

Amos Blas

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Contento De Semrik

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Kazik Shparok, the writer's cousin, at his last photo (1939)

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This book is dedicated to my parents. Thanks to them I survived. And to my children, thanks to them I learned what childhood is, and what are the responsibilities, duties, and enjoyments of a parent.



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The Meeting

I spent the night in a fitful sleep that alternated between many complicated, changing dreams and periods of deep sleep. The temperamental night was very long and exhausting. When I woke up and shook off the dreams, the light was as bright as at noontime.

We were in a Tel Aviv restaurant named after a Polish fish. We came here very often lately to enjoy an early lunch when the place was not yet busy. In an hour we would be back at our home, full and satisfied.

We sat, as usual, on the porch, enjoying the small entrees that were already served. We deliberated whether to order our regular choices or to change our habit and try some of the other specialties on the menu.

We decided to try something new.

At the table nearby was a couple who appeared to be different from the other guests. The man looked older than I and was the only one in the restaurant wearing a suit and a tie. He wore shining and polished leather shoes that stood out next to the sneakers and sandals of the other guests. The lady who sat next to him looked significantly younger than he. She wore a long, fashionable dress,

standing out in the presence of the pants and short skirts worn by the other women there. Her hand was decorated with many rings, and next to the closest chair leg stood an elegant purse.

We waited for our main dishes and looked at them. We had no doubt – they were tourists, probably from a large metropolitan area where it was the custom to dress in European finery to enjoy lunch in a restaurant. Their uncomfortable body language showed they were well aware of the fact that their clothing didn't fit the crowd or the hot and humid noon weather in a restaurant exposed to the breeze from the sea.

When they were handed the menu, the two were even more flustered. They looked at it, searching for non-Hebrew letters, turned it from right to left, but had no success – it was only in Hebrew. The perplexed man looked around in discomfort, but the young waitress did not notice him – the restaurant was already full.

I saw him looking at the waitresses, and from his expression I could tell that he was surprised by the diversity in their clothing. Most of them wore tight, low-fitting jeans, decorated by remarkable rips (probably fashionable). They wore tight T-shirts, un-unified, with different titles on them. Few of them had aprons, but almost all of them were friendly and smiling at the customers, looking like they were enjoying their work.

We were still waiting for our food, and I saw his head keep on moving from right to left, back and forward, on and on, searching

soundlessly for some help and attention. I realized that he wanted to call to one of the waitresses or to ask something, but they all looked busy and the perplexed tourist would not raise his voice. I was not as polite as he was. I called to the nearby waitress and signaled her to approach him. He saw and heard my calling, smiled with gratitude, and pleasantly thanked me in English. "Have a nice day," I answered in English as well, giving the customary greeting in the U.S.

The tourist seemed to be happy with my English reply and hesitantly asked me to help him with the menu because the waitress had not yet approached him. I pointed to the dishes that were served on our table and recommended them. The tourists agreed, I called the waitress again, and I helped them order their meal.

I quickly turned back to my food in order to finish it before it became cold. I felt a slight shove from my wife's elbow and saw her eyes gesturing toward the tourists. In a response that had nothing to do with my "unsocial" character and my usual "I won't interfere" approach, I talked to them this time and invited them to join our table. They happily agreed to do so. Now the young tourist sat in front of my wife, Adina, and the older one sat in front of me. Until their main dishes were served, they sampled, hesitantly and carefully, from the many small entrees that were already in front of them. It seemed like they were not familiar with many of those tiny dishes, such as the labaneh (soft white goat's milk cheese) or the hummus that was mixed with tehina. The contents of those dishes were the reason for an easy, polite conversation between me and the tourist in front of me.

Slightly late, but with well-ingrained European politeness, the tourist stood up, held Adina's palm, kissed its back, and introduced himself as Karl – a retired man from New York. He also introduced the young lady – his daughter, Guta.

I was shocked when I heard the daughter's name.

After a longer-than-expected break, I introduced both myself and my wife – as well, with only our first names.

Without understanding why and for what reason, I felt myself shivering and my skin tingling. The names of our two new partners seemed to me not American, and unpredictable – the daughter's name in particular was very strange to me. Even though the names were weird, I felt, without knowing why, that it wasn't only the names that made me feel the unexpected shivering and excitement. Since my lips are normally closed, I held myself back without asking my neighbors for further details or explanations about their names and their origin.

I returned to enjoy my food.

Karl was friendly and more talkative than I. With short sentences in American English with a slight trace of a foreign accent, he told us a little about himself and his daughter. He said that he is a Jew who lives in New York and was, for 45 years, a businessman in the field of marketing and trade. He retired 10 years ago and ever since, has been traveling the world. He said, sadly, that his wife had passed away from an illness before he even retired, and

that is why his daughter was joining him on some of his journeys. His son-in-law was busy at work and usually couldn't find the time to join them.

Karl said they had visited Israel before and had also toured most European countries, including Poland twice, and several countries in the Far East. As required by politeness, I replied that I was retired and was enjoying my work pension after working for 45 years as an engineer in the security industry and lecturer at the academy. Now I really enjoyed the fact that I had no commitments, and I often painted, read, wrote, and took care of my health that was deteriorating as of late.

At the other end of our shared table, a lively conversation flowed between the two women. When the tourists had finished their meal, I immediately noticed that Karl's plate, just like mine, was left with not even a crumb. Our baskets of bread and bread rolls also stood empty.

After the bills were paid, I exceeded my usual custom again, and I surprised even my wife, who often teases me as being "unfriendly." I suggested to the American couple to walk together with us along the wooden platform near the beach, and they happily agreed.

Karl took off his jacket, placed it over his shoulder, and we walked slowly on the creaky wooden dock along the shore. The pleasant wind eased the burden of midday heat. Karl mentioned that this platform was similar to platforms on the West Coast. In between the brief silences, he said that he wasn't born in America. He

arrived after World War II, alone, from Europe, when he was only 20 years old. Karl did not say, and I did not ask, which country in Europe he was from. I assumed from his accent that he and I shared origins. My bet was on Poland, the country which he said he had already visited twice, the same place I left 2 years after the war, a country where men kiss the back of a lady's palm as a customary greeting.

The conversation between the two women was more flowing and lively. They discussed the situation in Israel and America, Guta's children, and our grandchildren. Their voices were calm and pleasant.

For a long time we leaned, silent, on the wooden railing of the platform. I understood now why his name had been non-American – Karl. However, the strange name of his daughter, who, according to her father, was born in the United States, was still not clear to me. I wondered why her parents decided to pick a name so foreign to a natural-born American. Why give their daughter a name that emphasizes the Eastern European origin of her father and perhaps also her mother? I wondered also why they didn't choose this name as a middle name.

We walked for about an hour on the platform, where we watched with delight the waves crashing on the rocky shore and the flocks of gulls that dived into the sea, where they gobbled the discarded remains of the many surrounding restaurants.

We briefly looked at each other's faces and understood, without

words, that we were both tired. We gently hinted to the women and turned back toward the restaurant. I offered to drive them to their hotel, but Karl thanked me and pointed to the hotel nearby, where they were staying. We accompanied them to their hotel.

Karl shook my hand good-bye, smiled, and thanked us for the help at the restaurant and the pleasant company. When he shook my hand, I felt a very strange warmth spreading through my body. I surprised them. I was not usually inclined to initiate social contacts or host; I, who really do not have friends; I was the unexpected person this time. I invited Karl and his daughter, the foreign couple, to visit our home. Karl, Guta, and my wife looked at each other surprised, but the two tourists responded almost at the same time. "We'll be glad to come."

I wondered whether I heard the normal American answer, "We'll see you," which is a most comprehensive statement with no obligation to maintain it, or whether the two tourists would really visit us. I solved the dilemma in a practical way and surprised my wife again. I pulled a piece of paper from my pocket and wrote our names, phone number, and address, and gave it to Karl. I suggested that we might see them again tonight. Without any hesitation, the foreign tourists agreed, and we parted.

When the tall Guta leaned down to kiss Adina good-bye on her cheek, the tip of the thin gold necklace she was wearing was revealed to me. On the necklace hung, close together or even connected, two pendants. They were both the same size and color. One of them was the shape of an ornamental Star of David, and

the other, very similar to it, was a cross. I was surprised by the two pendants, but, of course, I made no comment or asked any question.

During our drive home, the car was completely silent. I felt confused as though I were still immersed in the night's frenzied sleep.

Adina expressed her surprise about my uncharacteristic openness with the two tourists we met and was happy about the invite, which would allow her to practice her English, which she does not speak well. I did not know why I strayed from my regular, restrained manner either, and invited them over. I drove the car as though disconnected from my surroundings, almost unaware of the roads and the meal we just had. I was shaken up and did not understand what caused my unusual behavior.

During the drive home, I had the same sensation in my body, and especially my skin, as I did when Karl introduced himself and spoke his daughter's name for the first time.

Guta was not a new name to me, but it did not sound appropriate for a young American woman, even if her father was born in Eastern Europe. The name was not foreign to me because it resided, for over 60 years, "somewhere" in my vague memory. Its mention by Karl returned my thoughts to those difficult, painful, and terrifying years I experienced during the war, in my childhood spent, for the most part, hiding in the Warsaw ghetto for about 3 whole years.

Guta was my mother's eldest sister. Only barely, as if in a vague dream, could I remember my aunt Guta, her husband, and their son, who was 10 years my senior. Then, in the ghetto, he was a young man of 14. From what my mother told me after the war, I knew her sister Guta and her entire family were tempted by the Germans' false promises and agreed to be sent from the ghetto "east to work." In the east, the Germans promised, they would receive plenty of bread and jam for their work. The three of them, I was told, arrived at the Treblinka "work" camp from which, like most of the others, they did not return.

As a morbid joke, I calculated that were my aunt Guta alive, she would be about 110 years old today, as opposed to Karl's daughter, whose age was probably no more than 50.

In the Forest of Martyrs on the way to Jerusalem, the forest planted in memory of the 6 million whose ashes remained in Europe, my parents put up memorials. There is also a monument for the memory of my aunt Guta and her family, who never returned to us from there. Every year, on the annual Memorial Day, we go back and bring up their names and memories, especially for the family members who were not there and did not know them during their lifetimes.

These "old" memories echoed in my mind and increased my wonder at Karl's daughter's name. I did not ask Karl at lunch, nor will I ask him this evening, why he chose that European name. I consider asking such a question rude and invasive.

At home, in the afternoon, instead of reading the newspaper as I usually would, I stayed in bed and stared at the ceiling. I asked myself voicelessly what changed this time.

I wondered what caused me to suggest, suddenly, that two strangers walk on the beachside pier with us and why I invited them to our home. What connects us and them? What guided me to these unusual actions?

I could not think of a rational explanation or motive. I, the technical, organized, and punctual man, a man who always plans his actions ahead of time, now initiated, as if detached from reality, an act that was very unpredictable. And now I wait, with anxiety and anticipation, to see the two tourists again.

Sammy and Karl

After lengthy anticipation I saw the two tourists arrive.

They were dressed more elegantly than they were at lunch and apologized for their slight tardiness. The taxi driver, they said, was not familiar with our small unlit street, and that is why they were late, despite making sure they left early enough.

Karl stopped at our entrance hall. He stared at the many paintings hanging on the walls. He paused, apologized, and explained that the paintings captured his attention. Karl and his daughter gladly accepted our offer to tour the apartment, with its walls covered by my work. We also went down to my basement painting studio, and in it, Karl mostly stared at certain paintings. He seemed surprised at the variety of styles, subjects, and colors of my paintings. When we returned to the living room, Karl seemed flabbergasted, unable to understand something.

