

STEVEN MAYOFF

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The morning the Montmartre approached Pier 2 the sky was a charcoal smudge. Passengers of all classes stood on the decks while a steady mist of rain clung to their faces. Many had heard about the great explosion six years earlier, but nothing could prepare them for what they saw. Much of the city was still in ruins. It was a grim and jagged skyline of crumbled buildings like a row of broken teeth that made some of the passengers instinctively run a tongue along their own. Many wondered if they were entering a war zone.

Those in steerage were the last to disembark, shuffling down the gangplank with their possessions. As it had been in Cherbourg, their home for the next few days would be a hotel that was situated at the top of the concrete transit shed. And just like in Cherbourg, there was a hospital—a makeshift infirmary staffed by only one doctor and one nurse—where they would undergo all manner of medical examinations before their papers would be inspected and processed by immigration officials. The transit shed itself showed signs of damage as did much of the pier. And although the building stood intact, as an immigration facility its resources were stretched.

This brief incarceration was particularly difficult for Shulim. For most of the voyage he had sat shiva, which was not the worst way to spend ten days trapped at sea in a congested steerage hold. In a way, his time of mourning was like a period of stasis, a way to numb himself against the uncomfortable conditions on the ship. Although there had been time to think and reflect, he couldn't recall any of his thoughts, like someone who wakes from sleep and can't remember his dreams. But here at Pier 2, in the small quarters (although comparatively roomier than the steerage berth) where he and Betye had been assigned, he felt like a frozen side of beef only now beginning to thaw.

Bereshul, my Bereshul. Buried so far away in a foreign land. In the past. No, not in the past, because it felt as if mysterious hands were digging up Bereshul's grave in the cemetery of Shulim's body. He wanted to beg the officials to put him back on the boat and freeze him again, so he wouldn't have to feel this raw ache.

Shulim imagined that he and the boy were walking around Sadgura, that he was pointing out to Bereshul all the places he remembered when he was his age. They strolled along the Prut River, across which lay the bustling city of Czernowitz. "When you're older we'll go and ride on a streetcar."

Shulim could see the gleam of wonder in his son's dark eyes. He could feel his son's hand grasping his own as they went down the barbers' street where

there were signposts with brass circles affixed —the sign of the soap bowl. “And if you get a boo-boo they can sell you leeches, too.”

“But, Papa, I can find all the leeches I want by the stream near our house.”

“Don’t say anything to Mama about that.”

Along Synagogue Street they passed the steam bath houses and the mikvahs or ritual baths. As they approached the chederim or religious schools, Shulim felt the same pang of awe that he used to feel when he was Bereshul’s age.

“Is that where you went to school, Papa?”

“No. I went to the regular school. But if you like I could enrol you there. Someday you might be a great scholar.”

“What is a scholar?”

“A scholar is a very wise man. He spends his days studying books and pondering the great questions.”

“What questions?”

“Questions such as what is God’s plan and when will the Messiah come.”

“I think I would rather be a fisherman and spend my days by the stream.”

And of course they stopped to look at the Great Schul with its huge door like an imposing cliff face. It amused Shulim to see how Bereshul had to tilt his head back to see it all, as if straining a hinge in his tiny neck.

“See, Yinguele No mezuzah on the door posts, so the souls of the dead can get in easier for their midnight gatherings.”

Was that where Bereshul was now, convening every night with the other dead ones? Or did he haunt the stream near their house? He often watched Betye and wondered how she was feeling. But he knew her grief—a mother’s grief—was different from his. She had carried Bereshul inside of her, had pushed him out of her like one of her own organs. After he died she had, in a way, put him back inside, letting him haunt her like the phantom sensation of an amputated limb. She still owned him, would not give him up, not even for her own daughter, Dvorah, whom Betye could not bring herself to hold. The thought of it made Shulim sick and somehow envious.

His grief, by comparison, seemed less concentrated, diaphanous. His grief had a will of its own, deconstructing and reassembling memories at will. Shulim kept returning to Sadgura.

In the quarter called Bei Der Brück he and Bereshul lingered by an old stone bridge and skipped stones across the Moszkow stream. At the bridge, carriage drivers waited for fares from the nearby guesthouses. The drivers were smoking and arguing, cursing loudly. I spotted my brother Yankel. Seeing us, he chided the others, saying “Watch your tongues, there are young ears around.” Yankel’s horse was an old nag named Tsuker because of its sweet disposition. Of course Bereshul wanted to feed the beast, and as luck would have it Shulim had a couple of sugar cubes in his pocket. “Mind you keep your hand flat or else the horse will eat your fingers.”

“Tsuker wouldn’t hurt anyone. Right, Feter Yankel?”

“The dumb animal doesn’t even have the heart to swat the flies with its tail.”

At the entrance to Rabbi’s Street they looked at the fenced-off district where the Wonder Rabbi of Sadgura lived. His great house had battlements like a castle. Then they found themselves, in contrast to the splendour of the Rabbi’s home, on Mizraim Street, one of the poorest areas in Sadgura, a row of desolate huts. When Shulim’s father was a schoolboy one of his friends had lived here. Shulim explained to Bereshul how the street had been named for the widespread sickness which infected most who lived there, particularly the children.

“They called it Pharaoh’s Sickness for the ten plagues in the Bible. It left its victims partially bald all their lives. Every year on Shabbot Hagadol the sick ones parade through the street with flags and noise-makers, crying out ‘Pharaohs to Egypt!’”

“Papa, I don’t want to lose my hair.”

