certainly would have become of my father, not quite 6 years old in the summer of 1941, had his family not boarded one of the last trains out of Daugavpils for Russia. For Soviet Jews of my generation, though born decades after the fact, it doesn’t require a big mental leap to imagine how one might have never existed.

Nevertheless, I knew almost nothing about Sobibor. I didn’t know, for instance, that along with Treblinka and Belzec, it had been created as part of Operation Reinhard—named for Reinhard Heydrich, one of the main proponents and architects of the Holocaust. According to Yitzhak Arad—whose book, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps, provides the most thorough account of this facet of the Holocaust—these camps were intended for the annihilation of the Jews of the General Government, the eastern part of occupied Poland that the Nazis didn’t annex to Germany. Home to an estimated 2,284,000 Jews, the General Government included the districts of Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Lvov, and Radom. The decision to implement the plan was taken at the notorious Wannsee Conference in late January of 1942, and it was meant to be fulfilled by the end of that year.

Even more than Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Operation Reinhard death camps were the apotheosis of the Holocaust. Unlike Auschwitz, which provided slave labor to various German industries, the sole purpose of the Operation Reinhard camps was the rapid murder and plunder of Jewish men, women, and children. (Gypsies were also targeted for extermination, and it is believed that some several thousand were murdered there.) Within hours of arrival at these camps, the people would be dead and anything of value they had with them—including the women’s hair—would have been sorted for shipment to the Reich. A large gasoline engine piped carbon monoxide into as many as six or eight gas chambers, each with a capacity of 50-80 people. The dead were removed by the Sonderkommando, a squad of enslaved Jewish men, who searched the corpses for hidden valuables before depositing them into pits and, later, onto large grills made from railway tracks for cremation.

The death camps were designed not only for maximum efficiency, but also to spare the rank and file SS the distress associated with the mass shootings they had been conducting in the Soviet Union after the German army invaded. Ultimately, not just Polish Jews but Jews from all over Europe were murdered in the Operation Reinhard camps, most significantly from Holland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, France, and the Soviet Union. Himmler issued no written orders about the camps at all. In remarks to high-ranking SS and police officers in 1943, he characterized the “annihilation of the Jewish people” as “an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory.”

Of the three Operation Reinhard camps, Sobibor was the most remote and the least known. This remained true after the war, as there were so few survivors. In the preface to his memoir, From the Ashes of Sobibor, Thomas “Toivi” Blatt, who’d been a young teenager in Sobibor, recalled giving an early draft of his manuscript to a “well-known
“To celebrate Ella’s birth, her father bought a good German piano, which he played frequently and well.”

three-room apartment she shared with her husband before his death in 2000. Her mind and her memory are clear but she suffers from moderate Parkinson’s and an undiagnosed condition in her legs, which has made walking difficult such that she rarely leaves her apartment. I met her on a Saturday afternoon in mid-December 2018, in the company of her daughter, Natalia Ladichenko, and Natalia’s husband, Mikhail. In the customary Russian fashion, she had taken great pains to host me and was willing to speak candidly to a stranger about her life and the life of her family.

A narrow corridor lined with bookshelves led from the entryway into a dining room with a large table in the center, a cupboard along one wall and framed photographs on the facing wall. One of the photographs was a black-and-white portrait of Ella when she was not quite 40, looking like a period cinema star. She had been a strikingly beautiful woman and, in spite of her ailments, retained the carriage and dignity of her beauty. For our meeting, she had done her hair and makeup and worn a nice skirt and blouse. Around her neck was a gold necklace with an Orthodox cross and in various places around the apartment were Russian Orthodox icons—as well as a few items of Judaica. Since her father’s passing she had become the only living person who could speak with any authority about the years of her childhood and her parents’ life in the time leading up to the war.

Her parents wed in 1933 and likely met when her father was performing some administrative function during his military service and her mother, Lyudmila, was perhaps working as a secretary in the military commissariat in Rostov. Her mother came from a Cossack family and had grown up in Tsimly, a Cossack settlement on the banks of the Don River halfway between Rostov and Stalingrad. In keeping with Cossack tradition, she had been married off young, at the age of 15, and gave birth to a daughter, Zoya. The marriage didn’t last and Zoya remained in Tsimly to be raised mostly by her maternal grandparents.

What brought Ella’s parents together was a mutual love of music. Lyudmila played the piano and accompanied herself on guitar. She had an exceptional singing voice, and sang not in the classic Cossack style but in the popular style of the day, the ballads and Gypsy romances performed by the likes of Klaudia Shulzenko and Izabella Yurieva, two of the most renowned female Soviet singers of the era. In surviving photographs from that period, her parents are a striking couple. Her mother was considered a notable beauty in Rostov and her father had the dark good looks of a Rudo- doph Valentino.

When Ella was born, the family lived in a two-room 21-square-meter communal apartment in a large new housing complex. To celebrate Ella’s birth, her father bought a good German piano, which he played frequently and well. Many evenings after work, her parents went to the theater, leaving Ella with a nanny. Their apartment also served as a kind of salon where her parents’ circle of artist friends would convene: Someone would sing, someone would recite verse. Her Uncle Kotya was part of this community, and the two brothers, who were extremely close, pursued these artistic interests together, played chess, and even wed on the same day. Kotya’s wife was named Nadja, also Russian, not Jewish.

For the brothers, the decision to
marry outside the faith was insignificant if not laudable. They were products of the first Soviet generation, schooled in its universalism, freed from the yoke of nationality and religion. From their wives’ families, they met with no resistance. But their parents and sisters disapproved—including Zina, who was no older than 12 at the time. To appease them, the brides agreed to accept the Jewish faith, including, apparently, immersion in the mikvah.

By 1933, Rostov’s Great Choral Synagogue had been nationalized and by 1935 converted into a hospital for skin and venereal diseases, but the Soldiers’ Synagogue, built by Jewish cantonists in 1872 hadn’t yet met with the totalizing judgment of the yeveshkesitia, the local Jewish Section of the Communist Party. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the Rostov yeveshkesitia (staffed primarily by Soviet Jews) waged a campaign against Jewish clerics—most famously Yosef-Yitzchak Schnerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe—and also against Zionist organizations, leading to the exile or imprisonment of their members. Some of the Zionists were Pechersky’s peers, 14 or 15 years old at the time of their convictions.

According to E.V. Movshovich’s History of the Jews on the Don, on the eve of WWII there remained only one active synagogue in Rostov-on-Don, the Tradesmen’s Synagogue. The Jewish population, which accounted for about 5% of the city’s total of 510,000, as much as doubled to some 50,000 with the arrival of refugees from parts of the western Soviet Union, making Rostov the third-largest Jewish population center in the Russian republic after only Moscow and Leningrad.

At this time, Pechersky held the title of deputy director in the maintenance and supply department (hozaitstvo) at the Institute of Finance and Economics, though his actual duties consisted of overseeing the institute’s amateur music and theater programs. He was popular with the students, who would come to visit the apartment. Sometimes they toured their shows.

In April of 1941, Pechersky and his wife sent their daughter to Tsimlya to stay with her grandparents and half-sister, Zoya. They intended to join her that summer for their vacation. However, Pechersky was called up to the Red Army on June 22, the very first day of the German assault on the Soviet Union, and so never made the trip. As it happened, his wife didn’t either.

Sometime in the first weeks after his mobilization, Pechersky received a letter from home with a snapshot of Ella with Zoya and some friends in Tsimlya. He kept that photo with him, hiding it inside his tunic, throughout the entirety of the war.

By September, as the Wehrmacht steamrolled across Soviet territory virtually unimpeded, Pechersky was a quartermaster attached first to battalion headquarters and later the headquarters of the 596th Artillery Regiment of the 19th Army. They were part of the Soviet forces defending the approach to Moscow and, in October of that year, Pechersky was one of nearly 1 million Red Army soldiers captured in the German encirclement known as the Vyazma pocket. Some 250,000 soldiers fell in battle while more than 500,000 were taken prisoner.

For practical and ideological reasons, the Red Army was woefully unprepared for the German onslaught, but Soviet citizens were forbidden from acknowledging this reality. “The much-battered enemy continued his cowardly advance,” read a typically aspirational phrase in the Front newspaper. Though the experience of the encirclement must have been harrowing, Pechersky’s account of it is brief and written in the heroic-generic style of the times. At one point, he and seven other soldiers are chosen by the politruk (political instructor) of the 4th Division to help evacuate their heavily wounded regimental commissar:

Several times we attempted to lay down fire to clear the way for ourselves, but success eluded us. We ran out of ammunition. Mortar shrapnel took the lives of the commissar and one other fighter. We retreated to the forest, taking with us our dead comrades. In the evening, we buried them and laid two helmets on their graves.

Other encounters with the enemy transpired. We expended the few bullets we’d found in dugouts. And though we were tormented by hunger, these few bullets were dearer to us than bread.

Fatigued, our ammunition spent, we were caught in the enemy’s ambush and could not escape. The most terrible thing happened, which one didn’t even want to think about—we were taken prisoner.

Pechersky wrote this version of events in the 1960s, knowing what he couldn’t have known at the time: that no matter how terrible the prospect of being taken prisoner by the Germans seemed, it would prove to be far more terrible and its consequences more lasting than he could have imagined. For that reason, one understands why he wouldn’t want to linger over these events, but simply to show that he and his comrades had fought and kept fighting in the face of insurmountable odds. For three years, from the time Pechersky was taken prisoner until he rejoined the ranks of the Red Army in 1944, he had no contact with his family. He didn’t know of their fates, and for a long time they believed he was dead.

Between September and November 1941, 100,000-150,000 people were evacuated from Rostov by train and on barges along the Don. It is supposed that an additional 50,000-100,000 spontaneous evacuees fled east or south. Among the evacuees were nearly all of the Pechersky family, who ended up in different parts of the Soviet Union: Faina’s family in Tashkent; Kotya’s family in Piatigorsk; and Zina’s family, with Pechersky’s mother, also in the Caucasus. (Because of some undocumented infirmity, possibly to do with his heart, Kotya was not conscripted into the army.) The sole person to remain in Rostov during the German occupation was Lyudmila.

When he was taken prisoner in October 1941, Pechersky became one of millions of Red Army soldiers to meet this fate. In Vyazma alone, nearly 500,000 Red Army soldiers surrendered to the German forces. Ultimately, nearly 5.7
million Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner with more than half, some 3.3 million, dying by the end of the war. (By comparison, 231,000 British and American soldiers were taken prisoner with only 8,300—a little less than 4%—dying in German captivity.) Soviet POWs died of exposure, disease and starvation and were also deliberately killed. Chief among the targets for extermination were “politically and racially intolerable elements” such as commissars, intellectuals and Jews, who, per a July 1941 directive, were to be screened out among the POWs and turned over to the SS.