After a brief pause, Karl apologized again and explained that he did not expect to see paintings with such varied styles. Some of the subjects of the paintings were difficult and painful. He saw paintings in bold, loud colors, next to calm paintings with a combination of abstract and realistic, if inconclusive, paintings. He saw paintings full of black and red, showing sadness, fear, and cries, but alongside them were also serene paintings in an

exact, abstract style with soft, warm, and gentle colors, and works with prominent areas resembling human body parts, and areas resembling flowers. There were also paintings in a calm, abstract style; ones the viewer can imagine contains different subjects or events, according to his mood at the moment, and paintings with subjects that seem to change according to the emotions and mood of the viewer.

Karl and his daughter were surprised. They both seemed like traveling “ghosts,” hovering in an unidentified, immaterial space. My calm and quiet behavior when we first met did not prepare them for such a varied and stormy expression in my paintings. It is possible, I contemplated, that Karl guesses I am not just the quiet, closed-off type he met at the restaurant. He may guess that in my past, too, and not only in his, are experiences and events implied and reflected, either directly or indirectly, in my paintings.

Karl did not ask questions or request explanations, but his face, and particularly his eyes, revealed his emotion and questions clearly and powerfully. Guta also showed an interest in the paintings, but her reaction was more contained than her father’s. She did not hesitate to ask about certain paintings, their subjects or the background that guided me while painting them. I avoided a clear answer, as I usually do with these questions, and only noted that the paintings she saw were from different years, and that painting has been my hobby for over 40 years. I also explained that the painter’s mood greatly influences the final outcome of his work. I was not surprised that Guta did not seem satisfied by my generic answers. My paintings are my “soul

portraits,” which I am not inclined to reveal or explain. Guta, in her wisdom, understood she would not receive a more thorough, real, and substantial explanation and did not press the matter.

Karl, on the other hand, surprised me and asked, “Do you also write stories or poetry?”

I understood what he was aiming for and answered in a roundabout way. “Yes, I have been writing for many years now, but I have used a paintbrush and paints, not words.”

Already en route to Israel, while staying in a boarding school in France, I began drawing in the classroom. I did not understand the language, and did not know the material they taught. I could not communicate with the other children, and I, therefore, used drawing as a substitute for studying and a type of expression of “my story.”

When I arrived in Israel I wrote a few poems in Polish. The poems are hidden away in my drawers, and to this day, no one has read them.

When I grew up and did not wish to, or lacked the courage to tell and expose my past, I chose to tell my story in my paintings, and have continued doing so ever since. It is easier and more comfortable for me, and I am emotionally satisfied when the subject, colors, and style I choose are able to convey my thoughts and feelings which change often. I prefer painting to social meetings and friendly conversations.

To me, every painting is a page in a book or an entire story. A story expressed through colors and shades, and in the language of light and darkness, and not with words. My paintings are a story written in code that can be given a number of interpretations according to the sensitivity of the viewer and his mood at the time.

It's clear to me – but I admit, it's less significant – that not all the viewers of the paintings recognize my motives and the thoughts I had when I painted.

Only now, when I am more than 70 years old, I dare write a bit and with words, “as accepted.”

“I,” Karl smiled at me, “cannot write and am unable to express myself in painting, and I have no choice but only to read. I read many books before the war, and when I readjusted in America, I went on reading and have not stopped to this day.” With a calm smile, Karl pointed at the thick lenses of his glasses.

Karl and I sat in the two large armchairs on both ends of the low coffee table. Unlike us, the two women settled close to one another on the soft couch next to the table.

We had coffee and cookies, and Karl was happy to join me in a shot or two of fine American whiskey.

The whiskey had a beneficial effect on both of us, and the many hidden stops holding back our conversation and action loosened.

We became more open and honest with each other, and the conversation flowed more easily and spontaneously.

After the third shot, my mind must have experienced a flashback of sort, and I unintentionally called Karl Sammy. Karl flinched and gently, with a smile, turned my attention to the fact that he had not changed his name to Sammy. He curiously asked who this Sammy was, and if he was also American, as his name suggested.

I do not know how Freud, the psychologist and dream reader, would analyze my slip of the tongue, but I had an idea about why Sammy's name appeared at the tip of my tongue. I explained to Karl that Sammy was a new immigrant from America who married Shosh, a childhood friend of my wife's. With Sammy too I drank, at this very table, many shots of the same fine whiskey we were drinking now.

For years, Shosh grew up and went to school with Nehama, my wife, and the mother of my children.

We married young, and Shosh thought we were rushing. Back then, in her twenties, marriage did not appeal to Shosh, but her spinsterhood lasted longer than she would have liked. The men she wanted did not want her, and she turned down the ones who were attracted to her. After a year of looking for a husband at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology – and then in many other places of employment, she went abroad to work (and look), but she was still single when she returned.

When we had two young teenagers, Shosh was still looking, but could not find the right man who would suit her. She met Sammy, an American man 10 years her senior, at one of the many parties she attended. They talked, danced, and enjoyed themselves, and late at night Sammy escorted her home and returned, alone, to the hotel in which he was staying.

Several months later, Shosh told us that at that party Sammy behaved in a cheerful and open manner and displayed a lively joy accompanied by great confidence as well as determination and initiative.

The day after the party, in the early morning, Shosh was surprised by a ring at her door. She had just woken up, was not yet dressed, and had not drunk her coffee, and already someone was at the door? Sammy stood at her doorstep with a suitcase in each hand, and before she could react to his appearance at her home, announced that he came to live with her and marry her. Shosh let him come in for a moment, and he has not left her home since.

They got married, had two children, and thanks to his generous American pension, live in comfort.

Shosh calmed down and blossomed and the children and the four of us spent many interesting and surprising evenings together.

Sammy was a Jew who had served about 25 years in the U.S. military and retired at the rank of major. He spent most of his

military service outside the U.S. He served in many countries in Europe and the Far East where the U.S. Army was based. In many of these countries Sammy had plenty of spare time to learn the local language, to study academically, and to pursue other useful activities.

When I asked Sammy what he did in the army he said, “We waited for the Russians to attack.” And since the Russians did not attack, Sammy had time for extracurricular activities as well as time for entertainment and recreation.

Sammy served in military intelligence, in plainclothes, and for his office, he used coffee shops, bars, and clubs where he would wait for his Russian counterparts, but most of the time he enjoyed plenty of whiskey and women, and met other agents.

When we would meet with them in the evenings, Nehama and Shosh would share secrets in a quiet place – much like Guta and Adina presently – while Sammy and I sat with a bottle of drink. Often the evening would go on until the bottle was empty.

Sammy developed his drinking habits during his extensive military service. I, on the other hand, had imbibed large quantities of terrible local vodka when I was a child of only 9, in Poland. Of my own accord, I drank from a small vodka bottle, hoping not to freeze, and to be less afraid. Often I was forced to bring these bottles through the snowy and intimidating black forest, when I was hiding, 2 years after the ghetto, in a remote Polish village.

The effect of the numerous sips of this primitive and highly concentrated alcoholic beverage have not abandoned me to this day. I recently underwent medical tests for an ailment of a vital internal organ. One of the doctors who examined me, an experienced and smiling older man, asked if I had drunk large quantities of alcohol as a child. The defect that had developed in my body, he thought, was a “memento” of the plentiful drinking of my childhood. I heard the doctor’s diagnosis, and congratulated him on his expertise. The effect of those forced encouraging and warming drinks has left a mark on my body that has come back as a harsh and vindictive fingerprint.

This was not the first time that the “experience and knowledge” I gained in my forced drinking in that black forest came back to me.

In one of the European countries I visited often on business, the hosts would often entertain me at long lunches, accompanied by many assorted alcoholic beverages. After the abundant meals, we would return to the office to finalize the technical deliberations and make decisions. After about 2 years of these business trips, I was entertained by the company’s manager. In an amused tone, he commented, “You are not Israeli,” and explained, “The Israelis who preceded you would soften after our plying them with beverages and lunches, and it was easy for us to reach the agreements we wanted. With you,” he stated, “we did not succeed.” And he patted my shoulder with some regret.

I observed a similar attitude when I was working in a certain

Asian country. In this country, it was customary to attend fancy dinners which were held before the lengthy evening and night discussions, which were intended for agreements and decisions. Their strong alcoholic beverage looked like water and had no scent. The waiters at the meals carried two bottles and poured generously to us and our host's representatives next to us. When we began discussions, the effects of the plentiful drinking were evident on our representatives, who were fairly disoriented by then. Our hosts, on the other hand, remained completely alert and took advantage of this. Only after a few of these dinners and discussions we found out the behind-the-scenes secret. Our hosts were poured water, and we were poured generous amounts of alcohol! It was gently hinted to the hosts that we learned the secret of their method and since then, the discussions after dinner became much more balanced.

I told Karl, "In the beginning of our acquaintance, Sammy was hesitant to tell us details of his activities during his military service. Only after a few years did he allow himself to reveal some of his activity and to suggest he also performed acts 'that are not to be spoken of.' In due time, he told us that he also assisted the Israeli branches of intelligence and helped to expose, and sometimes remove, characters who were unwelcome to us. Several more years had passed before he told us that as a 'citizen,' he took part in the Israeli Aviv Neurim operation, the operation in which several leaders of the Arab terror organization Fatah were killed in Beirut.

"After a further period of friendship, Sammy surprised us again.

He revealed that, like you, Karl, he was not born in the U.S. He said that, like me, he was born in Poland, and that in the last years of the war he was captured and incarcerated along with his parents in a concentration camp. He was able to survive the hardships of the camp, but he too was left an orphan.

“An officer in the American army who was one of the camp’s liberators noticed the desperate situation of the sick, orphaned boy and asked him to join him as his adopted son and become a U.S. citizen. Sammy agreed.

“And so Sammy grew up in the home of his American adoptive father, and when he reached the appropriate age, he enlisted in the army for a long professional service.

“From Sammy’s stories, I knew what motivated him, other than his Judaism, to act – despite and against American law – and assist in our security here in Israel. I understood that his desire for revenge on the Nazis and their ilk was what guided and pushed him. He served for a long time in the same army that liberated him from the camp. He helped, as much as he could, to strengthen the Jewish state, so that what was done to us there would never occur in the future.

“When Sammy retired from the military, he immediately immigrated to Israel, determined to find a wife and finally build a home and a family; a warm family like he had as a child, before the Nazis took it away.

“That is how I knew Sammy, an American man like you, Karl, cheerful and confident, who, only after shedding his many layers, showed me that he was, in some way, like I was and you were in the period of our childhoods, and that is probably why his name came to me.

“The relationship between us and Shosh and Sammy broke off after about 15 years. Shosh became ill with cancer and passed away. She passed away only a few years before the death of my wife, Nehama, from the same illness.

“Sammy could not manage in Israel without Shosh and returned, with his two children, to the U.S. His injuries and diseases, which he carried from the concentration camp, injuries he hid when he came to America and joined the army, destroyed him, and he eventually joined his parents who passed away in the camp, and his beloved wife.”

As I recounted Sammy’s tales just now, my eyes were closed and I could not see Karl’s face. Only when I was done with Sammy’s story did I look at him again. His expression, which only minutes earlier was glowing from the whiskey we were drinking, became sad and dark. The red sunburn on his face was now prominent on his forehead and pale cheeks, and he radiated a lack of confidence or apprehension. His mouth was slightly open, as though he were trying to speak, but his voice could not reach my ears. His embarrassment was evident, but I could not determine its reason.