“Don’t worry, boychik, you won’t get infected. Come, let’s go, and don’t tell Mama I brought you here.”

He and Betye had hardly spoken since they arrived in Halifax. He didn’t worry; in fact, he felt relieved. After all, what was there to say? Mariasse, the Polish girl they had met on the Montmartre, was still taking care of Dvorah. He watched Betye watching the girl. She was holding their daughter. For the first time he had a vague inkling of what Betye was feeling. Not that he had stopped caring for Dvorah. No; but he was aware that this yawning nothingness inside him—all he had left of Bereshul—had become a barrier between he and his daughter. It scared him. He had no urge to hold her, as if his arms were stricken. Once, when Mariasse offered Dvorah to him, he found himself shouting at the girl. “Don’t you think if I wanted to hold her I would come and get her?” Dvorah began to cry, and Mariasse recoiled as though she had been slapped across the face. Even Betye was surprised.

For Shulim, the days moved slowly. After a week, he, Betye, Dvorah and Mariasse had passed their physicals. Now it was time to have their papers processed. They sat on benches in a crowded room with other immigrants, many of whom Shulim recognized from the ship, huddled together, waiting their turn. Immigration officials in dark uniforms and caps sat behind a row of tables. The interviews passed slowly.

Women in white smocks brought tea and juice. Even though Shulim recognized the many people who had offered their condolences when he was sitting shiva, they now seemed like strangers. No one smiled or nodded. They waited. Shulim slipped back to Sadgura.

In the market at Targowiza, they wandered past the butchers’ stalls and heard the clacking rhythm of the barley mills.

“Papa, it sounds like your sewing machine, but louder and bumpier.”

“Such a clever boy.”

They gazed in wonder at the china vendor’s rattling wares—“Maybe Mama would like some nice dishes for Chanukah.” —and listened to the lowing and

neighing from the livestock and horse markets. Their noses twitched at the pungent smells from where the herring vendors displayed their dried fish in towering piles.

By now Shulim knew his son was getting tired. “Just a little bit farther, Bereshul. Papa wants to show you one more place.” They ventured into the Herrengasse, a quarter comprised of cottages inhabited by clerks and Jewish lawyers: the great middle-class of Sadgura.

“This is what I wanted for you, my son. To live a comfortable and dignified life. But I can see this place is changing; it is disappearing. To live this life, one would have to go far away. On the move, the way the Jews have roamed since Moses led us out of Egypt. I just wanted to take us to a place where we could settle, where we wouldn’t have to move any more. If only I’d known what would happen. I would never have taken us one foot out of Sadgura if I’d had any idea that I would lose my only—”

Shulim was suddenly aware of a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. It was Betye. There was a look of urgency in her eyes. All he wanted was to fall down at her feet and beg her forgiveness. She scowled with impatience.

“Shulim. They’re calling us. For God’s sake, it’s our turn. Hurry before they pass us over and we have to spend another day in this far’sholten place.”

The immigration officer looked pale and haggard. He sat at the table. He did not look at Shulim, busying himself with papers, writing and stamping. He was breathing audibly through his nose. Shulim could see the stiff shirt collar digging into the man’s neck. It was red with chafing. When the man finally lifted his eyes to Shulim, they seemed to be looking through him at the next applicant, as though the interview was already over.

“Name?”

During the latter part of the voyage, Shulim had enlisted Mariasse to teach him some English. But feeling somewhat nervous he thought the man had said Nain, Yiddish for No, and immediately feared he was being denied entry, even before he could show his papers. What would he tell Betye? That they had come all this way for nothing? That he had sacrificed their son just so they could be turned away and told to go back home? This was it. Now came the punishment Betye had warned him of when they first boarded the ship.

“Your name?” the man repeated.

Yor nain? What was he talking about? Year no? No year? Was he telling Shulim to come back in a year? Or could only stay in Canada for a year? What good would that do them? Shulim suddenly pushed back his chair and stood, searching around the room, not quite sure what he was looking for. Betye got up from the bench. She looked to Shulim. Shulim looked back down again at the immigration officer, who seemed equally surprised and confused to be looking up at Shulim.

Unsure of what to do next, Shulim pulled two pieces of paper from his coat pocket. He unfolded them and laid them out on the table for the official to see: Bereshul’s certificates of birth and death.

“My son is dead,” he said in Russian. Perhaps the dark uniform made him think the official would somehow understand. He pulled out more birth certificates for himself, Betye and Dvorah. “But I am alive. My wife and my daughter are alive. We must keep living. Please, sir, help us live. Help us remember.”

Now Betye was behind Shulim, tugging on his sleeve. “What are you doing? What’s going on? Sit down, for God’s sake. They all think you’ve gone meshuggah!”

Now it was the official’s turn to stand. He held up his hands like he was trying to direct traffic. “I need everyone to sit down. We’ll get to these papers in a moment. But first I need your name. Name.”

“What?”

“He’s saying we can’t come in?” asked Betye.

Mariasse had also come up to the table, holding Dvorah. “Nomen,” she said to Shulim. “Vos nomen du?”

Mariasse requested to act as interpreter. A chair was brought for her.

“Let me take her from you while you do this,” said Betye, with arms held out. Mariasse handed Betye her daughter and sat down.

Shulim saw this exchange, and felt something he hadn’t felt since boarding the Montmartre. He floated down into his seat. He craned his neck, like a boy trying to glimpse the end of a parade.

The officer looked at Shulim.

“Name.”