Pechersky, though captured in the period when such screenings and executions were taking place, wasn’t identified or betrayed as a Jew. It no doubt helped that his appearance wasn’t stereotypically Jewish. The Red Army, like the Soviet Union, was composed of many nationalities, and Pechersky could have passed for one of the other national minorities. His first and last names also were not overtly Jewish. Since he spoke no Yiddish, he didn’t have a distinctive accent. In his documents, his nationality would have been listed, but he might have lost these in the heat of battle or had the foresight to destroy or dispose of them before he was captured. Absent these, the only things that could have given him away were his patronymic, Aronovich, and the fact that he was circumcised. However he accomplished it, he was able to conceal his identity at a time when its discovery would have almost certainly spelled his death.

Somewhere from the time of his capture until the spring of 1942, Pechersky was imprisoned at a POW camp in Smolensk, southwest of Vyzma. The conditions there were abysmal. Prisoners were packed like cattle into drafty barracks where hundreds died daily from cold and hunger and were then thrown into mass graves. During this time, Pechersky contracted typhus and, in his words, “miraculously” managed to both survive and conceal his disease for seven months—as those found to be afflicted were usually shot. In May, he and four other prisoners were caught while trying to escape. Pechersky and his accomplices were sent to a penal company in Borisov, and from there to a forest camp in Minsk. One day in early August, the prisoners were forced from their barracks and made to line up two abreast for selection for work in Germany.

As is his tendency during this part of his story, Pechersky offers scant detail about this episode, even as it is where his path branched off from that of the general group of Soviet POWs and led eventually to the gates of Sobibor. One wonders how quickly he grasped the implications of this scene. Was he among the first to pass before inspection or was he obliged to watch and contemplate as others preceded him? One would like to know what went through his mind, but Pechersky writes only:

Before sending us off, they conducted a medical examination and discovered that I was a Jew.

Nine Jewish POWs, including Pechersky, were identified that day, and were taken under armed guard and interred in what was known as the “Jewish cellar.” Pechersky counted 24 steps down to this underground bunker. It was a single room packed tight with people. There was no light whatsoever. Once a day they were fed a watery soup and 100 grams of bread. When the door was opened to lower the food, the bodies of those who had died during the course of that day were removed.

By the fifth or sixth day enough men had perished that it became possible to lie down on the raw earthen floor. It was here that Pechersky met and befriended Boris Tsibulsky, a strong, coarse but goodhearted teamster, butcher, and miner from Donbass who would play an important role in the Sobibor revolt. They spent 10 days in the cellar before the survivors were released and taken to a brutal labor camp in Shirokaya (Broad) Street, near the Minsk ghetto.

On the face of it, the episode in the “Jewish cellar” fails a basic test of logic. Even Pechersky couldn’t comprehend it: If the Nazis wanted to kill them, it would have been faster and simpler just to shoot them. If they wanted their labor, why starve them and thin their ranks without deriving any benefit? Arkady Vaispapir, who spent 20 days in the “Jewish cellar” and would also end up at Sobibor, offered as explanation that the Nazis, responding to Vycheslav

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**Beach Reads**

**From Super Sad True Love Story**

I hate the Fourth of July. The early middle age of summer. Everything is alive and kicking for now, but the eventual decline into fall has already set itself in motion. Some of the lesser shrubs and bushes, seared by the heat, are starting to resemble a bad peroxide job. The heat reaches a blazing peak, but summer is lying to itself, burning out like some alcoholic genius. And you start to wonder—what I have done with June? The poorest of the lot—the Vladeck House project dwellers who live beneath my co-op—seem to take summer in stride; they groan and sweat, drink the wrong kind of lager, make love, the squat children completing mad circles around them by foot or mountain bike. But for the more competitive New Yorkers, even for me, the summer is there to be slurped up. We know summer is the height of being alive. We don’t believe in qso we know that we’re only given eighty summers or so per lifetime, and each one has to be better than the last, has to encompass a trip to that arts center up at Bard, a seemingly mellow game of badminton over at some yahoo’s Vermont cottage, and a cool, wet, slightly dangerous kayak trip down an unforgiving river. Otherwise, how would you know that you have lived your summertime best? What if you missed out on some morsel of shaded Nirvana?

—Gary Shteyngart

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**Community**

Our shared Jewish life, at tabletmag.com/sections/community
Molotov’s threat that the Soviets would do to German POWs what the Germans did to the Soviet, had ordered an end to the practice of routine shootings and so observed the letter if not the spirit of the law, like in a game played by nasty children.

A grim coincidence unites the time when Pechersky was put into the “Jewish cellar” and events back home in Rostov. On July 24, the Germans retook the city, which they had previously controlled for a week and then lost. In the eight months since they had last occupied Rostov, some Jews had returned, believing that it was safe. When the German forces approached again, the evacuation from the city wasn’t well-organized, and there were few places to go since the German army controlled most of the surrounding area. The Jews of Rostov were effectively trapped.

By Aug. 2, orders were posted around the city requiring all Jews aged 14 and over to present themselves for registration. Included in this number were also the non-Jewish spouses of mixed marriages. The order was to be carried out by Aug. 7. Responsibility for its fulfillment fell upon the elders of the rapidly assembled Jewish administrative committee of Rostov. Synchronous with the action against the Jews, the Germans were killing Soviet POWs in the vicinity of Zmievskaya Balka (Snake Ravine), a part of the city situated between the botanical garden and the zoo. Three hundred of these POWs were forced to dig large pits in the ravine. On Aug. 8, their work completed, they were shot and buried in the pits.

That same day, new orders were directed at the Jews. On the pretext of protecting them from recent attacks perpetrated by non-Jewish inhabitants of Rostov, they were instructed to gather at 8 a.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 11, at six different assembly points for resettlement to an undisclosed location where the Germans could better protect them. They were to bring their documents and, tied to an identification tag with their names and addresses, the keys to their apartments. They were also encouraged to bring their valuables: money, as well as any items they deemed necessary to establish themselves in their new homes.

On the morning of Tuesday, Aug. 11, possibly the very day Pechersky was tossed in the hole with other Jewish POWs, the Jews of Rostov presented themselves at the collection points. They were primarily women, children, and the elderly, since most men of military age had left for the front. Some trucks were provided to take them to their destination. Other people walked in columns of 200-300 or, by some accounts, as many as 2,000. Gas vans with a capacity of 50-60 people—called dušegubki in Russian, (soul-killers)—were also employed to suffocate the victims on the way to the killing field.

The residents around Zmievskaya Balka were told to leave their homes, but some hid and later bore witness to what they heard and saw.

“To achieve the extermination of these millions of men, women and children,” wrote Gitta Sereny in her book about Sobibor and Treblinka, Into That Darkness, “the Nazis committed not only physical but spiritual murder: on those they killed, on those who did the killing, on those who knew the killing was being done, and also, to some extent, for evermore, on all of us, who were alive and thinking beings at that time.” I would add that this applies also to those of us who were not alive at that time but now possess this knowledge, especially those who would have been victims had we been alive then. The knowledge is like a disease that expresses itself when you look at your wife, your young children, your aging parents or, unpredictably, when you stand in a forest, or hear certain kinds of music.

The killings at Zmievskaya Balka were carried out by the Germans with help from Russian police auxiliaries. Jewish adults were made to strip naked before being shot. In most other mass killings, the children were treated like the adults, but it has been reported, perhaps apocryphally, that the children of Rostov were killed by means of smearing a poison on their lips. The poison was described as being yellow in color. The sources I read did not specify what this substance was or if it had a particular smell.

I have never read a description of just how this sickeningly intimate murder was performed. Were the children torn from parents who were then obliged to watch this monstrous procedure as one of their last sights on earth? Or were the children the ones who had to first see their parents, siblings and grandparents shot at the edge of a pit? Did the children resist or were they docile, resigned to their fate by terror, shock and grief? How did the killers decide who qualified as a child? The poison was described as “fast-acting,” but what did that actually mean? Were the children left to expire on the ground and later thrown into the pits or were they thrown immediately into the pits to die there among the corpses? And what does it mean to say children? Because there are no children, only one individual girl or boy followed by another and another.

The registration lists of the Jews of Rostov have never been found, and estimates of the number of Jews killed vary. The figure most historians accept is that some 27,000 people were shot in Zmievskaya Balka, of which 15,000-18,000 were Jews. The killing of the Jews of Rostov unfolded over two days. Those not killed on the first day were made to wait in place to meet their terrible ends. Some Jews reportedly committed suicide first. For days afterward, local residents continued to hear the cries of the dying.

As the spouse of a Jew, Pechersky’s wife was subject to the German order, but she was not among the victims at Zmievskaya Balka. How she avoided this fate isn’t fully known. Ella’s chronology has her mother aboard a boat around this time en route to Tsimlya. Waiting to meet her at the harbour was her elder daughter, Zoya, who was 18 years old at the time. The boat never arrived, because German planes attacked that day, sinking it and killing many of the passengers.

Ella, age 8, was playing outside her grandmother’s house when the planes appeared. She didn’t understand what they represented, even when some men nearby declared that they were not “ours.” The men scattered, and Ella’s grandmother ran out of the house, grabbed Ella and hid with her in the lee
of the ravine. They emerged later to find much of the village in flames. It was a small Guernica.

Ella recalls seeing the occupants of a workers’ barracks leap to their deaths as the building burned. Her grandparents’ house was on a rise. Most everything below was destroyed. The only people to survive were those few whose houses were on the rise, and those whose houses were on the banks of the river and who managed to leap into the water. Ella’s step-grandfather was working in town and was never heard from again.

With everything around them burning, Ella and her grandmother fled. As it was late summer, the apple trees in her grandmother’s yard were heavy with fruit. Her grandmother picked some for their journey, handing an apple to Ella, who recalls being confused until her grandmother explained that the heat from the flames had baked the apples on the tree.

For the length of the German occupation, Ella and her grandmother lived in a different Cossack village, at first given a room in a house, later shunted to a pig pen or cow stall when German and Romanian troops were billeted there. Zoya, who survived the bombing at the harbor, found them some months later and moved in with them. They had no word about their mother. They also lived in fear that survivors from Tsimlya might arrive in this village and inform the Germans that Ella was the daughter of a Jew. The dire consequences of this fact were known.