Was it the result of the information Karl perceived about my childhood? Maybe Karl had, in the past, or was expecting to discover now, some connection to Sammy?

A silence of mutual wondering stretched between us, with each of us tensely waiting for the other to break it.

Karl was the first to overcome himself and shatter the tense quiet.

He asked the name of the camp Sammy was in, and I did not know – Sammy did not say, and I did not encourage him then to reveal it, and now he cannot be asked. Karl also asked for Sammy’s full name, his age, and details about his family. When I answered, his expression revealed a combination of disappointment and satisfaction. I thought that perhaps certain hopes or expectations Karl developed at hearing my story did not come about. Karl did tell us he was born in Eastern Europe and was there during the war.

Karl asked to see a picture of Sammy, but I did not have one. The disappointment and doubt remained on his face. I imagined Karl expected something of me, perhaps a bit of information on a matter I could not comprehend at the time.

Guta also noticed the marked change in her father’s appearance. She quietly asked him how he was feeling. Maybe he was tired, she wondered, or did he have too much to drink? Maybe he should take another of his pills? Karl smiled at her and assured her – “Everything is under control,” he said as Americans are

known to say. Several minutes later, and after I removed the bottle of whiskey from the table, Karl's face returned to its previous appearance.

Karl returned to his wondering. He tentatively asked to return and look at some of my stormy paintings. This time he dared to ask me about certain subjects he thought he saw in my paintings, and this time I answered in more detail. Now he already knew that my childhood was spent in occupied Europe. I imagined Karl was looking for a possible connection between that period in my past and the images he perceived from my paintings and my story. His expression revealed that my concise explanations so far did not meet his expectations and did not help solve his questions.

His eyes continued looking at the walls of the apartment. His gaze focused on and examined closely the large color photograph of my face at the age of 2. This framed photo hangs in my bedroom near the headboard of my bed. Karl examined it again and again, from different directions, as though trying to resolve a puzzle from these very young features, but he did not react as someone who had seen these features or ones like them before. He did not seem to connect them with some character familiar to him from the distant past.

This large, old photograph of my boyhood face with the small serene smile and the blond curls was found and taken by my parents after the war from the home of our relatives who lived in France. In Israel, the photo hung in their bedroom, and only after my parents passed away I hung it close to my bed.

My children, and their children, required extensive persuasion to believe that it was indeed my face when I was very young – younger than they, and over 70 years ago.

Karl's eyes did not rest. They went on and scanned the walls of our home as though looking for more photographs or another source of information from my paintings, but to no avail. With a disappointment he tried to mask unsuccessfully, he returned to join me in the living room.

Guta gently pointed at her watch in a clear signal that the hour was getting late and they should return to their hotel. Karl understood his daughter's hints but pretended not to notice them. He returned to the armchair and sat down and continued to consider things on his own. The movement of the many wrinkles in his forehead showed that he was debating many unresolved issues within himself. Only many minutes later did he seem to stop thinking. In a polite tone with a mix of disappointment and satisfaction, he said he would not trouble us further and they would now return to their hotel.

When the taxi arrived, Guta climbed in the backseat, but Karl seemed to delay. He opened the taxi door, put one leg in, and immediately took it back out. His hesitation and indecision was clear. I did not understand his hesitation and did not ask him, in order not to embarrass him. After several seconds of entering and exiting the taxi, Karl suggested with a mumble that we should see each other again. He said they will be in the country for a few more days, and he looked forward to our get-together.

We agreed and decided to meet again at our home.

The difficulty to score a deep and relaxed good night's sleep is a common phenomenon for older folks. These phenomena were especially more troublesome recently. I have learned that tonight, despite taking a sleeping pill, I would not get a sound and peaceful sleep. I lay on my back resting and dozing off, and mentally re-enacted everything that the "odd" American couple said and did. I felt a certain strain and discomfort. I felt we touched subjects that were still not clear enough to me in our conversation, subjects that, although I wanted to talk about, I refrained from doing so. I felt that during our conversation there was an unintended tension, which I could not attribute to a specific behavior by Karl or myself.

From Karl and Guta's interest and questions about the reasons for my choice of subject and colors for my paintings, and from Karl's outright interest in Sammy, I assumed perhaps there was an issue that was troubling him, but he did not dare talk to me about it.

As I was lying, dozing off, or possibly sleeping, I still could not figure out why I was so moved by the name of Karl's daughter. I also did not understand Karl's interest in the photograph of my young face, as well as in Sammy's tale and part of my oldest paintings.

I was glad we would meet again, but was nervous about what was to come.

Inseparable

They showed up as I predicted.

This time, Karl and Guta were dressed in lighter, more casual clothes. Their faces were red from the sun, and their expression was serious. They presented us with a large bouquet of flowers and a beautifully and carefully wrapped package containing chocolates.

We sat in the living room again in the same seating as previously. The table was prepared with soft drinks and what was left of the bottle of whiskey from the previous visit.

When our guests arrived, the television was audible in the background. The screen showed, again and again, bodies and injured people from a terror attack by a suicide bomber in Haifa. I wanted to turn the television off in order not to interrupt us, but Karl prevented me from doing so and asked to leave it on.

Our guests could not understand the Hebrew commentary, but Karl, who had frozen in his place, could not take his eyes off the set. He stared at the many injured, the great wreckage around the area of the bombing, and the bearded, black-clad men who were hard at work collecting body parts and any object with bloodstains on it. His eyes moved and followed, as though hypnotized, the

many ambulances evacuating the injured, and the images of the quick and thorough medical care broadcast from the hospitals the injured were brought to.

The four of us were tense and watched silently until the broadcast from the scene was over and the pundits began their explanations. Finally, Karl agreed to turn off the television. At the sight of his pale, sad face and his red eyes, I thought his emotions showed a natural and expected identification that a Jew living abroad would feel for the many injured in Israel. I tried, unnaturally, to alleviate his tension, and commented that in the U.S. they are not exposed to these brutal acts of terror and horrific sights.

Karl smiled at me cynically, was quiet for a few more seconds, and then, in a hoarse, mechanical whisper which sounded as though it was coming from miles away, he said as though to himself, "I've seen sights more horrifying than those," and he sank back into his armchair and his heavy silence. Karl did not elaborate whether he referred to sights he experienced in the Vietnam War or experiences from a different war in which he may have taken part, or to horrors he may have seen on television. He went on sitting, frozen and hypnotized, with no movement and in complete silence, until he spoke again, briefly, and with a sigh of pain. "Back then, they didn't treat the injured and sick at all. Back then, they murdered many Jews and did not give them a proper Jewish burial," and he was silent again.

I understood very well what those two sentences meant. From her face, it was clear Guta also understood what her father had meant.

I realized his thoughts returned to the time of the Holocaust in Europe, to the bodies of the Jews and to their Nazi murderers. It was obvious Karl was speaking from personal experience. I again felt the similarity revealed between the past we both endured. Now I also guessed more clearly the reason behind Karl's questions and the interest he showed in Sammy's story and his specific preoccupation with some of my older paintings.

Long seconds of complete silence passed until Karl asked again about Sammy's past in the concentration camp. He wanted to know Sammy's exact age when he was incarcerated in the camp. When he heard Sammy was about the same age as him, I could see surprise, as well as satisfaction, that were not yet clear to me. I could not answer many of Karl's questions. I realized that Sammy only told us a little of his experiences in the concentration camp, and he did not mention at all what happened to his parents and to the rest of his family.

I indeed realized that Sammy, the veteran soldier who presented a tough exterior, also found returning there painful, both in thought and in speech. Sammy also barely told us a thing about his first years in the U.S. I realized that he revealed only a few of his experiences in Poland to us. From the little he told us, we could understand why he agreed to go on living in the U.S. and serving for a long time in the U.S. army – the army that liberated him from the camp and symbolized to him the power we, as Jews, did not have at the time.

Sammy did not want to start a family in the "Diaspora." He got

married in Israel, when he knew he had completed the main goals he set for himself: military service, helping Israel, and revenge against the enemies of his people.

The little I knew about Sammy, and told Karl, did not satisfy him. He remained tense, and his eyes continued expressing an anticipation that was not answered. His eyelids flitted nervously, and it seemed I could also hear his teeth grind.

Karl drank another shot, leaned back in the armchair, gave another thoughtful look at the television, which was now turned off and was no longer showing the dead bodies and the blood, and turned his head to us. In a quiet, clear, slow voice, which made both women stop their conversation, he briefly summarized for us what happened to him during the Holocaust.

“When I was 15, we were transported, my parents and I, from the ghetto in a packed cattle train to the concentration camp Treblinka. The hunger and diseases in the ghetto were beyond our ability to bear, and my parents agreed to heed the German persuasions to go to the ‘work camps’ in the east. I,” Karl lowered his gaze sadly at the floor, “disagreed with my parents’ agreement to go east. I was young and full of vigor, but my father was already sick and weak. He coughed and spit up blood and realized he would soon be unable to pass the Selections at the ghetto. Father gave in and convinced Mother as well, and they decided to leave and hang on to the German promises. I,” Karl sighed, “was persistent and warned them, and they suggested that I stay in the ghetto or try to escape from it. I wanted to escape from the ghetto earlier, but

would not leave my parents behind,” muttered Karl, “and that is why I went east with them.”

I listened closely to the use of his father’s illness to explain his parents’ decision to agree to go east. I heard him, and well remembered in contrast my mother and how she cared for my father when he came down with stomach typhoid in the ghetto, and how he became well thanks to her treatment. I also remembered well how my mother worried about me and took care of me after the war, when the doctor who examined me diagnosed me with severe malnutrition and active tuberculosis. That doctor believed that if I did not get better, I would die. In both cases, Mother did not give up, and succeeded in nursing us back to health.

My mother was able to find, back at the ghetto, while risking her life, fresh meat and vegetables for my father. She fed me a special “medicine” and plenty of fat. The medicine, by the doctor’s recommendation, was porridge with ground egg shells as a source of calcium for my lungs. The fat, I was told later, was mostly fat from dogs, which remained the main source of animal fat available at the time.

I remembered all this but said nothing to Karl. I did not want to rub salt in his wounds, which had yet to heal.

Today, I also understand that powers of will and decisions under great pressure and distress are not the same for everyone. Every person reacts and is capable of acting in different manners, even when we all strive for the same goal – survival. Today, I also know

that whoever survived then was blessed with at least one person who reached out for him with his strong hand to assist.

Karl did not mention from where he and his family were sent to the camp, but from the name of the camp he mentioned – Treblinka, the extermination camp closest to Warsaw – I could deduce which ghetto they were in.

Karl was silent for a few moments and then, with evident effort, went on telling his story. He willingly unloaded if only a fraction of the burden that had been building up within him for many years.

“When we arrived in the east, the train stopped.

“The transported that were still alive were taken off the cars by their predecessors at the camp. We were forced to leave our expensive and personal possessions we brought with us from the ghetto in the train car. Again, we saw armed soldiers shoving, beating, and shooting, and among them I also saw many who looked ‘like us’ assisting in the work and wearing a kind of worn, striped pajamas.

“They pushed us from the platform ramp to the first Selection.

“Mother and the other women and small children were sent to the long line on the left. Father and I, who stretched my body and stood as tall as I could along with the rest of the men, were ordered to stand to the right. Mother was gone from my vision

quickly, and I could not even wave good-bye to her – we were pushed and prodded, and so was she.

“We men were quickly standing for another Selection. The strong and young ones among us were crowded into barracks, and Father and I were separated and placed in different barracks. The older and weaker among us were sent running forward to the ‘showers.’ Back then, I still did not know what those showers meant or what the source was of the strong, sweet smell that came from the numerous pits burning nonstop.

“Father and I were not assigned to the same work unit. He was sent to work in tailoring and shoemaking, and I was sent to the woodshop, and later to backbreaking construction work.

“Only rarely did I manage to see Father. I did not see Mother at all. I saw in my father’s face the depression and disappointment when he realized the fantasy and hope he and my mother had for the saving grace of going east was all a lie.

“I saw Father a few times stand at the long and arduous morning and evening roll calls or straggling in the march on his way to work. He seemed bent to me, and his head was always down. We all were and looked like machines or raw material led to production – machines and raw materials used and abused until they run out of strength, and then a fresh new shipment was brought in.”

In his apologetic voice, Karl continued to unload his burden...

“I was young then, tall and strong for my age, even compared to others. I was able to keep up with the grueling pace of the work, and even the kapo was somewhat forgiving with me and less brutal than toward the others.

“I did not know if the kapo was also Jewish, and did not understand then, and have a hard time understanding even now, how ‘one of us’ or someone ‘like us’ could humiliate us, kick us, and beat us in such a cruel way.

“Was the kapo naïve enough to believe that he would survive thanks to his service? Did he have family members or children in the camp he was protecting, or was he anxiously awaiting their arrival? Would my father or I decline to take on the role of kapo ourselves? Would we manage to survive this position in a more humane and considerate way?”

Karl shook his head quickly from side to side, was quiet for long seconds, and sighed. “Who knows!”

I continued listening to Karl’s voice, which sounded like a monotonous echo.

“I also remember the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp from all sides. The fence was woven, from all sides, with tree branches, to save the Polish neighbors from seeing, clearly, and in the open, the mass extermination in the camp and the image of the bodies thrown into the giant smoking pits.

“The camp’s Polish neighbors had the ability to smell, however. They could smell the stench of burning flesh and despite the fence knew what was going on in the camp, but preferred to act like those three monkeys that: closed their eyes, blocked their ears, held their noses, and stayed oblivious.

“After a short period of time in the camp I lost the sense of time. When I tried to find out what happened to Mother I had no clear answer. Soon I realized on my own where she disappeared to, and how.

“Shortly after, my father grew very weak and I stopped seeing him in the daily roll call or when leaving for work. I tried to find out where he was, but the prisoners in his barrack gave different evasive answers. ‘He may have been shot while working and maybe he was sent to one of the gas showers’; ‘he may have broken down and been thrown in a pit,’ they said. I heard many different answers, but they all had one meaning: I was an orphan, but – I had an inheritance.

“My father’s bunkmate passed by me and quickly took a bent spoon out of his pocket and gave it to me. I recognized the spoon – Father bent its handle to make it easier to grip when his hands were already shaking. When I looked up to the retreating bunkmate, he whispered to me – a whisper that sounded like a cry – ‘Your father asked me to give it to you,’ and disappeared, leaving me with my entire inheritance.

“Less than a year after my incarceration, at the end of the

summer, a gunfire riot broke out in the camp. I heard single shots by prisoners, followed by lengthy, continuous shooting by the German guards and their faithful assistants, the Ukrainians. Most of the uprising prisoners were shot to death or hanged by the neck when they were caught, and only a few, and I the smallest of them, managed to escape to the surrounding forest.”

Karl’s eyes were shining as though covered by tears, and his speech became slow and quiet. He tried to go on and describe to us out loud what happened to him after his escape, but his daughter’s warm yet unequivocal look prevented him from doing so. Guta could easily sense the strain her father was under, and I could see she was afraid of another heart attack. Karl caught her look and sipped from his glass of cold water, smiled at us a forced smile, and leaned into his armchair in silence. When Karl stopped speaking, a heavy, uncomfortable silence spread. I realized it was my duty to hurry up and break the silence due to the worry for the health of both of us, and the remainder of our emotional meeting.

I already understood from Karl’s story that, at least in the first years of the war, our experiences were similar. In a soft voice, which to my ears did not sound like my own, I said that I was also incarcerated in the Warsaw ghetto, and spent many hours hungry and scared, in cramped hideouts. My parents were well aware of what would happen to children and the elderly in Selections, and would be sure to hide my brother and me ahead of time and feed us, and were successful at doing so. How did they know, and in time, about most of the Selections? Did Mother or Father have

special sources of information?

They never discussed it, and I, neither then nor until we separated forever, did not ask!

I cannot be sure, but from the fragments of sentences I heard from members of my family years after the war, I concluded that it is possible that my father and my uncle Mietek, or only one of them, served as a policeman or as some other official in the self-governing body – the Judenrat – appointed by the Germans to assist them in the ghetto.

I was just a boy in the ghetto and did not notice it, and even if I had, I would not have known what was the role or status of the Jewish policemen or other officials. Today, I know that the Judenrat members, in their positive and possibly negative activities, also helped Jews. Did Father know in advance, thanks to his position, when the scheduled Actions would happen, and was, therefore, able to hide my brother and me, and by that save our lives?

Was it thanks to his familiarity with the Jewish Council that he was able to find extra food for us children, which may have prevented us from starving to death?

Was it thanks to his job at the Judenrat or his closeness to the Jewish underground movement that Father knew to smuggle us out of the ghetto in time – only days before the uprising?

Was Father, as part of his position, only helping and saving us, his

children, or was he also harming others or hurting them? After all, many of our family members did not survive the ghetto!

This question has been troubling me for many years, but I was faced with it when Father was no longer among the living. He never brought the subject up himself, at home or during the many memorials held at the Forest of the Martyrs. Was this a secret he had kept?

Did my father believe that the goal – saving us – justified the means?

Did Father not want us to know, or was he afraid we would not understand, or did he knowingly hide difficult experiences he and my mother shared?

Did my father or my uncle Mietek know in advance that those found eligible by the Germans for service in any possible position and refused them, or those who abandoned their duties, possibly for conscientious reasons, were shot on the spot?

I am angry with myself for not asking in time, and I am left with this burden of the question mark. I remain with no clear answer, but with a sense of a complete faith in my father's decency, judgment, integrity, and courage.

After the escape through the sewage pipes to the Arian-Polish side of Warsaw, I was transferred to a small, remote Polish village, where I spent about 2 years disguised as a Polish boy. The village

was located – and this I only learned after the war – close to the “main” extermination camp: Auschwitz.

Compared to Karl’s experience at the ghetto and in Treblinka, then escaping and losing his parents, I now felt how relatively “comfortable” were the conditions of my survival.

It would not occur to me to call the conditions of my survival “comfortable” as long as my parents were alive. I am aware that my parents’ conditions were anything but comfortable, to say the least. Only after many years did I understand the supreme effort, the strain, constant worry, and strength of character they were able to wring from themselves daily to fight and ensure our survival there.

Only after having children of my own did I feel, if only a little, the fears that enveloped my parents then. When the Six-Day War broke out, followed by the Yom Kippur War, my children were infinitely safer than my brother and I had been during our childhood in the war. I felt then a tiny touch of the strain, dread, and concern my parents felt for 6 straight years. Despite the concern for the well-being of my children, I sometimes ask myself if I always protected them and kept them from harm in the right and necessary way.

Immediately after the Six-Day War, in 1967, I drove my entire family in our car to visit the Old City in Jerusalem and the West Bank, as well as Sinai, which were just recently occupied. The roadsides were still packed with damaged and burnt vehicles,

remains of rotting corpses, and undetonated bombs and explosive devices. Only a few private vehicles dared go there, and I was there, with my wife and two small children, with no means of protection. This may sound ironic, but during those trips my eldest son was the same age I was when I was living in the ghetto.

Was I taking an uncalculated risk during those trips?

Today, I know that I gravely underestimated the dangers, probably due to my overconfidence – overconfidence based on my survival. Without being aware of it, I believe that if I made it out alive from the Holocaust, I was “immune” and no conditions or situations were capable of endangering me or threatening me or my children.

The events of the Holocaust distorted and damaged my natural ability to distinguish between real danger and my conclusions stemming from my past memories.

I am more aware of this today, and treat dangers in a more balanced way, but my fear of risks, disease, and disasters is still different than that of the people I know. I am not ruled by fears or phobias of any sort. I am well aware that this does not show bravery or courage but an involuntary suppression of some of the behavioral mechanisms required for self-defense.

I try to guide my children to treat my grandchildren more cautiously and with more care than I did with them, and they are surprised, as I am, by the great change in my behavior.

Karl listened closely and smiled lightly at me, firmly nodding his disagreement with my appraisal that my life then was “comfortable.” He said that he, the elder of us, cannot imagine even now, how a small boy between the ages of 5 and 8 could survive the ghetto and get out of there alive after more than 2 years.

He opened the palm of his hand and demonstrated what he was saying with his fingers. There were four cousins with him in the ghetto, all of them younger, and none of them, and their parents, were found after the war. He knew his mother’s brother ran away with his wife and daughter to Russia, but he had not heard from them since, and he did not know if they survived.

When Karl noticed Guta’s worried look, he changed the subject and asked to hear about my wife and children. I was glad. I, too, was looking forward to a lighter atmosphere and change of subject. I told them that Adina, my second wife sitting with us, was born in Israel and her knowledge of the Holocaust is from books she read, and a little from my stories. Nehama, my first wife, was also Israeli-born, but passed away from illness before she reached the age of 60.

I shared with Karl and Guta the events of the last year of my wife’s life – the long year when Nehama was no longer able to function on her own.

Conscientiously and practically, I only had a few options. I had stopped traveling for work 2 years earlier, and took on another

position which did not require leaving the country. When Nehama's condition worsened, I could hire a woman to stay with her and help during the hours I was at work. I did not want to burden our daughter who was a student and was still living with us with more responsibilities. I could have placed Nehama at a hospice sooner, as the hospital "hinted" I should, and I could have taken on more responsibility for her needs.

I deliberated my options. I did not reveal to my children the gravity of their mother's situation and decided that I would take an early retirement and for a year nursed my wife as much as I could. I tried to emulate, if only a little, my mother immediately after the war, when I was very sick and she dropped everything and successfully took care of me, only me – but I was not as successful as she was.

I returned to work, this time in academia, a year after Nehama's passing.

I was surprised by the reaction from Karl, who was listening intently. The amazement on his face gradually turned to a light smile which was only visible at the tips of his mouth, and I heard him say, with a degree of cynicism, "You and I are like brothers in troubles. My wife, who was the same age as me, also passed away before I retired. Sarah, my wife, was a camp survivor like myself, and we met on the boat ride from Europe to America. Sarah's health was severely affected by the 3 years she was held in forced labor camps.

“We were both only children, and we both became orphans. When we married we wished for a large family, but were only able to have one daughter – Guta, who is here with us. We had extensive medical insurance, and the doctors tried to help Sarah with her disease for years. During the last 2 years of her life, the doctors kept her alive even though we all knew Sarah was suffering greatly, and there was no chance to save her, or even ease her suffering,” Karl concluded sadly.

“Even though many years have passed since the death of my wife Nehama, the frustration of the helplessness of dealing with a suffering, terminal patient is still strongly deeply ingrained in me.

“Doctors study and try to do everything they can to assist their patient and save his life. Is extending a terminal person’s suffering indeed the help he needs and wants? Is that really the doctor’s duty?

“Who can determine whether the idea of a doctor assisting a patient does not require, or at least permit, him to shorten his period of suffering?

“I wonder if all doctors are guided only by the medical and humane considerations. Perhaps some economic considerations of their livelihood ‘sneak in’ for a few doctors?