For more than a year, from August of 1942 until the middle of September of 1943, Pechersky remained in the Shirokaya Street camp. The prisoners in Shirokaya were Jewish POWs, select Jewish specialists from the Minsk ghetto, and incorrigible non-Jewish Soviet POWs who had committed crimes or opposed the Nazis. At Shirokaya Street, Pechersky came to know the men whom he would later trust to carry out the most important tasks during the Sobibor uprising: the Red Army soldiers Arkadi Vaispapir, Semion Rosenfeld, and Alexander Shubayev, known as Kali Mali. Also, there was Yehuda Lerner, a young Polish Jew who landed at Shirokaya after multiple escapes from other camps. Most importantly, Pechersky became close with Shloime Leitman, a Warsaw Jew, whose wife and children had been killed in the Minsk ghetto. In Sobibor, Leitman would serve not only as Pechersky’s translator but his most trusted confidante.

Shirokaya Street was run by sadists who killed prisoners for the slightest infraction. During roll call, one guard had the habit of placing his revolver on the shoulder of the lead prisoner in a column and firing down the line, killing the first man out of step with his fellows. When two prisoners staged an escape, the SS selected every fifth man from that work group, forced them to dig a ditch, and shot them in the back of the neck. Boris Tsubulsky survived because he’d been fourth in the count.

And in reprisal for a more sophisticated escape plan that involved breaking into the armory and stealing rifles and ammunition, prisoners were set upon by dogs and then tortured to death with boiling and freezing water.

“On the 18th of September, at 4 am, when it was still completely dark, all the Jews were roused from their bunks and ordered to leave the barracks with their bundles in hand,” wrote Pechersky of the morning when he and his fellow prisoners were assembled to be sent away. Among them were people drawn from the Minsk ghetto, women, children, and the elderly. Vaks, the Shirokaya Street Commandant, announced that they were going to Germany to validate their lives with honest labor. Troop trucks came and loaded the women and children. The men were formed into columns and marched toward the train station under armed SS guard. As the prisoners passed the ghetto, the emaciated ghetto residents threw food through the gaps in the barbed wire and called out: “They are taking you to your deaths!”

In a field, still some distance from the station, a line of 25 cattle cars awaited. Seventy people were pressed inside each car. The train traveled for four days, the people inside unable to sit or lie down, provided no food or water or any concession for their personal needs. Standing next to Pechersky was a young mother holding a thin, blond, 3-year-old girl. Pechersky had noticed the girl in the camp in the days leading up to the resettlement. For the duration of the trip he and his compatriots took turns holding her to give her mother some rest. What little food he had Pechersky shared with the girl—some jam, a potato, and water from his flask. She would rest her head on his chest and fall asleep, rocked to the rhythm of the train, and he was put in mind of Ella, his own daughter.

On the evening of the fifth day, the train arrived in a small outpost station. They read a sign that spelled “Sobibor,” and saw a camp ringed by three rows of barbed wire, set within a pine forest. They had never heard of the place, and didn’t suspect that the Nazis would go to the trouble of bringing them all the way to Poland to kill them, as they’d had no compunction about killing many Jews on the territory of the Soviet Union. Their row of cattle cars was switched onto a side track, and that is where they remained for the night.

At 9 o’clock on the morning of Sept. 23, a steam engine pulled their string of cars into the camp.

In the fall of 1943, Sobibor was the sole Operation Reinhard camp still functioning. Belzec had stopped receiving transports in December of 1942, and the commando of Jews tasked with burning the corpses and leveling the camp completed its work in the summer of 1943. They were then shipped to Sobibor. When they realized where they had been taken, they resisted, and a bloodbath ensued. A note found in the clothing of one of the condemned read:

We have worked one year in Belzec. We don’t know where they are transporting us. They say to Germany. In the wagons are dining tables. We have received bread for three days, canned food, and vodka. If this is a lie, you
“Eastern and Western European Jews were regarded as coming from different worlds—one impoverished and backward, the other wealthy and civilized—a bias often shared by the Jews themselves.”

On Aug. 2, 1943, the prisoners at Treblinka had risen up in a fashion not dissimilar from the one the prisoners of Sobibor would later employ. Near the end of the workday, they attacked the SS and guards, set some of the buildings on fire, and hundreds of prisoners escaped into the woods. The camp ceased its operations about two weeks later with a final transport from Bialystok.

By this time, Operation Reinhard had achieved its aims and nearly all the Jews in the General Government had been killed. In March of 1943, Himmler had given the order to shutter the camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau was fully operational and could receive Jews from all over Europe. And after the German army’s defeat at Stalingrad and the Red Army’s grinding advance toward Poland, there arose a more pressing need to hide the traces of the atrocities committed in the Reinhard camps.

The prisoners inside Sobibor did not and could not know all of these details, but they deduced that their usefulness was waning and that the Nazis would not hesitate to eliminate them. The fiendish irony was that their survival depended on a steady supply of other Jews for the Nazis to murder. Richard Glazar, who survived Treblinka, recalled his and his fellow prisoners’ reaction when they were informed in the spring of 1943 that new transports would be arriving after a significant lull. “Do you know what we did? We shouted, ‘Hurray, hurray.’ It seems impossible now. Every time I think of it I die a small death; but it’s the truth.”

There were two different protocols at the Operation Reinhard camps for the arriving transports: deception and terror. Jews from Western Europe—Holland, Czechoslovakia, France, Austria, and Germany—usually arrived in coaches, and the passengers were greeted in a courteious manner. The Jews of the Bahnhofkommando (platform workers) would help the passengers from the carriages and provide them with claim tickets for their luggage. Eastern European Jews arrived in cattle cars and were met with shouts, beatings, and brutality from the moment the cattle car doors opened. The reason for this was that Eastern and Western European Jews were regarded as coming from different worlds—one impoverished and backward, the other wealthy and civilized—a bias often shared by the Jews themselves.

As a transport from the east, Pechersky and his group would have been greeted with a display of brutality. However, whereas few if any people were selected from an arriving transport and everyone else driven swiftly through a set of predetermined stations, this time the SS asked for “carpenters and joiners without families” to step forward. Some 80 men did, including Pechersky and some of the prisoners from Shirokaya Street. They were taken to a neighboring section of the camp, which was separated from the unloading platform by a barbed wire fence. Everyone else from the transport was marched through a set of gates and disappeared from view.

It is important to note that accounts of what happened over the next several weeks are not uniform and sometimes conflict. Those who survived recall events differently and, over time, people’s recollections have either wavered or calcified into a certainty. To read or listen to the different accounts is to encounter a range of contradictions, small and large. For instance, it remains unverified why the Nazis needed these 80 men and why they would have admitted scores of Red Army soldiers into the camp.

Like the other Operation Reinhard camps, Sobibor was organized into three sections: Camp I, where transports were received and where the various workshops and prisoner barracks were located; Camp II, the undressing yard for the condemned, the barracks where the women’s hair was cut, the Lazarett where weak or disabled Jews were taken to be shot, and all the warehouses and sorting rooms for the belongings of the murdered; Camp III—connected to Camp II by “the tube” or the Himmelfahrtstrasse (the Road to Heaven) a narrow path some 250 meters in length—housed the gas chambers, the burial pits, the “roasts” for burning the bodies, and the barracks for the Jewish prisoners employed there. At the time of Pechersky’s arrival, the Nazis were also constructing Camp IV for storing and repairing captured Soviet munitions, and the Jewish POWs were assigned to do the hard physical labor of clearing the forest and building the barracks.

One possible reason why such an unusually large number of men was chosen from Pechersky’s transport was because the Nazis had recently foiled an escape plot attributed to 72 Dutch prisoners. All the Dutchmen were killed, and their places on the work crew needed to be filled. However, this same reason—the foiled plot by Dutch prisoners—was offered by Thomas Blatt for why he was selected when his transport arrived in April of 1943.

After Pechersky and his comrades were separated from the rest of the transport, they were taken to a barracks where, after such a long and arduous trip, many men climbed onto the bunks and fell asleep. Pechersky and some others, including Shloime Leitman, elected to go outside. It was a warm autumn day and they spread themselves out on some logs. They were soon approached by a Sobibor prisoner, a man in his early 30s. Why the prisoner
specifically to Pechersky is unclear. One account claims that it was discernible from Pechersky’s uniform that he was an officer and that the other soldiers deferred to him—though it is doubtful that after two years in POW camps Pechersky’s uniform would have borne any marks to identify him as an officer. It may simply have been that Pechersky had an impressive physical presence and a personal charisma. At 34, he was also about a decade older than most of the other POWs and so wielded the authority of age and experience.

The man who approached Pechersky was Leon Feldhendler a Polish Jew who had been in Sobibor for nearly a year and who led the camp’s underground organization. In Pechersky and the Soviet POWs, he saw potential allies who could provide what the underground lacked, a cadre of men with military experience. Speaking in Yiddish, with Leitman translating, Feldhendler told them the truth about Sobibor. Indicating the smoke that rose in a far corner of the camp, Feldhendler said: “Those are the bodies of the people who were with you on the train.”

That night, as Pechersky tried to come to terms with the knowledge of what confronted all new arrivals, he was tormented by thoughts of the little girl from the train.

A kind of mythology has attached itself to Pechersky’s time in Sobibor, founded on a number of extraordinary scenes and exchanges. Few of the people who witnessed them lived to see the end of the war and exchanges. Few of the people who heard the truth about Sobibor. Indicating the black smoke that rose in a far corner of the camp, Feldhendler said: “Those are the bodies of the people who were with you on the train.”

I. THE STORY OF THE MARCHING SONG:

On their first workday in Sobibor, Pechersky and the Soviet POWs are ordered by SS Sergeant Frenzel, who was in charge of Camp I, to sing a Russian song as they march to work. Provocatively if not recklessly, Pechersky instructs his men to sing the martial hymn “If Tomorrow War Comes.”

If tomorrow war comes

If the cruel foe attacks
If the dark force descends down upon us.
Then all like one man
All the Soviet folk
Will rise up in defence of our homeland.
This way, in formation, singing in full voice for the whole camp to hear, they set off.

II. THE STORY OF THE STUMP:

Two days later, Pechersky is among 40 prisoners chosen to chop logs and remove stumps from Camp IV. Working beside him is a strapping, bespectacled, Dutch youth. Or merely a tall thin one. The scene plays out variously in different tellings. The youth is weak and barely manages to lift his axe. Or he stops momentarily to wipe his glasses and is immediately struck by the whip of Sgt. Frenzel, who was posted that morning to Camp IV. The young man’s glasses fall and break so he can no longer see. He tries to carry on as Frenzel repeatedly whips him. Pechersky, standing nearby, is disgusted by the sight and momentarily rests his axe, drawing Frenzel’s ire. Frenzel commands him to approach. By some means—either in broken Russian (unlikely), or in as much German as Pechersky could comprehend (more likely), or with a kapo named Pożycki acting as translator (most likely)—Frenzel communicates to Pechersky that he will give him five minutes to split a large stump. If he succeeds, Frenzel will reward him with a pack of cigarettes; if he fails, 25 lashes. The Nazi consults his wristwatch and orders Pechersky to begin.