“As a child who experienced events and sights children are not meant to experience, and as an adult who helped his mother and his wife in their difficult last months, I have learned and

formulated a clear opinion on the matter. I feel and believe that quality of life, not the duration of suffering, is most significant and should be the determining factor for the steps that should be taken by us and by the doctors.

“My mother, in her last months of illness, prepared for what was to come and stored sleeping pills in an amount that would allow her, in her own time and on her own, to end her life. But Mother was not ‘selfish enough,’ and postponed the ‘finale’ she decided on several times. The postponements stemmed from my mother’s considerate nature, and she tried not to spoil family celebrations. She postponed in order to not ‘hurt’ Father’s birthday, postponed so she would not ‘spoil’ a party for one of the grandchildren, and postponed again and again until her strength ran out and she could no longer execute her plan.

“In her last night at her home, while Mother lay down foggy and in pain, I asked her whether I should give her the pills, whose location I knew. She objected with slight but definite head motions. She pointed at me with her finger and gestured, ‘No – not you!’ Mother prevented me from being involved and assisting in her death – she chose to worry about my conscience over releasing herself from her pain!

“When Mother was transferred to a hospital in the morning and put on a ventilation machine, she tried to unplug the machine. When they became aware of her intentions, they tied her arms to the bed rails. To my shame, I did not have the necessary courage to unplug the machine for her, and in the evening I returned to

my home. Shortly after my return, they called to tell me Mother was no longer with us.

“To this day I do not know whether my mother was able to free herself and cut herself off from the machine, or if her good deeds stood in her favor this time.

“We wrote in the death announcement: ‘saved from her misery and donated her body to science.’

“My mother’s message, which was very clear, was not the first message of this type I saw realized.

“When we arrived in Israel, we were housed in a two-room apartment. The four of us lived in one room, and a childless couple, also Holocaust survivors, lived in the other room. The woman was sick with cancer, was treated in the hospital, and returned to her room suffering and in pain when the doctors ran out of ways to help her. She was lucky. A doctor of ‘the other kind’ was found – a neighbor from the same building. This neighbor was a surgeon in the Polish army for years, survived German captivity, and continued to work as a doctor in a hospital in Israel. He understood our sick and suffering neighbor’s condition, and by her own request gave her an injection that freed her of her suffering.

“This brave doctor went on in his profession, but he followed his military habit of drinking himself blind whenever he was off duty. Several years later, he realized his liver paid a heavy price for his

drinking. He had cirrhosis. He did not hesitate. He took his life with his own gun before he would be overcome by agony.”

The atmosphere in the room eased. The images of the injured from the bombing in Haifa came back on the television screen in the nightly news.

Guta rose, clearly hinting to her father who was sunken into his armchair, that it was late and they should retire. When he tried to stall, she reminded him that they have to get up early the next day, and he needed to rest. She said they agreed to go to the Old City in Jerusalem and to the new Holocaust Museum Yad Vashem.

Mentioning Yad Vashem immediately awoke the daily reality of the past year. Yad Vashem decided to publish my memoir about the Holocaust and its effects and continuing shadow on my life. Any day now, they promised, the book would be printed and I could come and receive a few copies of it.

Without hesitation, I told our guests we would gladly join them.

At the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem

Karl sat next to me quiet and deep in thought, as though disconnected from reality and his surroundings. For a few moments he even closed his eyes, and I was worried about his health. Occasionally, without opening his eyes, he smiled slightly and seemed deeply immersed in a silent conversation with himself, or with the souls of his parents and wife.

Before we arrived in Jerusalem, Karl said in an apologetic tone that he had not yet visited the Holocaust Museum. In his prominent honesty, he admitted that during his previous visit to Israel he was afraid of his reactions and the memories which would arise from the confrontation with the exhibits and the testimonies of past horrors.

Karl went on to divulge, “During my many years in the U.S., I wrapped myself in silence and treated any topic that could remind me of my past with deliberate ignorance and aversion. Even with my wife I didn’t discuss that period we both went through. We repressed the past inside us, and did everything we could to modify our behavior to match the free and easy American culture. We both chose local friends and acquaintances that knew and heard nothing about the dark times we went through over there. We both focused our aspirations, like most Americans, on

establishing ourselves financially, socially, and mentally.”

In a quiet voice, as he brought his head close to mine, Karl whispered that he and Sarah barely told their own daughter anything of what they went through in Europe. “We didn’t want,” he said, “to burden her, the next generation, with our memories and wounds. We wanted her, at least, to grow up like a normal girl, a free, happy, mentally sound American girl free from the effects of the troubles weighing on her parents.” I realized that without communication between us, Karl treated his daughter similarly to the way I treated my children. I too spared them the events of my damaged childhood and preferred they grow up with stories from their Israeli-born mother. I told little of my past to my friends and acquaintances too.

I know, from my own experience, that many survivors behave the same way we did. Most of them did not speak and share their experiences with others. Were we ashamed of what they might think of us?

Did we want to bury past events we felt the locals, the “normal” people, were incapable of understanding?

Were we hurt and offended when the locals called us “lambs for the slaughter”? We did not know then that the locals did not truly know or understand what happened in Europe and what it was really like.

“When Guta grew up and turned 10,” Karl continued, “she asked

us about her none-American name, which was so different from the names of her friends. We evaded and gave her a partial, softened answer. We told her that her name, Guta, was common and popular in our homeland, and we wanted to memorialize our roots through her. Guta must have understood more than we explained and pretended to be all right with our explanation.

“Most of her friends called her various nicknames which only vaguely resembled her real name.”

We arrived at the entrance to the Holocaust Museum.

It was just here that I noticed Karl was carrying a cane. He had a conspicuous slight limp in his right leg, and he used the cane to ease it and steady his stance. His back was hunched forward slightly – and I did not know whether it was the strain of the atmosphere of our location or his age that caused Karl to be bent down. He advanced in slow steps, as though hesitant and considering turning back. He looked like someone with his mind and thoughts floating somewhere in a faraway place, perhaps with other people and with other companions.

In an attempt to ease Karl’s first real encounter with past testimonies, we began our visit in The Avenue of the Righteous among the Nations.

Karl scanned the row of trees and the signs at their bases and did not know their meaning.

We stopped at the shade of one of those trees, an older tree that by now grew branches and set deep roots. I explained to my guests the uniqueness and symbolism in this remarkable avenue of trees: trees planted in honor and in memory of the singular, extraordinary people who dared help us back then. They, the very few, held out a helping hand and heart to save a few Jews, even though they knew they were definitively risking their own lives, as well as the lives of their loved ones.

I led our guests to “our” two trees. Two trees that grow here in honor and memory of two flesh and blood angels who rose above the circumstances and dared give us their brave hand in support and in that, helped in our survival. I imagine, in each tree that grows here, the standout image of Roza, the Polish villager, a Christian woman — a stranger to us who was not deterred — and took me, a Jewish boy about 8 years old, to her remote village in southern Poland. In the guise of a Polish boy she watched me for 2 years in her Jew-hating village.

Following me, my mother and father also escaped to that village, and we all stayed there disguised as Polish and survived. Our family connection was successfully kept from the villagers until the area was liberated by the Russian army.

Roza was married to the village metalworker. He was a crude man and a drunkard, who was physically and verbally abusive. He knew the truth about us and in his inebriation would shout that the kikes who invaded his home should be crushed. Despite his great physical strength and his decisive and violent opinions,

the husband could not overcome the spirit, perseverance, and determination of his wife Roza, our angel. Thanks to his well-known drunkenness, the other villagers did not believe his claim that we were Jews.

I showed Karl and Guta our second tree, the tree bearing the name Professor Minkiewicz, the Polish nobleman, and his family. They dared hide my brother in Polish Warsaw and saved him. My brother did not have any papers identifying him as Polish, and he also looked like a typical Jew to the Polish – his hair was black and his eyes brown. There is no doubt that the Minkiewicz family was well aware that my brother's presence in their home risked all their lives, but they did not give up.

According to Professor Minkiewicz, a man always remains a man, even if he is a Jew, despite the invention of the Nazi race theory and its implementation in the mass extermination of what was known as “the final solution.”

Karl's eyes were fixed on the names at the base of the trees. He knew that regarding the solitary characters to whom he owed his life, he was the only one who knew of their importance, and the assistance they gave him. No one but him knew them, and no one memorialized them.

We looked at these avenues of gratitude and thought deeply.

Are there, or were there, other survivors like Karl who did not memorialize their saviors? Perhaps many did not survive “to the

end” and were unable to plant the memory of their helpers here. Perhaps this is the reason there is only an avenue here, and not a forest.

And perhaps, in truth, the reality was even crueler. It was reality in which few, very few, dared risk their lives and acted according to their human conscience. Few went on believing that their neighbors, acquaintances, partners in business and childrearing – despite being Jews – were also human beings entitled to live. That they too, despite being proclaimed as “inferior,” and despite having their blood and property forfeited, were also entitled to some help.

It is painful to see that it is not a great forest that is growing here because the saplings planted were too few. From the tens of millions of Poles and hundreds of millions of Russians, there were only about three or four hundred righteous people who helped, compared to more than 4 million Jews who were exterminated. There was not one righteous person to be found for a thousand or even one for ten thousand killed.

A small light of hope comes from other nations – over 400 righteous sprouted in Holland, where far “fewer” than a tenth of the Jews in Poland and Russia were killed. In small, quiet Denmark grew an entire forest of humane people who “woke up” and smuggled their Jewish neighbors to a neutral country and saved their lives.

Indeed here, in Yad Vashem, the avenue of thanks, gratitude, and

esteem grows proud, but it also grows as an avenue of warning to the world: Let every man know that in times of trouble and danger, help is not nearly as certain as expected.

Here in these unparalleled avenues Karl introduced us to one of his angels.

“When I escaped Treblinka,” he told us, “I turned south, for a reason I still do not know. For many long days and months, I walked from village to village along obscure roads, dressed in the clothes of a Polish farmer, which I stole from one of the yards on my path. At night, I would sleep and hide in haylofts, sheds, and sties which provided most of my food. Often I would be discovered by the farmers who would beat me, but luckily be satisfied by throwing me out.

“The sharp pitchfork of one of my unwilling hosts, who caught me resting in his barn and eating the potatoes I found there, was lodged deep in my right leg. I ran away limping and bleeding, but without leaving behind the potatoes, which I stuffed in my pockets.

“In my first stop after my injury, in a run-down horse stable, I took care of my wound as best I could. I wrapped it in rags and continued my escape south. My dress was local, but my gaunt face and thin body aroused suspicion in many of the Poles I saw on my way, and so I kept my distance from them. I knew very well to which hands they would deliver me if they caught me, and what my fate would be.”

Karl pointed at his right leg and his cane and continued. “The good people were very few. When I limped past one of the small towns I made a point of bypassing, I drew the attention of a man dressed in urban clothes and whose look did not seem threatening. The man, who was older than I, looked at my limping leg and in a friendly voice asked what had happened to me. I told him that I hurt myself slightly in a fall, and went on my way. The concerned man followed me with his eyes and understood my injury was more serious than I was willing to admit. He called me and asked me to wait for him. I was scared of being caught, but this time I dared not to run away. “When he came close to me and rolled up my pant leg, he saw my makeshift bandage and understood my situation, as well as my ethnicity. In a warm, friendly voice, so different than I was used to, he introduced himself as a doctor called Janusz and invited me to his home, which was nearby.

“Despite his friendly voice, I was afraid he would turn me in to the Germans, but my pain and rising temperature convinced me to take the risk and join him.

“At his home the doctor peeled the bandage off my leg, cleaned the area thoroughly, and put a brown powder on it. He took a clean bandage out of a handbag hidden underneath the bed and dressed the wound with it, and over it he wrapped a wide strip of cloth which was probably cut out of a sheet.

“When the doctor peeled the rags off my leg I was in great pain, but, of course, I did not make a sound. Not long earlier, when I peeled off the striped pajamas I had been wearing after escaping

and stealing the change of clothes, the pain was much greater. The worn striped pajamas I wore in the camp, and which I wore from the day I was imprisoned to the day I escaped, was like a part of me. The shirt and pants clung to my body and were like a second skin. The sweat on warm days, the wetness of rain, the freezing cold at night and in the winter, together with the dirt and remains of my body secretions made the pajamas part of my gaunt body. I had no choice but to rip all parts of the pajamas off my body. My flesh, infected from the many old wounds on my body, already grew into the tears in the pajamas and clung to them, and when I tried to take it off, the skin tore off my body as well. I will never forget the pain – I stood naked until the blood dried, and then dressed again.

“I wore, with a sense of freedom and victory, the peasant clothes I stole, and felt as though I was cutting off my handcuffs. I enjoyed the fresh air and the pleasant breeze that could now flow between my thin body and my new clothes, which were larger than my size.

“When I was rid of my pajamas I also got rid of most of the lice on my body. They did not all surrender easily, however. Many remained on the hairs of my body and in the folds of my skin, and from there, infiltrated my new clothes and settled in them. They continued to hurt me and to itch, especially in the areas of the wounds that were reopened.

“For the first time since my imprisonment, I was also wearing underclothes. I could feel their delicate touch, which was also

clean for the time being. I did not manage to bathe yet – I had already forgotten the feeling of being clean. The off-putting odor that clung to me and my pajamas was partially gone with my change of clothes, but enough of it was left behind to remind me and my persecutors where I came from!

“Janusz, the doctor, and I did not start a conversation. I thanked him for treating my wound and tried to get up and leave his home, but Janusz stopped me and offered to continue to take care of my wound and fever. I was frightened and unsure, but in this case, as in similar stressful times at the camp, I let my gut feeling decide. The doctor’s calm features and warm, quiet voice convinced me to stay.

“Janusz put me up in a small, yet clean, shed near his home. There was no doubt the doctor understood why I gave off such a strong odor, and why I was hesitant and fearful, but he said nothing about it to me. In the mornings he came back and brought me large portions of food, treated my wound, and gave me large white pills to swallow.

“In my first morning in the shed, Janusz brought with him a large tin tub with a little boiling water, and a square lump of yellow laundry soap. I rejoiced – I filled the tub with water from the tap in the shed, snatched the soap, and washed myself, over and over, from the tip of my head to my toenails. More than the feeling of cleanliness, I felt the first signs and scents of being human return to me.

“The medicine, nutritious food, the milk, the affection and the physical rest calmed me and fortified my body. After a week, the pain subsided significantly, and I also felt a clear improvement in my strength. The face of Janusz the doctor also seemed calmer after he examined me. He smiled at me and left, and this time, he did not lock the shed door. I realized I had a choice to make – I packed the remainder of the food and left to continue my escape.”

Karl stood tall, and his entire body shook as though he were crying. He admitted with somewhat of a stutter that he did not remember the last name of that Janusz, the noble doctor, or his address. “It has been more than 60 years,” he said. “The doctor has surely passed away without receiving, after the war, even a word of thanks or appreciation from me. His memory does not even have a single tree in this avenue of testimony, and there is no sign to carry his name and actions in pride and for generations.”

Karl stopped the flow of his words but did not move. His wrinkle-covered forehead and the movement of his lips indicated that his unease remained and that he continued judging himself harshly. We did not interrupt him, and a few minutes later his voice was heard again, “I am guilty!” and the words rushed out of him.

“Twenty or forty years ago, I was self-centered. I could have gone to Poland and located the doctor. I could have introduced myself and shown him, in pride and gratitude, that I was alive and well. I could have shown him my leg, which, thanks to him, is in decent shape, and thank him, this time as a free man

who was aware of the great and admirable risk he took upon himself. I knew, and he knew back then, that if the Germans or their Polish helpers found me in his shed, we would both pay for it with our lives.

“I knew all of this in America, but I did nothing. I did not even send him a letter of thanks. I was, possibly, too busy in my own matters in establishing myself and raising my family. I was, possibly, too young to truly understand and admire the benevolence and humanity of the doctor and ignored his crucial contribution to my survival. Is it possible that a life of constant self-defense and caring for myself at the camp had made me an egotist who only thought about himself – his own survival?”

“Regret does not leave me,” Karl said, and then spoke no more.

I also thought, soundlessly, that Karl, upon arrival in America, was too young and lonely to understand and to act differently toward Janusz the doctor. I, who am younger than Karl, also did not think about my emotional and actual debt to the noble Roza upon our arrival in Israel. Fortunately, my parents were more fair and practical than I was.

Immediately after the war, my parents gave Roza and her family an apartment we owned, and which remained intact despite the German bombing, an apartment that initially required evacuating the Polish neighbors who hurried to take it for themselves; neighbors who were very disappointed to learn that we, the Jews who owned the apartment, survived and returned.

In addition to the apartment, my parents sent Roza, for about 20 years until her death, packages with clothes and medicine she could sell to support herself. My parents sent the same kind of packages of gratitude and appreciation to the family of Professor Minkiewicz. The new communist regime in Poland removed him from all his positions from before the war and took away all his privileges because he remained “white” in his beliefs.

It is only thanks to my parents’ assistance that my conscience is now clear.

“I will check with the Yad Vashem representatives – if I can ease my conscience, if only a little, with a contribution for memorialization or education,” Karl mumbled to himself, but still did not move. “I am ashamed to tell you,” he went on, “that I met a Jew in Brooklyn, older than me, who survived in a hiding place. He was concealed for about a year in a pit in the yard of two farmers from his village. These farmers were also aware of the searches the Germans conducted to seek the last Jews who escaped deportation. They knew that if a Jew was found hidden with them, they would be executed, and yet they continued hiding him and giving him food.

“When the village was liberated, the Jew left the pit and promised his saviors ‘great things’ in return, but actually did nothing for them. Worse than that,” Karl continued, “when I asked him how he would have acted in a situation like the one of the farmers who kept him, he answered honestly, ‘I would not risk my life to save others. I would be afraid.’”

Karl asked the elderly survivor a difficult moral question, and he received an honest answer even more difficult and painful. Indeed, how can we know what each one of us would do if faced with the same dilemma?

Would he have risked his life to save another man or would he act as the majority did?

How many brave, humane, and daring people would be found among us Jews, and especially among those of us who were lucky enough to survive?

Only those who were like us, who experienced hiding, escaping, or similar threats like we did, are allowed and able to honestly answer that question. Only those who lived through these experiences can give a true answer, and not an abstract, altruistic, and sanctimonious answer.

I know my parents paid a very high price for our hiding, our food, our smuggling out of the ghetto, the fake identification papers for my father, and for many different things. Back then, especially, money was the motivating, significant, and deciding factor in getting help, but there were a few people for whom the money was not the determining factor for their choices. Roza the farmer and Mankiewicz the professor, two representatives of two extremes of Polish society, rose above others, and in their actions, overcame their fears and the behavior they saw around them. It was not money that “bought” them.

To my shame, to this day I do not know (because I failed to ask in time) how my parents met Roza and Professor Mankiewicz, and why they agreed to be our saving angels.

I know my parents did not “buy” them with money, and cannot, to this day, comprehend the enormity of the bravery of spirit that impelled those noble souls to risk the lives of themselves and their families by helping Jews who were strangers to them.

Karl’s pained voice was heard again. “My conscience is not clear or clean, and not just about Janusz the doctor. In my first years in America, I was faced with a dilemma somewhat related to your rhetorical question: Who among us would risk their own life to save another, or at least to help them?”

“At the time, I was living in a poor neighborhood with a majority of dark-skinned and Jewish residents. One of the dark-skinned young men who I knew was badly beaten and left crippled by a group of white racists that belonged, probably, to the Ku Klux Klan. They hurt him because he tried to associate with a white young lady.

“I was in college then. I heard whispering in the halls about this racist group, and I could identify one of them. I could have revealed the attackers’ identity to the victim’s friends, who would surely pay him back, but I would be at risk too, then. Racist groups like those also raise the banner of hate for Jews, let alone snitches, would probably have hurt me too. I could have also revealed the attacker’s identity to the local police, who were known for their

leniency toward those racists, and risk payback from both my dark-skinned neighbors and the racists themselves.

“I was a new immigrant in America then and still carrying the fears of Treblinka and the ‘lessons’ I learned there of having to take care of myself. I deliberated and kept my mouth shut.

“I was living in the land of freedom and acted as though I was continuing my life of survival.

“I am ashamed of my behavior then, ashamed of the fear and egotism that rules me, and believe – or at least hope – I would behave differently today.”

The Memorial Hall

After a short rest, we entered the new museum building.

You cannot remain indifferent in the presence of the impressive and large building, with its sharp triangular shape, breaking out of the mountain into nature, into light, and life.

Karl and Guta seemed to me as though holding back, and they stalled at the entrance. Karl's obvious uncertainty whether to dare and enter the Memorial Hall illustrated again why he refrained from visiting here during his previous trip to Israel. His face showed that he was aware that his past and memories will now resurface, and that he was fearful of it. He knew that the ghetto, Treblinka, and his parents' faces would be visible to him again. He knew that his wife's suffering and what she went through would be as tangible and real as they once were.

Karl overcame his hesitation.

In small steps, followed by the echoing clacks of his cane, Karl moved slowly from one exhibit to the next. He did not speak or ask anything, just limped and looked carefully and silently – and became engrossed as though swallowing it all. He deliberated with himself and discussed matters only with himself, in mute alertness.

When we reached the photographs and subtitles on the Warsaw ghetto, Karl froze in place. His eyes scanned each picture, display, and address thoroughly. I could hear his silent voice pronouncing, in perfect Polish, the names of the streets shown in the pictures, and the names of other places, only few of which I remembered.

Karl's gaze was fixed to the cobbled streets of Warsaw. The cobblestones he remembered as creating the clicking sounds of the horse-drawn carriages in the Warsaw streets before the war. We both recalled the rides in the high, comfortable carriages we were occasionally treated to with our parents or grandparents. I do not remember such carriages at the ghetto. Instead, I remember clearly, the wood-plank wheelbarrows, with only two wheels. These wheelbarrows were harnessed to one skinny person then, and not to a horse, and they carried piles of bodies to be buried.

In the displayed photographs we also saw the old buildings of the ghetto area – buildings the likes of which we did not find when we went back to visit Warsaw – the city that was destroyed and rebuilt – many years after the war.

Karl's eyes appeared to be trying to go through the ghetto walls in the photos and inspect the gaunt bodies of small children lying on the sidewalk as though thrown there, their hands stretched out begging for food. Karl looked at their faces closely. Perhaps he was looking for his cousins or friends from that time.

Karl remembered the scenes of the ghetto better than I did. As a young man, he would often walk down the main street, Leszno

Street, which I only remember by name. He remembered the rickety, creaking wooden bridge that connected both sides of the ghetto, and I only know of its existence from photographs. Did Karl see the image of this bridge in his mind while we were casually strolling on the creaky wooden dock on Tel Aviv's shore during our first meeting?