The stump is large, hard, and full of knots; Pechersky lays into it with all his might. His hands and back ache. But he manages to split the stump with 30 seconds to spare. Keeping his promise, Frenzel extends a pack of cigarettes.

“Thank you, but I don’t smoke,” Pechersky declines.

Expecting a beating, Pechersky nevertheless returns to his place in the work gang and resumes chopping. Frenzel walks off and returns some minutes later with half a loaf of bread and a lump of margarine.

“Russian soldier, take,” Frenzel commands.

Despite his hunger, Pechersky knows the bread has been taken from Jews whom the Nazis have killed, and before his eyes it appears as if the bread is soaked in their blood.

“Thank you,” Pechersky says, “but the rations I receive here satisfy me.”

Frenzel storms off, leaving the gang under the supervision of Kapo Porzycki. By evening word of the encounter has spread throughout the camp.

III. The story of the crying child:

The very next day, Pechersky and his comrades are again sent to work in Camp IV. A new transport has arrived and the distance between the gas chambers and the site of Pechersky’s work party is not very great. A barbed wire fence woven with pine branches separates them, making it impossible to see what is happening on the other side. At first there is silence but it is shattered by the cries and screams of women and children. Pechersky hears distinctly the voice of a small child calling out for its mother. The voices are then drowned out by the maniacal honking of hundreds of geese, which the Nazis keep for this purpose and to supply their tables. Pechersky feels himself paralyzed with horror and helplessness. Leitman and Tsibulsky are beside him, deeply shaken by what they’ve heard.

“We must get away from here,” Tsibulsky says. “The forest is only two hundred meters. The Nazis are distracted. We can cut through the wire and kill the guards with our axes.”

“We might succeed,” responds Pechersky, “but the Nazis will slaughter the others in reprisal. If we go, all must go. Some will survive to tell the tale.”

“You’re right,” agrees Tsibulsky. “But we mustn’t delay. Winter is coming and the snow will show our tracks.”

A mere three weeks elapsed from Pechersky’s arrival until the uprising. In that span Pechersky was able to establish trust in a fraught, stratified, and
dangerous environment and formulate and implement an ambitious and intricately choreographed plan. On his seventh day in the camp, he accepted Leon Feldhendler’s invitation, and both he and Shloime Leitman joined the camp’s underground committee, which consisted of the heads of the various workshops—shoemaking, tailoring, metalworking and carpentry. Because the heads of the workshops had some latitude about whom they wished to employ, by Oct. 8 both Pechersky and Leitman were installed in the carpentry workshop for their protection.

The planning for the revolt was done in nighttime meetings at the carpentry workshop and in the evenings in the women’s barracks where prisoners were permitted to socialize. At Feldhendler’s suggestion, Pechersky found himself a “girlfriend” to serve as cover so he and Feldhendler could meet without attracting too much attention. An 18-year-old girl who went by the name Luka agreed to the arrangement. Because she spoke neither Russian nor Yiddish, Pechersky, Feldhendler and Leitman could speak in front of her without her understanding. Over time, a genuine affection developed between Pechersky and Luka, and they took to meeting on their own, though Pechersky always insisted that relations between them were chaste. In his memoirs Pechersky offers long and lucid dialogues between them, even as the language barrier would have made that impossible. But by some means they communicated, presumably because Pechersky would have picked up some German during his time in the POW camps or there is the possibility that he had studied the language in school.

Luka was from Hamburg; her father was a communist. After the Nazis assumed power, they hunted her father and tortured Luka to make her reveal his whereabouts. She was only 8 at the time, but she kept his secret, and her father fled to Holland. The family followed and lived in peace until the Nazis invaded. Her father fled farther east but Luka, her mother, and two brothers were rounded up and sent to Sobibor. Her brothers were killed while she and her mother were selected for work.

“One imagines Luka with the dumb innocent rabbits, the sounds of horror in the background, representing their shared fate.”

Luka’s job was to tend the rabbits the Nazis raised for slaughter, their hutches in close proximity to Camp III such that she could hear and even glimpse what went on there through gaps in the pine branches. One imagines her with the dumb innocent rabbits, the sounds of horror in the background, representing their shared fate.

Pechersky, Leitman, and Feldhendler contemplated two different plans: digging a tunnel from the carpentry workshop to the forest or luring SS officers to the workshops and killing them. Pechersky dismissed the idea of the tunnel because it seemed improbable that several hundred prisoners could crawl through a narrow tunnel in a calm and orderly fashion over the course of one night.

The idea of luring and killing the SS officers, while more treacherous, looked to stand a better chance of success. There were only about 20 SS officers at the camp at any one time. If most of them could be eliminated, the auxiliary guards—drawn primarily from Ukrainian Soviet POWs, numbering from 100-200, and not necessarily loyal to the Germans—would be left to their own devices and might not stop the prisoners from fleeing. And if the killings were undertaken near the end of the workday, the prisoners might be able to melt into the forest as darkness fell, making pursuit unlikely until morning.

Pechersky’s terms for the revolt were that he would personally select the assassins from the ranks of the men who had come with him from Minsk, and that the final word would be his. On Oct. 7, over a game of chess, Pechersky and Feldhendler agreed to this plan.

Pechersky projected confidence but he was skeptical that the plan would work. At best, he thought they would be able to kill some of the SS and a few prisoners might make it to the woods. But he shared these doubts only with Shloime Leitman.

In the week leading up to the revolt, the main challenges were keeping the plan secret—they agreed that no one but the members of the committee would know of it until the appointed day—and establishing exactly how much ammunition the Nazis entrusted to the guards on duty. The answer was five rounds.

On the morning of the 14th, Pechersky called in each of the men he’d designated to serve as assassins and gave them their orders. Organized into teams of two, and equipped with short whetted axes, the assassins took to their posts at around 3 p.m., an hour before their targets were to arrive. Some of the men were informed of their targets, some were not. Military discipline was observed, and nobody questioned Pechersky’s orders. On the contrary, recalling the day in an interview with Claude Lanzmann, Yehuda Lerner, only 17 years old at the time and having never killed before, regarded the assignment as “a big honor” and went “willingly and with a light heart.”

In many ways, Pechersky and the plotters were lucky. By happenstance, Franz Reichleitner, the commandant of Sobibor, and Gustav Wagner, probably the most vicious and savvy of all the SS men, were on leave at the time. “Nearly all of us state with certainty,” recalled survivor Moshe Bahir, “that if [Wagner] had stayed in the camp until the end, the revolt would not have broken out, or would have failed from the outset.”

The plan was largely predicated on the Nazis’ covetousness and greed; their renowned Teutonic punctuality; and their conviction that the Jews posed no threat. To effect the plan, young boys,
called putzers, who did small jobs for the Nazis and had considerable freedom to roam the camp, were enlisted to entice the SS to visit the workshops at appointed times. Waiting for them amidst the actual tradesmen were the assassins. Until the killing started, the tradesmen didn’t know what was afoot.

The first two kills were committed by Shubaev in the tailor shop. Afterward, he reported to Pechersky and presented him with one of the Nazis’ revolvers. Tsibulsky was sent to the sorting sheds of Camp II and killed four SS men. Yehuda Lerner and Arkady Vaispapir, the only team of assassins to both survive the war, killed two SS in the tailor shop.

The first man to visit the workshop was Siegfried Graetschus, commander of the Sobibor “Ukrainian” guards. In Vaispapir’s telling, he snuck up behind him and struck the first blow; in Lerner’s telling, he did it. Either way, Graetschus was killed. Moments after the workers cleaned up the blood and concealed Graetschus’ body, another Nazi entered—either by chance or by appointment. Looking about, he spied a hand poking out from under a pile of coats. When he went to investigate, Vaispapir and Lerner pounced.

Shloime Leitman lured an SS man into a barrack under the pretense of needing his direction for the work being done inside and killed him with his axe.

Aside from his role as commander over the uprising as a whole, Pechersky also assigned for himself and Semion Rosenfeld the task of killing Karl Frenzel. Frenzel was expected to come to the carpentry workshop to see about some cupboards, but he never did. “I prepared myself thoroughly for this task,” Rosenfeld recounted years later. “But the scoundrel did not come. Until today I am sorry for that.”

As time ticked down and with no sign of Frenzel, Pechersky sent for Luka. They met in the carpentry workshop and he informed her about the revolt and instructed her to go to her barracks and change into men’s clothing, as these would be better suited for running and surviving in the woods. Luka left and returned not long after bearing a shirt she insisted Pechersky put on. It was her father’s shirt and she assured him that it would protect him and bring him luck. Pechersky, not inclined toward superstition, at first demurred but ultimately relented. Before Luka ran off to alert her mother, Pechersky told her that when she heard the bugle sound for roll call, to find him and be by his side.

It was known that much of the perimeter around the camp was mined—to keep prisoners in and partisans out. Pechersky had hoped that once most of the SS had been eliminated, the prisoners might be able to be led out the front gates, where there were no mines. But things didn’t go according to plan. Some prisoners spontaneously killed an SS man in the garage. Then SS officer Erich Bauer returned unexpectedly and ordered two Jewish boys to unload a truck, whereupon guard discovered the dead body and Bauereopened fire.

Pechersky ordered the bugle to be blown ahead of schedule. When the prisoners assembled, they sensed something was amiss and became unruly. Shots rang out, and the remaining SS then opened fire. Prisoners who had secured arms and rifles were killed with a submachine gun. Any semblance of order dissolved and people ran for the fences and tried by any means to get through the wire as the guards in the watchtowers unloaded with their machine guns.

Pechersky made his way to the part of the camp that housed the SS officers because he rightly surmised that the area around there would not be mined. At one point, he spotted Karl Frenzel shooting at prisoners with a submachine gun. Pechersky took aim with his revolver and fired two shots, but none found its target. He then ran for the woods.

Unlike in Treblinka, where the underground organization found a means to communicate with the Sonderkommando in Camp III and include them in the uprising, no such contact was possible in Sobibor. All those prisoners, who’d been forced to dispose of the corpses of the murdered, remained at the camp and were killed. Among the prisoners who made it to the woods, a significant number were Soviet POWs, including some of Pechersky’s most trusted comrades—Boris Tsibulsky, Alexander “Kali Mali” Shubaev, and Arkady Vaispapir.