Karl said he could feel with his hands the red brick wall that closed in on us at the ghetto. In comparison, I only remember the wall vaguely, and only seeing it at a distance. I was told, after the war, that my mother and brother escaped the ghetto by jumping over that wall. In the ghetto, Karl was above ground most of the time, while I was kept, for many days, hidden deep underground or in cramped attics. He was taken to Treblinka, and I stayed at the ghetto almost until its last day.

We looked at the pictures of German soldiers marching in the streets of the derelict ghetto with their hands held behind their backs. They looked calm and confident, as though out for a stroll. You can clearly see in those photos, in contrast, the imprisoned people of the ghetto, the yellow badges sewn to their clothes, staying as far away as possible from the soldiers, and walking scared and bent.

Several years ago we both searched for remnants of our past in Warsaw.

We both toured the few "leftovers" and "memories" left from the old ghetto, and we both bought a packet of photos sold as

souvenirs. The photos in this packet, like many other souvenirs sold in tourist sites around the world, were taken by the “heroes” of the German army. They show figures from the ghetto, figures awaiting shipping out, and even a few figures from inside the camps. The pictures the Poles decided to sell were relatively restrained and in black and white. My eyes could not ignore the red color that was not “perceived” by the camera, the bold color that would have made it hard to sell those photos to most of the area’s tourists.

For Karl and me, the place we were touring was more than a museum. The building and everything stored in it are for us a tombstone and a collection of route markers, of an actual and emotional return to a home, a street, relatives who were gone, and to the horrors we experienced over there.

I stood alone to the side and contemplated the twists of fate. Only a short while ago, I randomly met an elegant American tourist in a Tel Aviv restaurant. We soon discovered that over 65 years ago, both of us lived, starved, froze, and were afraid inside the same ghetto walls, in the same city. To illustrate this, I pointed out the sewage covers to Karl. These covers are seen in photos of the Warsaw streets, and here are some of the same sunken into the floor of the museum. I told Karl, “These were my openings of safety in the ghetto. I was led by a professional smuggler through these enormous stinking sewers from the ghetto that lead to the allegedly free Polish-Arian area.”

The museum was packed with visitors and groups accompanied

by guides and those who explained about the artifacts and history. Karl and I were bothered by the noise and clamor around us. Back there and then, there was no noise. There were more people, but they were surrounded by the silence of dread and fear. The noise and tumult here, in the museum, sounded foreign and unlike what we remembered from there.

We very much would have wanted to be standing here alone, in utter silence, to commune with the photos, exhibits, and our memories. To listen and perhaps even hear, in our minds, the sounds from back then, and see again, if for a brief moment, the faces of those taken from us.

After about 2 hours, we emerged into daylight, to the fresh air and green and lively outdoors.

We turned to the area commemorating communities that were destroyed. I did not tell Karl ahead of time that on the way he would see what must be the symbol of his deportation from the ghetto and his imprisonment in the extermination camp.

On train tracks over an elevated and truncated bridge, on tracks that lead nowhere but to green and flowery scenery, is a train car; one of many produced to transport goods, but transported then, as goods, as cattle, those deported to the camps; one solitary car which represents here the thousands of cars that ceaselessly fed the extermination industry.

Karl spotted the train car, was surprised, and stopped in his tracks.

He sat on the stone railing by the path and wordlessly stared at the car. We did not interrupt his meditation on the memories of the car of the past. Guta sat next to him and gently placed her arm on his shoulder. We had little trouble guessing what images were now raging in Karl's mind, what was "shown" again to his eyes and where he was "traveling" now.

Did Karl see the faces of his mother or father again?

Did he feel himself, again, along with many others, squeezed into the cattle car and trying to stand on his toes to suck in more air?

Did he hear the groans of the thirsty and the whining of the little children?

Did he see again the mothers trying to hopelessly shield their children with their bodies?

Did he hear the clicking of the wheels on the track again, clicking that did not stop and did not overcome the sounds of crying and despair inside the car?

Karl stood up and summarized briefly. "I did not expect to see again, to feel again that I was returning to a train car like this."

In our separate visits to the "new" Warsaw, we both saw a cattle car like this one placed as a monument in front of the Umschlagplatz, which was the lot used to gather people for transport to Treblinka. "In Warsaw too," Karl said, "I was moved and remembered, but

not like here and now. There, in the wide, orderly street, the clean and painted car near the clean and reconstructed transport lot looked like an exhibit for tourists, and not like evidence and illustration for those of us who ‘knew’ it personally.

“Here in the green woods and on the broken bridge, the train car, with its cracks, faded colors, and original markings, will stop in his tracks anyone who has experienced it from the inside.”

Karl turned to us and with an unexpected smile, said, “I have not been into trains since. When I came to America, I needed to use trains for transportation and tried to use them unsuccessfully. When I stood at the station, I felt as though I was standing at the Umschlagplatz again, or on the ramp at the final station at the camp. I was taken aback by the rattle of the wheels and the screech of the cars and ran away. The image of people boarding the train mixed with the vision of us, back then, squeezed and cramped inside. I know, logically, that passengers today board and leave at their will, but I still feel, with every part of my body, going up into the cattle car in which my parents and I were forcibly led, and left at its final stop – a stop from which my parents never returned.

“I drive my car or take buses, and I fly domestically. My traveling costs are expensive, but even after about 70 years, I still cannot overcome this.”

Karl’s sad face and red eyes revealed mental and physical exhaustion. In a look we exchanged, we decided, without speaking, that we would not be going to Jerusalem’s Old City today.

We turned to the Hall of Names and the Children's Memorial.

In the Hall of Names, thousands of eyes from thousands of still faces stared at us at once and from all around us.

Karl's head began moving quickly up and down and left and right in frenzy, and occasionally his eyes stopped and focused, for a few seconds, on a certain picture, and then went back to dart and seek once more. His eyes searched in anticipation, hope, and illusion for a familiar face. I understood him well. I also experienced this false hope in my first visit to this tombstone of faces, and we both did not find on the walls the faces we so missed from then. Even in this great hall, there is no room for 6 million photographs.

Guta also scanned the many faces in the photographs, but her gaze mostly focused on her father's expressions and movement.

In her childhood, when her father told her a little about his past and his family members who did not return, she could not picture their appearance or accept their image and fate. The light American atmosphere covered for the stunted and restrained emotion of her parents' story. Now that she was older and more mature, and faced with her father's paleness and with it the photographs on the walls, she understood, for the first time in her life, the past figures of her father and his father – her grandfather. She could now visualize the appearance of her father's figure then, the figure around which he built his new American figure.

Guta also understood now her father's fears when she was

growing up. He was afraid of car accidents, he was afraid she would be hurt by the boys in the streets of Brooklyn, he was afraid of many different dangers. He was afraid, but kept from her the real origin of those fears.

Upon exiting the Hall of Names, Karl's whole body shook, and his cane clacked loudly again. In daylight, the paleness that resulted from the magnitude of emotion he felt was clearer.

We stopped to rest in the shade and Karl's appearance changed quickly. His eyes radiated with a slight satisfaction, and he said, "I did not see the faces of my parents or acquaintances, but I saw, for the first time since, faces with the warm, familiar look I missed so terribly."

In the darkness of the Children's Memorial, we stood and stared at the hundreds or thousands of small glinting lights. Lights that went on and off, on and off, flickered and reflected in front of us like a waterfall of stars on a dark night. Lights that shine over us twinkled not only from the heavens above, but from each and every site. We were lit by innumerable "small" lights, but not by one-and-a-half million lights, as the assumed number of children whose lives were taken before they could really taste life; children who committed no crime or sin; children who did not even understand their fate.

The children "shining" down on us here and now would be among the first to be annihilated because the Nazis worried that they would grow up to be the new generation of the lowly "race."

Karl, me, and few others, the few who survived, were victorious and “cheated” the Nazis. There is no light for us at the Children’s Memorial, and even more, we had children and grandchildren – the next generations that have already emerged, and that is our little revenge on the Nazis.

We came out of the darkness into daylight with Karl leaning on his daughter’s supportive shoulder more than on his cane. He shielded his eyes with his hand until they were used to the bright light again, to the light of the sun that did not emerge from the memorial lights in the children’s hall.

Karl suddenly turned his face to us and whispered, “This time I saw. I imagined flashes of the faces of my five cousins whom I have not seen since. From the day we were taken from the ghetto, I did not see or hear about any of my family members, and I do not even have any of their pictures.” With a smile and a voice tinged slightly with cynicism, Karl admitted that even if he had met his cousins now – he would not recognize them. Karl made a gesture of withdrawal and whispered again, “They’re already there,” and looked up as he wondered, “Will we only meet again when I am up there?”

I did not react to Karl’s comments, but I also ruminated about my four cousins, only one of whom have I met. In Paris, I met Irene, the daughter of my uncle Stefan, who escaped to Russia in time, and from there returned after the war to Poland, and then to France. The three others I did not, and could not meet since the ghetto.

We inscribed all three of their names on the monument we raised in the Forest of Martyrs, and I placed their photographs in the middle of my memoir, which Yad Vashem had already published.

On the drive back, we were silent most of the time; a silence that was dedicated to private thoughts and ponderings. Karl's brief comments were heard occasionally. He left the museum in body alone, but in his thoughts and feelings, he remained there. He mumbled, as if to himself, that he knew he would not find personal testimonies and would find no mention of the doctor who treated his leg. He knew this, but allowed himself to hope and keep his fantasies, if only for a few hours.

While disclosing his past to us, Karl revealed another tree missing to him in the Avenue of the Righteous among the Nations.

He told us about his only friend in Treblinka. "His name was Ignac, like my father's, and he was older, more decisive, and stronger than me. I was the youngest and smallest among the men in our shack and in the work unit. I would get elbowed and kicked by my neighbors in the food line. I was pushed back and sometimes, when my turn came, the soup pot was already empty. They often tried, and were sometimes successful, in snatching away my bread allowance.

"Ignac, my loyal friend I met at the camp, was the only one who defended me and helped me. He was also my guide in the camp – he was there before I arrived. His guidelines were: 'cheat, lie, steal, beat — do anything to survive – that is the only rule here.'

“In Treblinka, he explained when I arrived, there are no friends. There is no mutual help. Here in Treblinka, there is also no god. Do not expect his help or protection – you are your only god. Here we only have hunger, hard work, and constant fear.

“Ignac supported me in moments of crisis, hunger, pain, and despair at the camp. It is thanks to him that I did not collapse or break down, even when I realized I was an orphan. Ignac was strong and decisive, and he was the one who pulled me after him in our panicked escape from the camp. He also determined, and correctly, our escape route south.” Karl’s eyes were wet when he told us that the strong Ignac did not survive. “In one of his dashes to find food for us, he was captured, and I was on my own again.”

After a long silence, Karl visibly recovered. He was glad to be back at the hotel, in his clean, orderly, safe, air-conditioned room. He wanted to rest and relax, “to come back” from the painful past to the present, which was easier and better.

When I saw my son, I told him about our moving visit to the Holocaust Museum. His first question was whether we checked the computerized database of names at the museum. To my son, who was personally involved with the foundation of this database, it was obvious we would try and find Karl’s relations in it. I did not remember the existence of this database, Karl never knew it existed, and so we skipped over it.

When thinking about the database of names, I realized I did not know Karl’s last name or the names of his parents, and Karl did

not know my last name. I decided to ask Karl for his last name, and at some point check the name database for him.

I remembered that my parents, over 20 years ago, filled in meticulously and with great detail the pages of testimony from Yad Vashem for our family members who were taken there. Mother filled in eight pages for her family: one for her mother – my grandmother, who always brought us children a piece of chocolate in the ghetto she never left. She filled out four pages for her brother Pavel, his wife, and their two small children who were caught in the Selection. She also filled out three pages for her older sister Guta, her husband Ignac, and their son Kazik, who volunteered to go east, and none of the three returned.