Pechersky did not see Feldhendler, but others reported to him that he had survived the escape and was headed with a group of Polish Jews in the direction of Chelm, a nearby town. But Pechersky also received the devastating news that Shloime Leitman had been wounded during the revolt and, though he made it as far as the forest, was so badly injured that he asked his comrades to shoot him. They said they would try to take him to the partisans, but Pechersky never heard from him again. To this day, Luka’s fate remains unknown.

There was no time to dwell on any of this, as the escapees needed to get as far away from the camp as they could before day broke. As part of the plan, a Jewish electrician had cut the telephone line and sabotaged the electrical generator to hinder the Germans’ ability to communicate. Not until 8 p.m. was Frenzel able to call for help; reinforcements didn’t reach Sobibor until later that night. But by morning 400-500 soldiers, police officers and SS were actively engaged in pursuing the fleeing prisoners. They blocked the crossings of the Bug river east of Sobibor, which, in many places, represented the border between Poland and Belarus. Luftwaffe planes were also assigned to the manhunt. Within the first few days of this pursuit, it is estimated that 100 of the 300 prisoners who made it to the forest were captured and subsequently killed. For the Nazis, it was important to capture and kill all the escaped Jews not only to fulfill their genocidal mission but also to preserve its secrecy.

Pechersky’s objective was to cross the Bug and link up with Soviet partisans. On the first day after the revolt, he found himself leading a group of some 60 people, a mix of his Red Army POWs and Jewish prisoners from different countries. But it was clear to him, as it was to some others, that it would be difficult if not impossible for such a large group to avoid detection. Further, the Polish Jews knew the language and the territory and could fend for themselves, whereas he and his men were Red Army soldiers who wished to return to their country and resume the fight against the fascists.

On Oct. 16, Pechersky writes that
with everyone’s consent he and his Soviet POWs split off from the others and headed east toward the Bug. The Polish prisoners remembered it differently. And as much as they revered him and knew that they owed their lives to him, bitterness lingered over the way he left. Shlomo Alster, a Polish Jew who had been in this group, recalled it this way:

Sasha’s people left us and went away. We remained without a leader. What could we do? Without arms and without a man to lead us. Together with us were French, Dutch, and Czechoslovakian Jews. They could not find their way without knowing the language and the surroundings. Like us, they also divided themselves into small groups. They went out to the road, which was full of SS men, and all of them were caught alive. Also the local people caught them one by one and brought them to Sobibor, where they were liquidated.

The subject of the local people’s attitude toward the Sobibor escapees is a painful one. Many Polish partisan units wouldn’t accept Jews, and some, including detachments of the Armia Krajowa (The Home Army), actively killed them. There is also the ghoulish fact that local people dug up the earth where the Operation Reinhard camps had stood and picked through the ash and bones in search of Jewish gold. To stop this, the Nazis established small farms on the territories of each of the camps and settled a Ukrainian guard and his family there.

“On the whole, with some exceptions,’ writes Yitzhak Arad, ‘the local population did not aid the escapees. Anti-Semitism, greediness, the fear of German terror and punishment were all contributing factors. Yet it should also be noted that those who did succeed in remaining alive until the liberation were in part saved by the aid extended to them by the local population at critical junctures after their escapes from the camps.”

One of those who was aided was Pechersky. On the night of Oct. 19, he and the Soviet POWs found a place to cross the Bug that was pointed out to them by locals. Two days later, Tsibulsky became very ill with pneumonia and the others were forced to leave him in a villager’s hut.

On Oct. 22 a week after the revolt, in the region of Brest, Pechersky and his men encountered a group of Soviet partisans. Some of Pechersky’s comrades were taken into this group while others, including Pechersky, were accepted into a different one.

“Of my existence and actions among the partisans is a separate chapter, which I might return to someday,” Pechersky wrote, but he never did. He also never wrote about what happened to him after the front caught up to his partisan unit except to say that he rejoined the Red Army, fought, was wounded in August of 1944, and spent four months in hospital before returning home to Rostov. These omissions are not surprising, given the stigmatized status of POWs in the Soviet Union after the war.

But to close out the chapter that marked him for life, it should be said that Pechersky was exceptionally fortunate. By the harsh calculus of the times, he should not have survived. Of the 450,000-600,000 Jews brought to Belzec, only two are confirmed to have survived; of the nearly 850,000-880,000 brought to Treblinka, about 50 survived; of the 170,000 Jews brought to Sobibor 57 survived. For Pechersky to have cumulatively survived all of the perils of war, followed by his years in penal camps, then at Sobibor and his escape, then a year as a partisan and then service in a very dangerous battalion in the Red Army is extraordinary. To be a Soviet citizen, let alone a Soviet Jew, and to have lost not a single close relative during the war is also exceedingly rare. The losses Pechersky did sustain were of the people who were dearest to him during the war, and whom he mourned for the rest of his life: Shloime Leitman, Boris Tsibulsky, Luka, and Alexander “Kali Mali” Shubayev, who is presumed to have been killed while fighting with the partisans.

In 2006, on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the massacre in Kyiv’s Babi Yar, Leonid Terushkin, an archivist at the Russian Holocaust Center, attended the memorial ceremony. While in Kyiv, Terushkin made contact with Arkady Vaispapir, who lived in the city. In 2008, based on his interactions with Vaispapir, another surviving Soviet POW, Aleksei Vaitse, and the material available to him at the time, Terushkin and two co-authors, Semyon Vilensky and Gregory Gorbovitsky, published the first scholarly book on Sobibor in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Around this time, the lawyer and Holocaust expert Lev Simkin came across the Soviet trial records of 12 Sobibor guards, including lengthy transcripts of the testimony of Alexander Pechersky. His book on Pechersky appeared in Russia in 2013 and was reissued in 2019. More recently, another exploration of Pechersky’s life was written in English by the Dutch historian Selma Leydesdorff, whose paternal grandparents were killed in Sobibor.

But the most consequential event for the revival of Pechersky’s memory took place in 2011, when a man named Ilya Vasiliev attended a poetry reading in a literary café in St. Petersburg. Vasiliev was 40 years old at the time, a political scientist by training, well-connected in both Israel and Russia, and engaged in promoting memorial projects about two Soviet Jews—Shmarya Yehuda Leib Medalia, a rabbi, and Meer Akselrod, a painter. The poem being recited was called “Luka,” inspired by a small exhibit the poet, Mark Geylickman, had stumbled upon at a Moscow synagogue.

Prior to that evening, Vasiliev knew virtually nothing of Pechersky and Sobibor but be was intrigued by what he heard. The poet introduced him to the woman who had organized the exhibit at the synagogue. She in turn introduced him to two friends of Pechersky’s who lived in Israel and who tasked him with raising Pechersky’s profile to
the level of a global hero, on par with Raoul Wallenberg.

Vasiliev would go on to author a book from which the screenplay for *Sobibor* was adapted, and he was also a producer on the film. I met him in late December 2018 at Mosfilm, the iconic Moscow film studio, where the producers of *Sobibor* had their offices. The day before he had been in Rome, where he’d flown with Khabensky to attend an audience with Pope Francis and present the Holy Father with a DVD of the film.

Vasiliev is tall and sturdily built, with a shaved head and eyeglasses. He is self-assured, quick to disparage the flaws of his adversaries, but also open to debate, capable of irony, and transparent about what he is trying to accomplish. Though he has a solid grasp of Pechersky’s biographical details, he doesn’t consider himself a historian. His talent is for encapsulating the essence of an idea and framing it in a way that is comprehensible and practicable. His worldview also inclines toward the conservative, which makes him well-suited to operating within the current Russian and Israeli political systems.

As this pertains to Pechersky, he grasped very early a few basic concepts. The first was that in order to propagate anything on a mass scale in Russia one needed the support of the government. Those who had written about Pechersky before had anti-Putin political leanings and criticized the Russian regime for neglecting Pechersky, thus guaranteeing that their efforts would never reach a mass audience. The other thing Vasiliev realized was that Pechersky’s story aligned perfectly with the Soviet/Russian narrative of WWII: weak, helpless Western European countries who surrendered to Hitler had to be rescued by the Red Army. The same thing occurred in Sobibor, where defenseless, impotent citizens of Western European countries needed Soviet citizens to arrive, quickly take stock of the situation and triumph. (If one ignores a fistful of quibbles, this account is basically correct.)

This patriotic Russian narrative functioned as a sword and a shield for Russia against European countries who found it now suited them to draw an equivalency between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. This equivalency didn’t wash in Russia and, for obvious reasons, it didn’t wash in Israel either. In this way, the Sobibor and Pechersky story offered a useful tool for Russia and Israel against revisionist foes and created a politically useful bridge between them. When Netanyahu visited Moscow in 2018, he and Putin toured the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center specifically to view an exhibit about Sobibor and Pechersky and make statements of mutual purpose.

Vasiliev’s strategy for enshrining Pechersky’s memory rested on three pillars. One was to gain official recognition for Pechersky in various countries in the form of awards, street names, monuments, and other tangible manifestations of honor: Both a train and an airplane now bear his name, as well as several streets in Russia and in other countries whose citizens were murdered at Sobibor. In 2016, Pechersky’s granddaughter traveled to the Kremlin to receive a posthumous award for bravery directly from Vladimir Putin.

The second pillar was to seek out and collect all the documents related to Pechersky and establish a definitive archive. And the last was to produce, or encourage others to produce, books and films about Pechersky so that his story would reach the widest possible audience. With the assistance of backers in Israel, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Poland, and America, Vasiliev created a foundation, The Alexander Pechersky Fund, to administer these activities in different countries. When we spoke, the fund was a modest enterprise with a rudimentary website and three employees, Vasiliev being one of them, albeit unpaid.

Until he and his comrades crossed the Bug river, Pechersky’s life had been essentially unhampered by politics. Before the war, he’d been a loyal Soviet citizen, absent any counterrevolutionary tendencies. He hadn’t fallen victim to the repressions that devastated others at that time—not as a religious Jew, or a Zionist, or a kulak, or a communist of the wrong deviation who had fallen afoul of, or was arbitrarily swept up by, Stalinist paranoia. At the front, in the POW camps, and in Sobibor he’d been treated the same as everyone else.

But once he crossed the Bug into Belarus he acquired the status and stain of a Soviet POW. Pechersky and POWs like him were looked down upon and treated poorly because they served as a shameful living reminder of the fecklessness of the Red Army’s—and by extension Stalin’s—response to the German assault in the first stages of the war. Those who died in captivity were easy to disregard, but those who survived were treated as unreliable, or worse. So it’s safe to assume that when Pechersky and his comrades first encountered Soviet partisans they weren’t necessarily welcomed with open arms: An account exists, in fact, that the first partisans they met stripped them of their weapons and cast them aside.

Once Pechersky and his Jewish POWs were accepted into the partisan ranks, they were divided up among different units. Pechersky served as a saboteur, attacking rail lines. In late April of 1944, the front reached them and his outfit was absorbed into the Red Army. However, as a former POW, Pechersky was assigned to a reserve regiment for about two months, before being sent to an NKVD filtering camp where POWs were screened to establish how they’d survived in occupied territory. Pechersky held the rank of lieutenant, as the army had automatically promoted all quartermasters to officer class not long into the war.

Though in nearly all the accounts of his wartime service Pechersky is described in terms that create the impression that he was a seasoned combat officer, this was far from the truth. (One might suppose that his ability to organize and lead the uprising in spite of his negligible military training would make his accomplishment seem *more* rather than *less* impressive). As an officer, Pechersky fell under even greater suspicion, since it was known that the Nazis treated officers more harshly, routinely executing them. Rather than being decorated for his heroism in Sobibor, he was assigned to a *shturmbat*, a storm battalion, a formation consisting of officers such as himself deployed in the most dangerous missions. This phase
of Pechersky’s war record is also often misrepresented, with Pechersky said to have served instead in a *strafbat*, a penal battalion made up of inmates from the gulag and soldiers who had committed crimes while in uniform. In practice, these two battalions were very similar, their members known as *smertniki*, the walking dead, condemned to “cleanse their guilt with their blood.”

Legend has it that, before he was sent to the front, Pechersky was permitted to travel to Moscow to give testimony about Sobibor to the Jewish Antifascist Committee. The committee included the writers Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, who were leading the effort to collect documents and testimony for a compendium called *The Black Book* about what we now call the Holocaust. In my English edition of *The Black Book*, Sobibor is spelled Sobibur and is identified as “the button factory” for the fraudulent claim the Nazis apparently circulated to placate the Jews being sent there. (I have not come across this detail in any other source.) Pechersky is mentioned but, for some reason, incorrectly identified as “the political instructor Sasha, of Rostov.” There are also some flaws in the description of the killing process. However, the only people who could have corroborated it were the SS and the Ukrainian guards, but nobody would hear from them until the criminal trials of the 1960s and ’70s.

Pechersky’s military and hospital records indicate that his battalion participated in Operation Bagration, a massive and highly successful Soviet push to recapture large swathes of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. On Aug. 20, 1944, Pechersky was in combat in the area of Bauska, Latvia, and was seriously wounded by mortar shrapnel to his right thigh. He was hospitalized for four months, and after more than three years as a soldier, POW, death camp inmate and partisan, his war was over.

Since the other Jewish POWs he was with weren’t officers, they were taken into the ordinary ranks of the Red Army, where they also fought with distinction. Semion Rosenfeld went as far as Berlin, where he carved the words, *Baranovici, Sobibor, Berlin* into the walls of the Reichstag.

“Ella was a child of 9 when the two sisters returned to Rostov. They made their way to her old apartment and found that it was still standing and that their mother was alive.”

Rostov was liberated by the Red Army for the second time on Feb. 14, 1943. After the ice broke up on the Don, Ella and Zoya boarded an old barge with many others and sailed south. The trip took several days. For food, men caught fish; for water, they drank from the Don.

Ella was a child of 9 when the two sisters returned to Rostov. They made their way to her old apartment and found that it was still standing and that their mother was alive. One can imagine this scene of intense gratitude and affection, which was repeated millions of times across the country, except when it was not.

As joyous as it must have been to discover her mother alive, Ella would have also learned that her father had fallen at the front. A funeral notice was sent by the army in late 1941 or early 1942, around the time Pechersky was caught in the encirclement, informing the family that he’d died a hero’s death. Not until letters arrived from Pechersky in 1944 did they receive any information to the contrary. By that time, the rest of Pechersky’s family was resettled in Rostov.

Once Pechersky reestablished contact with his family, he took to writing them about what he had experienced. Unfortunately, none of these letters have been preserved, though they must have made a strong impression on his relatives, not least on his younger sister, Zina, who worked at a publishing house. She shared the letters with her boss, an editor named Safronov. Not only had Pechersky recounted his experiences in these letters, but he had also composed a manuscript based on his recollections of his time in Sobibor. By means that are partly lost to history, a short book, *Uprising in Sobibor*, was approved for publication and appeared in the spring of 1945 from the Rostov publishing house.

It is here that we enter into a thicket of interpretation regarding Pechersky and his level of Jewish identification as expressed in the way he spoke and wrote about Sobibor. Explicit reference to Jews is present in the manuscript Pechersky composed in the reserve regiment but it is absent from the 1945 book. We can ask why, but no answer is recorded or, likely, could have been recorded.

So what did Pechersky believe? What mattered to him? Was the Jewish component of the tragedy he lived through immaterial to him, such that he would consent to having the references to it removed? While Pechersky was listed as the book’s author, there is a belief that someone else with more literary skill, perhaps Safronov, substantially edited and rewrote his story. Why this person, presumably with Pechersky’s consent, eliminated references to the victims’ Jewish ethnicity at a time when the inclusion of such references was still deemed permissible isn’t known.

The publication of *Uprising in Sobibor* was only the beginning of Pechersky’s literary pursuits. Over time, as he acquired information through contact with other survivors about things which he personally did not and could not have seen in Sobibor, he tried to publish more authoritative versions of the story. In 1958, after Stalin’s death and the onset of Khruschev’s thaw, he sent one of these manuscripts to Vasily Grossman. In 1974, he tried again with another draft. At the same time, he also tried to get a commemorative pin struck in honor of Sobibor and appealed to a director of a film studio to have the story adapted for the screen. But he only met with success in 1945 with the publication of the first book; in 1946, when that book was translated into Yiddish.
Beach Reads

From Marjorie Morningstar

Every day the look of the camp improved. The weather turned fine, too. By the first of July, after a week of continual sunshine, the fountain was flowing, the grass was velvet-neat, the buildings were dazzling white and gold, and the grounds were alive with noisy merry people in summer clothes of carnival colors. They were a helter-skelter group of ordinary young New Yorkers; a few girls spoke with comic Brooklyn and Bronx grotesqueness, and a few of the men were excessively crude, but most of them were just like the young people she had known all her life. They ate, danced, drank, and played at all the sports with great gusto. Gaiety and freedom were in the air. The food Greek fed them was a curious mélange of traditional Jewish delicacies— Gefilte fish, stuffed neck, chopped chicken liver—and traditional Jewish abominations, like shellfish, bacon, and ham; the guests were in the air. The food Greech fed them was a curious mélange of traditional Jewish delicacies— Gefilte fish, stuffed neck, chopped chicken liver—and traditional Jewish abominations, like shellfish, bacon, and ham; the guests devoured the delicacies and the abominations with equal relish. Marjorie had to comb the bacon off her eggs for the first week or so, until the waiter became used to her old-fashioned ways.

—Herman Wouk

and brought out by Der Emes, the publishing arm of the Jewish Antifascist Committee (with the Jewish material reinstated); and in 1964 with a book called Return Is Undesirable, authored by two writers who drew from Pechersky and other participants, though again skirted the Jewish aspect of the story to the consternation of at least one of the Sobibor survivors. Writing to Pechersky from Israel, Moshe Bahir inquired why a book about a death camp for Jews omitted any mention of Jews.

When Pechersky was discharged from the hospital in early 1945, he returned to Rostov. Arriving in the morning, he went looking for his wife and daughter. It was a weekday, and neither of them was at the apartment, but neighbors told him which school his daughter was enrolled in.

Ella's classroom was on the first floor, and she noticed a man in uniform peering in at the windows. When the door to the classroom opened partway she recognized her father but did not go to him. Even after the bell rang and all the other children filed out, she remained at her desk, fiddling with its contents. She couldn't bring herself to get up, though she loved her father very much and knew that he loved her.

To see him again had been her most fervent wish. But faced with him at the door, she was seized by a nameless feeling. She was an unusually shy girl, but what she felt wasn't her habitual shyness. From his letters, she knew her father was alive, but maybe there is a special feeling, particularly in a child, that comes from seeing for the first time someone you love but have long believed to be dead. In the end, her father came into the classroom and went to her.

The family was reunited and lived together in their old apartment, but it didn't last. That summer, Ella was sent away to a Young Pioneers camp so that she wouldn't be present during the court proceedings of her parents' divorce. In most accounts of Pechersky's biography, the divorce is attributed to a love affair that developed between Pechersky and a woman named Olga Kotova who worked at the hospital where he was recuperating. In these versions, Pechersky returns to Rostov not alone but already with Olga, the end of his marriage to Lyudmila a fait accompli.

But there is another version, in which Pechersky returns by himself intending to resume his domestic life and discovers that during the occupation Lyudmila had relations with a German officer. This version is presented as fact in the book by Selma Leydesdorff and is supported by Pechersky's niece, Vera Rafalovich, and by a close friend of Pechersky's who now lives in Israel. The friend knew this as an article of unspoken but common knowledge. Vera recalled overhearing the matter discussed within the family, between her mother and her grandmother.

However, Ilya Vasiliev and his colleague Mikhail Edelstein dismiss Lyudmila's affair as implausible for reasons of logistics. Lyudmila lived in a large Soviet apartment block where one couldn't buy a new pair of shoes let alone conduct an affair without the neighbors catching wind. And if they had caught wind, Lyudmila would have been shunned and punished after the Germans were driven from Rostov. Leonid Terushkin also regards this as an unfounded rumor, and, frankly, beneath the dignity of respectable historiography.

When I put the question to Ella, as delicately as it is possible to ask such a thing, she said it was only the second time in her life that she had heard anything of the kind. The first time had been about a decade earlier when a documentarian named Alexander Marutyan had interviewed her for his film about Pechersky, Arithmetic of Freedom. She didn't know where he'd gotten his information from because it was the kind of thing she would have heard about if it had any substance. Her reasoning was similar to that of Vasiliev and Edelstein's; in the apartment block where they lived, with three communal neighbors and an assortment of quite simple and even vulgar people who needed little prompting to spew something cruel or spiteful, nobody had ever said anything to her in childhood or thereafter.

"I never saw or heard any such thing," Ella said and solemnly swore on her cross.

In the divorce, Pechersky was granted custody of Ella. Ella believed it was because her mother was adjudged a very small living space, one unheated room walled off from the old apartment without a kitchen, toilet or running water.

The course of Lyudmila's life afterward was very dismal. She was struck by a mysterious illness that took her beautiful singing voice. Later, she was felled by a heart attack, and, for a short time, was obliged to live in the care of Pechersky and Olga. It was very humiliating for her, even though she was treated with kindness and solicitude. She spent the last 11 years of her life with Ella and her husband and was convinced that she
had been cursed, or had cursed herself, when she’d agreed to deny her faith and convert to Judaism.

About the time Pechersky was recuperating from his wounds and reuniting with his family in Rostov, the Soviet attitude toward the Jews had begun to change. Anti-Semitism was never official Soviet policy, as it was with the Nazis. It was more creeping and insidious, cloaked in Marxist-Leninist terminology.

People noted the change after the Red Army defeated the Germans at Stalingrad and the balance of power shifted in the Soviet favor. That spring, David Ortenberg, Vasily Grossman’s editor at the newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star), was instructed to reduce the number of Jewish correspondents on his staff. He informed his superior that the numbers had already been reduced since nine of them had fallen at the front. He then resigned, adding a 10th. A Soviet colonel charged into the offices of another newspaper where Ilya Ehrenburg’s daughter worked shouting, “Is this a synagogue?” The newspaper was closed, and the staff reassigned.

Jewish soldiers noted that they received lesser medals and awards than their Russian counterparts for similar acts of valor. Whether because of a rise in Russian chauvinism at the expense of all the national minorities, as Stalin took to using the phrase the Russian instead of the Soviet people when heaping praise on the citizenry. Whether because of the old and pernicious accusation of dual loyalty: that while Jews could be trusted in a war against the Nazis they could not be trusted in a war against America and the West—and after the establishment of the state of Israel, they were more suspect still.

1948 and 1958 there was not a single mention of it in the Russian press. The Black Book that Grossman and Ehrenburg were editing was scuttled by the authorities in early 1947; it didn’t appear in Russia until 2015. Opposing its publication, the official in charge of propaganda wrote that “reading this book one gets the false impression that … the Germans fought against the USSR solely for the sake of exterminating the Jews.” For Pechersky, who wanted above all else to inform the world about Sobibor, this had to be terribly frustrating.

Pechersky also suffered more directly during this period—though it’s not possible to assert whether he was targeted primarily because of his Jewish ethnicity or because of his other vulnerabilities. In the winter of 1951, he was working as an administrator at the Musical Comedy Theater in Rostov. He was also at this point a member of the Communist Party.

One afternoon, investigators from the MGB (a precursor to the KGB) arrived with a search warrant at the communal apartment—five rooms, of which three were inhabited by Pechersky, Olga, Ella, and Olga’s daughter from her first marriage, Tania. They accused him of profiting from an illicit trade in theater tickets. Ella returned home from school to find the investigators in the apartment, rifling through their meager possessions. The contents of the apartment were four small beds, a writing table that Pechersky had made himself; an old dresser that held a few items of clothing, and the piano Pechersky had bought when Ella was born. In the larder, the investigators would have found some noodles and potatoes, nothing more. There was no refrigerator. If Pechersky was enriching himself through this scheme, there was no sign of it.

Several people were charged at his theater, most of them Jews. But Pechersky was the only one who was convicted. He lost his job. In June of 1952, he was dismissed from the Communist Party. In early 1953, he was sentenced to a year of community service and a substantial fine. It could have been worse; he could have been sent to prison.

What occasioned the charges against Pechersky? There had been a notorious attack in print against Jewish theater critics. Pechersky was no critic but Jews were being purged from various industries. There was also a campaign against speculation in tickets. Pechersky apparently had strained relations with his boss. He was also a POW and, despite having “cleansed his guilt with his blood,” he was considered perpetually tainted; many like him had been shipped to the gulag. In short, his position was tenuous.

Among the various myths that have accrued around Pechersky is that he spent time in prison in connection with this incident. Or that he was five years out of work and reduced to selling handmade trinkets at a bazaar. None of this is true. Ella’s own recollection, that he was out of work for three years and that they relied upon financial assistance from his brother and from another friend is also untrue. In their tenacious search for documents, Ilya Vasiliev and Mikhail Edelstein found evidence that Pechersky was without work for less than a year. The work he found was menial but he remained employed until he reached his retirement age.

His brother, Kotya, was less fortunate. In December of 1958, he was found...
hanging in a jail cell. By this time Stalin was dead. Khruschev was in power, and ostensibly the black cloud that had loomed over the Jews had lifted. But Khruschev also launched anti-corruption campaigns, and Pechersky’s brother was caught up in one of them. The exact nature of Kotya’s offense is unclear, but like Pechersky he had a job administering an arts troupe, a small enterprise called Tsirk na scene, Circus on Stage, and he was accused of financial malfeasance.

When this happened Ella was living with her first husband and attending university in Baku, in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. One night she received a call from Olga who informed her, “Uncle Kotya is no more.” It was impossible to discuss further by telephone. Nor could the event be written about in letters.

Ella didn’t learn any more until she returned to Rostov in 1960. Her aunt Nadja, Kotya’s widow, told her that Kotya was set to be released. They’d hired a good lawyer who assured them that the case wouldn’t go to trial. One day, when all the other prisoners were in the exercise yard, Kotya remained behind. It defied sense that he would kill himself if he was to be set free.

In the official documents, a line slashes through the spot where the cause of death would be recorded.

Kotya was 51 when he died, and his death was one of the great tragedies of Pechersky’s life. How to comprehend it? If Kotya died of natural causes, on account of his frail heart, then it is unfortunate and sad. If he was murdered, then it is horrific and unjust. And if he found himself in that situation because the Soviets were pursuing a policy adverse to Jews, then it casts the matter in yet another light. If we are to believe that Pechersky and his brother harbored no special feeling for Jewishness, regarded it as an anachronism and tried to evade it, the circumstances of their lives wouldn’t allow for it. As was true for many Soviet Jews, their Jewishness pursued them like a shadow.

In the years after Kotya’s death, years that coincided with Khruschev’s “thaw,” it became possible again to write and publish about Sobibor. Articles appeared in the Soviet press, and in this way Pechersky’s surviving comrades learned of his whereabouts and established contact with the leader of the Sobibor revolt.

In 1963, Semion Rosenfeld and Arkady Vaispapir came to Rostov to mark the 20th anniversary of the uprising. An article about it appeared in the newspaper Komsomolets. (During this period, other articles were written about Pechersky and Sobibor in the Soviet press.) The reunion became a tradition. On the 25th anniversary, they were joined by three more surviving comrades. They exchanged recollections and new information that had emerged over time. There was a dinner, with everyone contributing something, because decent food was both difficult and costly to secure.

At the table, when toasts were made, Pechersky rarely spoke because he was quickly overcome with emotion. The concept of trauma, as it is understood and accepted today in the West, did not exist in the Soviet Union. It was taken as a given that everyone lived through some nightmare during the war and was haunted by it. For Ella, it was a fear of planes passing overhead. Just the sound of them made her tremble.

For Pechersky, it was the crying of children. Within the family it was known that if a baby started to cry, it had to be taken into another room because Pechersky would become distraught. This condition became more pronounced as he grew older. There were certain topics he could not discuss. Kotya’s death was one. Luka’s fate was another. He blamed himself for losing track of her during the uprising. In 1965, he placed an ad in a Dutch Jewish newspaper looking for her. He preserved the shirt she gave him. It remains in the family and is sometimes included in touring exhibits, a precious artifact.

Throughout the 1960s, ’70s and as late as the 1980s, so long as his health permitted, Pechersky gave talks about Sobibor to schoolchildren, Pioneer troops, and university students. It is estimated that he made around 700 such presentations, not just in Rostov but in different parts of the Soviet Union. He also kept up an extensive correspondence with people all over the world, particularly with former Sobibor inmates and researchers and journalists who expressed interest in Sobibor and the uprising. For languages other than Russian—Yiddish, English, Hebrew, Polish—he befriended people who translated for him.

One of these, a man named Lazar Lubarski, first encountered Pechersky at a museum in Rostov where Pechersky was sitting in front of a scale model of Sobibor that he had made himself. Lubarski was a Zionist, and served four years in prison for it. Lubarski eventually settled in Israel and remained devoted to Pechersky. He was one of the two people who encouraged Ilya Vasiliev to take up the work of reviving Pechersky’s memory.

At different points starting in the 1940s, Pechersky wished to attend war crimes trials outside of the Soviet Union but was never granted permission to do so by the authorities. In 1965-66, Pechersky asked to attend the trial of 12 SS officers who had served at Sobibor, including his nemesis Karl Frenzel but permission was denied. Five of the defendants at the trial were acquitted completely. Five others received sentences of three to eight years. Kurt Bolender, a particularly vicious officer who was in charge of the prisoners in Camp III, killed himself before his sentence was handed down, and Karl Frenzel was sentenced to life. In 1982 Frenzel appealed, and in 1984 some German procurators traveled to Donetsk to depose Soviet survivors of the death camp. This was as close as any of them would get to facing their tormentors and exacting justice.

But Sobibor survivors from Western nations did attend the trial, Thomas Blatt among them. Remarkably, at Frenzel’s request, the two met in a hotel room in Hagen where Blatt conducted an interview with Frenzel that subsequently formed part of an article that ran in a German magazine. Frenzel requested
the next, gaining momentum until it formed. They were the culmination of machinery of the Holocaust, the death hard murderers in the euthanasia program, down to the design of life.” The model employed in the euthanasia program, gassing to death the mentally ill, who were considered by the state to be “unworthy of life.” The model employed in the euthanasia program, down to the design of the gas chambers, was extended to the death camps. A select number of staff members made their superiors believe that they were the culmination of the three Reinhard camps. Something in the recollections of several survivors. It was tame until it attacked prisoners on their buttocks or genitals, crippling them and sealing their deaths.”

“The dog features in the recollections of several survivors. It was tame until it received a command, at which point it attacked prisoners on their buttocks or genitals, crippling them and sealing their deaths.”

reached its ultimate, if not necessarily inevitable, genocidal terminus. Though Frenzel's sentence was upheld, he was released shortly thereafter for reasons of age and ill health and lived 11 years in freedom, dying in 1996 at the age of 85. He was nearly Pechersky's contemporary and outlived him by six years.

The picture drawn of Pechersky in the last decade of life is often a melancholic one. He is depicted as living in poverty. He is worn down by the cumulative disappointments imposed upon him by the Soviet authorities—a lack of recognition for his and his comrades' heroism, a lack of recognition for the extraordinary feat that was the Sobibor uprising, and the serial refusals to allow him to travel outside the Soviet Union to participate in events related to Sobibor. The last of these occurred in 1987, when Pechersky was invited to attend a screening of the British television movie Escape from Sobibor starring Alan Arkin as Leon Feldhendler and Rutger Hauer as Pechersky. Once more the authorities made it impossible for him attend.

Age and infirmity were also taking their toll. The effects of a hard life manifested themselves, arising not insignificantly from the injuries and ailments he sustained during the war. And by the late 1980s with Gorbachev and perestroika, the Soviet Union was undergoing a transformation that made everyday reality increasingly alien for people of Pechersky's generation.

In January 1990, it became clear to Ella that her father would not live much longer. Moshe Bahir traveled from Israel to say his farewell. On the night of Jan. 18, Ella decided to stay at Pechersky and Olga's apartment rather than go home. Moshe Bahir slept in one room. Olga was in her bed, and Pechersky, no longer communicative, lay in his. A folding cot had been made up for Ella at the foot of his bed. She listened to her father's labored breathing. Once Olga fell asleep, Ella sat in a chair beside his bed and held his hand.

I looked at my watch and it was four minutes to midnight on January the 18th. I got up and went around to Olga Ivanovna’s bed. I said, ‘Aunt Olya, if you want to say goodbye to Papa, come say goodbye because he is leaving us.’ She started to wail in the Russian fashion and I said, ‘Please be calm, let him go in peace. Don’t wake the whole house.’ I resumed my seat and took his hand. Olga sat on the opposite side and pressed herself to him and cried, ‘Shurinka, Shurinka.’ At a certain moment I looked at my watch and saw it was 12:05 or 12:07 on the 19th of January. I heard him inhale once, just as my mother had inhaled, then he inhaled a second time and that was it, except with my mother a single tear fell from her eye. That was all.

In talking to people about Pechersky, I often had the sensation that when they spoke about him they were really speaking about themselves. He was a prism through which were refracted their own views about Jews, Germans, Ukrainians and Poles, of the Soviet Union, of Russia, of Israel. I don’t exclude myself from this, because when I read his words or watched his interview with Dunya Bruer, I felt that there was some alternate meaning beneath them, a true meaning.
that needed to be decoded—except that everyone would decode it differently, including Pechersky himself.

For Ilya Vasiliev, Pechersky was tough, resourceful, wise, effective, charismatic, and superior to everyone he associated with. He was at once a universal hero to be admired by all peoples everywhere and the quintessential Soviet Jew, misunderstood and underappreciated by Western Jews whose Holocaust narrative was a narrative of victimhood, and whose institutions—Yad Vashem and The United States Holocaust Museum—venerated the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and Mordecai Anielewicz, a martyr, and neglected Sobibor and Pechersky, a victor.

For Leonid Terushkin, it was as if Pechersky was divinely chosen, born solely for Oct. 14, 1943, and then living to tell the tale. Otherwise he didn’t achieve anything in life. He was unlucky in love. His family life wasn’t very successful. He had no career. No money. He lived in a hovel. Some acknowledged him as a hero, others did not. He never entered the Soviet pantheon. Like many other war heroes, he was capable of remarkable things in extreme circumstances but he wasn’t equipped for normal life.

For Lazar Lubarksi, Pechersky was a casualty of the Soviet regime. He lived in fear of the KGB, who monitored his every move, censored his mail and proscribed how he could speak about Sobibor—which pained him very much. If before the war he believed in the Soviet Union he ceased to believe after the war. He saw himself as a Jewish hero, but remained in Russia because his wife was Russian and his daughter and granddaughter were Russian, and Russia was their home.

For Ella, her father was a humble person who never claimed the mantle of hero. Who never made any demands.

“**For the most part, people were killed not far from where they lived. Their neighbors watched them get rounded up.**

Who, if he ever asked anything from the regime, always asked for others. Near the end of his life he didn’t want anything anymore, just to spend time with his family, with his granddaughter and later with his great-grandchildren.

An estimated 15,000 Jews live in Rostov today. They are served by two different Jewish organizations. There used to be one but there was a schism, and now there are two—but as in an amicable divorce, for the sake of the children, the organizations sometimes cooperate and complement each other. One organization gets the bulk of its funding from the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which is true of most such organizations in the FSU.

The other organization is financed by the local community, relying heavily on a few wealthy Jewish donors who triumphed in the Darwinian struggle of the post-Soviet collapse. They have their offices on the top floor of the Soldiers’ Synagogue, which was returned to the community and beautifully restored. The synagogue follows the Orthodox tradition and its rabbi is a young Chabad Lubavitch Hasid. Hence, the spiritual life of the Rostov Jews is once more in the care of the Lubavitchers who proved to have outwitted and outlasted the Bolsheviks.

In 1975, a memorial park including a small museum was built on part of the Zmievskaya Balka site. A huge, brooding stone monument was erected, depicting a man, a woman, and a child in anguish. For a long time, information about what transpired there could only be found inside the museum, which opened just a few times a year. But in 2004, after extensive lobbying and agitation by the Jewish community, the mayor of Rostov agreed to include a memorial plaque that acknowledged that some 27,000 people were killed there by the Nazis, among them many Jews. Overlooking the ravine are private homes, presumably on the same plots where homes stood in 1942. A busy four-lane road borders the memorial. There is a gas station within view. Across the road is a housing development called Russkaya Balka, Russian Ravine. People were murdered there too, but in the political maelstrom of the 1990s the land was acquired and developers built on it.

This is the story of the Holocaust in the lands of the former Soviet Union. For the most part, people were killed not far from where they lived. Their neighbors watched them get rounded up. Some were horrified and sympathetic. A few risked their lives to shelter them. Others participated in the killing. Many scavenged their possessions and assumed occupancy of their homes.

For traces of Pechersky in Rostov, one can find a plaque affixed to the wall of the house where he lived with Olga. It reads: “In this house lived the organizer of the uprising in the death camp Sobibor ...” One can find his grave, in a desirable location in the Northern Cemetery, one of the largest in all Europe. His plot is near one of the entrances, adjacent to a narrow bumpy road skirting auto repair shops. Car parts are strewn here and there, the husk of a rusted automobile, discarded vodka bottles and random trash. A painted sign at the entrance asks visitors to kindly refrain from relieving themselves near the graves.

One can also still find people of a certain generation in Rostov who remember Pechersky. A number of them assembled

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in a room at the Family Center run by the JDC-funded organization. One man, a history professor, remembered how in the late 1960s, Pechersky twice spoke to his students about Sobibor. He never uttered the word “Jew” and the second time was overcome with emotion. Another man recalled how Pechersky came to speak to his class when he himself was a student. He did use the word “Jew” and he did not become emotional. A third man remembered Pechersky visiting his neighbor, a concentration camp survivor, and speaking fluent Yiddish. When a quarrel erupted over the true extent of Soviet anti-Semitism, a fourth man put on his coat and scarf and stormed out of the room.

Pechersky is also remembered by the younger generation of Rostov Jews. In another room at the Family Center were members of the Youth Club who agreed to talk to me. They ranged in age from 15 to 37, male and female. They were familiar with the details of Pechersky’s life and, as young Rostov Jews, considered it their responsibility to know. But his story was also taught in the public school system to everyone, Jews and non-Jews.

The question of Jewishness, the degree of Pechersky’s Jewishness, which nettled others, didn’t concern them because their understanding of what it meant to be Jewish was improvised and intuitive. They had sifted Jewishness from their ancestry like flecks of gold, or even fool’s gold. A father who never spoke about it. A grandmother who let something slip when relatives emigrated. Atheists with peculiar surnames. A schoolyard taunt that later needed explaining. Awareness that lay dormant until something called it to the surface. Confusion and shame were recast as cognition and pride.

I posed a question to one of the group members, a blond, fair-skinned, 16-year-old with a nose piercing named Dasha, who’d been quiet while others spoke.

Can you tell me what is a Jew?

The answer that instantly came to me is: It’s me.

What makes you a Jew?

It is the internal condition of my soul. A connection to something greater. A connection to this force that was, is and will be after my own death and for many centuries beyond. It is a connection to something deep and meaningful.

How does it differ from Islam or Christianity?

I don’t know. It’s something that can’t be expressed in words. It is something deep within a person. It is something exceptional. Some kernel that makes a person who she is.

How did you start coming to the club?

My father brought me.

Why did your father bring you?

He wanted that I would be exposed to this world.

Is your father Jewish?

Something like that.

And your mother is also something like that?

My mother isn’t at all. But she’s now taken an interest because her daughter has immersed herself fully in it.

And your father is Jewish in what sense?

That’s very difficult. I have no Jews in my family. But my father’s first wife was Jewish. While he was married to his first wife he really enjoyed being in the company of Jews. It captivated him. This is how I ended up in the Jewish community.

How do you imagine yourself in 10 years?

In 10 years I will have gone through conversion.

In Rostov?

It’s not realistic here. It’s hard to get kosher food.

So where?

St. Petersburg. When I go to university.

I ask these questions because part of the problem with Pechersky was that people abroad didn’t understand how he was a Jew and the circumstances of Russian Jews. And what you have described about yourself, there are Jews who may say you’re not particularly Jewish.

That’s their problem.

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Mango Ice Cream Cake

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 3 pints mango ice cream
- 3 pints vanilla ice cream
- 1 cup crystallized ginger
- 1 cup dried mango slices
- 1 cup blueberry or mango preserves
- 1 cup fresh blueberries, raspberries, or diced fresh mango

PREPARATION

Step 1
Take the mango ice cream out of the freezer to soften slightly. Put a 9-inch spring form cake pan in the freezer to chill.

Step 2
Chop the crystallized ginger and dried mango into small pieces while the mango ice cream softens. When the ice cream is ready to be scooped, take the cake pan out of the freezer. Working quickly, scoop all the mango ice cream into the cake pan and flatten it with your hands using a small spatula. Be careful not to leave any gaps on the side. Sprinkle the dried ginger and mango over the ice cream and press it in. Make sure that each piece is pressed in or you will have trouble with the next layer of ice cream. Return the cake pan to the freezer to harden, for at least 20 minutes.

Step 3
When the mango ice cream is stiff again, take out the vanilla ice cream and let it soften slightly. Take the cake pan out of the freezer, scoop the vanilla ice cream into it, and smooth the top. This will be the bottom layer (the cake is inverted) so the top doesn’t have to be perfectly smooth. Return the cake to the freezer for a couple of hours to harden before serving.

Step 4
Fill a bowl wide enough to fit the cake pan with very hot water. Take the cake out of the freezer and carefully submerge the sides of the pan in the hot water. Hold it there for about 15 seconds, then dry the pan off, run a knife around the inside, and invert the cake onto a serving plate. If you are not serving the cake right away, return it to the freezer.

Step 5
When you are ready to serve the cake, spoon the fruit preserves over the top, starting in the center and moving in concentric circles out to the edge. Let the puree or preserves spill over and down the sides of the cake. Scatter the berries or mango over the top of the cake.

Yield: 10–12 Servings