Father filled out these pages for his mother and father, my grandparents, who went up in smoke in a bunker in the ghetto, and a page for proud Mietek, the husband of my father's sister Minka; he was probably shot and left to die.

These pages of testimony are now the basis of the computerized database of names which will remain, we hope, forever.

I recalled how we drove our guests to the entrance of their hotel, but we did not say our good-byes at all, and did not discuss the remainder of their days in Israel. I thought to myself that I would call their hotel the next morning, but I would not know who to ask the reception clerk for – which name? Which room? I hoped Karl kept the note I gave him at our first meeting. The note also had our phone number. If they wanted to see us again, they would call.

The Second Meal

The stifled sound of the telephone penetrated my hearing. I reached my hand to the earpiece automatically. A strange, unfamiliar voice was on the other end. The voice asked for my name and after a brief moment of phone silence, I answered. Then the voice on the other end changed, and I recognized Karl's voice speaking to me. His speech was slow and apologetic. He asked for our forgiveness for not thanking us for the joint trip and the sympathetic ear, and blamed his rudeness on his emotional state after visiting the Holocaust Museum. I understood his sentiment and gently cut off his apology. Karl asked to see us again.

I was surprised to hear Karl telling me, hesitantly but clearly, that he felt he should know more about my family and the way we survived the war and after it. I did not know the reason for Karl's wishes, but I agreed to share my past with him.

We agreed on an early dinner at a quiet restaurant near the hotel at which they were staying.

I saw them again. After another apology, Karl told us that they had changed their plans for their visit in Israel. Karl confessed that his memories of the past were returning to him so vividly, and he felt tense and was looking for testimonials, roots, and explanations of what happened to him and his family.

He told me that they already visited and toured Yad Mordechai Kibbutz, the kibbutz carrying the name of the young Mordechai Anielewicz who dared lead the Jewish “uprising of rage” in the Warsaw ghetto, the uprising of the young and few who knew they had no chance against the Nazi “giant.” On the other hand, they also knew they were likely to be sent, like their predecessors, to the camps to be exterminated. They, the few, preferred an outright battle, a battle in which the Nazis would witness a different side to the Jews and Jewish behavior they had been previously unfamiliar with until that time. They tried to draw at least a few drops of blood from their occupiers and drip a little bit of humiliation on those who were thus far undefeated. They tried and succeeded.

Karl told me about their tour of the small museum in the kibbutz – a museum which tries to preserve and emphasize the few acts of uprising by the captive Jews against the German “Goliath,” and memorialize the massive entirety of the German destruction industry.

“We felt satisfied,” he said, “when we realized that a learning center was established alongside the museum, a center dedicated to try to explain to the young generation, the proud Israeli, what really happened there, and how; an institution that tries to convince, teach, and educate that ‘never again...’” Karl and Guta witnessed, without knowing, the fingerprint of Aba Kovner, the fighter from back then, whose spirit lies among the exhibits even now.

Along with the satisfaction gained by the visit, Karl also expressed

his doubts – would a regular normal person be able, with logical human thinking, to accept that the things exhibited and described there did indeed happen?

Guta noted that they are hoping to visit the north – LoChamei Ha'Getaot (Fighters of the Ghettos) Kibbutz, which was founded by the survivors of the fighters of her father's ghetto – the Warsaw ghetto.

They would very much like to see, if only briefly, the archives and the rich library.

Karl also said that, during his visit to Warsaw, he also passed through the wide and modern street named “Anielewicz's Street.” He was surprised by the Polish tribute and was glad they honored the courageous rebel with the name of a major street in the city, and that the crossroads on the street carry his full name: “Ulica Mordechaja Anielewicza.”

As in most cities around the world, street signs in Warsaw do not include information about the person or event after which the street is named. During my own visit to Warsaw and Anielewicz Street, I conducted a random survey for myself and asked several passersby about who Mordechai Anielewicz was, a man who had such a non-Polish name, and who had this street named after him. I was not surprised at all that no one of the surveyed could respond correctly. In that way, the city of Warsaw benefits from both worlds: they honored the name and memory of the Jewish warrior without exposing the important information to the

residents of the city regarding who the man was, what he did, and why was he memorialized.

It is hard to complain about the Polish. In Tel Aviv, for instance, in Ehad Ha'Am or Ben Yehuda Street, would most of the passersby know who these men were and what were their contributions?

Would the survey I performed in Warsaw elicit different results if it were done in Yad Mordechai Kibbutz?

It just so happens that I live on a street called Aluf Hanitzahon (Major General of Victory) – with no additional details on the sign. Until a few months ago, the previous sign was still hung at the crossroads, and on it, in parenthesis, was stated that the street was named after Major General Assaf Simchoni. Thus, the name of the man who commanded the Southern Command during the Sinai Operation in 1956 was honored. The old sign also did not elaborate on who Major General Simchoni was, and that he was killed immediately after the battles, in an accident in a lightweight aircraft flown by a young junior officer called Benny Gordon. As a young man, the same Benny Gordon was my teammate at the Tel Aviv Aeroclub.

According to the sign now placed at the street corner, I live on a street named after a major general, and there is also no mention of my pilot friend.

We entered the restaurant. The hostess counted the number in our party and asked us to accompany her. Karl passed us and

followed her. When a table was offered for the four of us, Karl examined it carefully and requested a different table. The location of the other table was also not to his satisfaction. The hostess suggested a distant table at the edge of the restaurant, and Karl immediately approved. He gave us an awkward smile and asked if the table was suitable for us as well. It was. I did not understand why he preferred that table and did not ask. I assumed it was an American preference or an “age-related” consideration which was not clear to me. After a short while – I understood.

We sat casually at the quiet restaurant. Without coordinating between us, we both ordered large juicy steaks with overflowing beers. When the steaks were served at our table on thick wooden trays, we stuck our knives in them with great joy, and with a smile looked at each other.

I felt clearly that both our minds wandered back to that subject of the distant past. “Do you remember?” Karl asked without elaborating. Yes, he remembered, and I remembered that during the ghetto years, the only meat we ate, and even that was rare, was horse meat; meat that was cooked for a long period of time with large quantities of salt to overcome its sweet, repulsive flavor. We smiled at each other and enjoyed the juicy beef steak lightly seasoned with a delicate mustard-cream dressing.

I recalled something and told Karl that we recently returned from a trip to Sicily where we saw restaurants offer delicacies made of horse meat. I did not dine in those restaurants for fear of remembering.

We ate with great pleasure, but between one delicious dish and another good dish, Karl asked again, with a cynical smile, if I still remember the desperate food shortage during the ghetto period and after it. I smiled to myself as well – you cannot forget hunger; you cannot help but remember. Hunger is the shrinking sensation you feel in your stomach and your mouth, the feeling that stays forever and shadows anyone who has felt it; a feeling that is felt even when your stomach is full and you are eating plentifully. I remembered very well the cramps in my stomach, especially when I sat in the cramped ghetto hiding places for long hours. To this day, I cannot recall whether we had water in our hiding places and if we had something to chew.

I described for our guests the infrequent and uncommon ceremony of eating the fresh egg my mother was very infrequently able to find for us in the ghetto. She would boil it carefully, so it would not crack, and feed it to us to the very last crumb, to the point of us licking the eggshell.

I can still feel the heavenly taste of sucking a tube of condensed milk. These arrived, few and far between, in the food packages sent to us by my uncle Benio in France.

I did not skip sharing with my guests the obsessive thinking that accompanied us almost every evening back then: Would we eat before bed, or would we go to sleep hungry again?

I only understood the Germans' sinister plan when I grew up. Starving those imprisoned in the ghettos and the camps was

more than just a method of saving money and a tool for cruel oppression and humiliation for their own sake. They knew that hunger occupies the mind of the hungry incessantly, and they are completely immersed in their own worries: how would they find food and how would they overcome the pain gnawing at their whole body, which is screaming “Help!” in silence. They understood that the hungry mothers and fathers were worn down by the mental battle – how would they feed their young children – in addition to their own physical pain.

Hungry people do not have the time and energy to think about what will become of them, about their future, about going against rulers, or uprising against them. The Germans knew this ahead of time and reaped the rewards they anticipated.

In Israel, after I was married and my two sons were born, we would often visit my mother-in-law and eat there. I was very thin then, not because of a lack of food. On the contrary, I would eat the largest portions at mealtimes, as well as anything my children left on their plates. My Israeli-born mother-in-law would look at the amounts I swallowed down and smile in amazement. She could not understand how I could take in these enormous quantities of food and stay thin.

I could not understand it either. I ate out of an internal drive that was out of my control, and my body “understood” me, digested everything, and stayed thin.

Several years before that, when the army agreed to enlist me,

one of my medical deficiencies was being underweight. When I reported for duty, the doctors were also aware of the prominent traces my tuberculosis left on my lungs, and they postponed my enlistment for a year.

A year later, the doctors determined I was fit for service and gave me a medical profile that limited my service only to service and assistance roles. My brother, who at the time of his enlistment was already very ill mentally, was given the highest medical profile possible at the medical examinations before his military enlistment! It was determined that he was fit to serve as a responsible combat soldier. Responsibility and health are apparently very relative and undefined terms.

I continued enjoying our delicious meal and did not notice Karl stopped eating and his face revealed his mind was again wandering.

He returned to the past, to the tough and demeaning hunger in the ghetto. He remembered his mother and father's failure in obtaining the minimal amount of food for their survival.

Waving his fork, with a piece of steak still on it, Karl shakily told us of his failed attempt as a boy of 14 at smuggling food into the ghetto from the Arian side. Hesitantly and with a slight stutter, which may have disclosed some shame, he said, "I once joined a group of boys, and we snuck past the ghetto walls to buy vegetables and sausages in the Polish market. We returned to the ghetto through the same opening we used to go out. My

friends, who were experienced, were able to slip quickly through the passage, while I, shaking with fear, was caught by a German soldier who had a Jewish ghetto police officer with him. They beat me with the butts of their rifles and wooden batons and kicked every part of my body, and even went as far as shaking me and taking everything I had.”

I heard Karl and recoiled – I could see before me my father and uncle, who may have been Jewish ghetto policemen. I heard Karl and decided for myself, with utter confidence, that my father or uncle would not behave in that way!

“I lay,” Karl went on, “alone and in pain on the sidewalk, and only after many hours, in the dark and after curfew, recuperated enough and was able to stagger back to our room.

“My parents understood what had transpired and were glad I was not shot. They treated, as much as they could, my injuries, and made me promise never to try and smuggle again. And I, the thin, bespectacled, gentle student of before the ghetto, promised them. I knew I was incapable of doing that since I was not quick or cunning enough for such operations.”

Karl rose to his feet and with a small smile went over his body with his eyes and concluded with satisfaction, “I grew taller since the ghetto, stronger, and fatter, but even in the alleys of Brooklyn I did not dare face the thugs, gangs, and many immigrants who were already there when I arrived.”

Like Karl, when I came to Israel, I too was unable to face the “natives.” I was different and weak, and was just one against many. I only once stood up to one of those “locals.”

When leaving school, my path was blocked by a tall, fat boy who studied in the grade above mine. He took a magnifying glass out of his pocket and stared at me. “What do you want?” I asked, insulted, and he looked at me with contempt and said he was “examining” soap. Rumors had spread then that the Nazis produced soap from the bodies they burned at the death camps, and that was what the phrase “soap” meant to me. Back then, I did not think for a moment that he may have been surprised by my white skin, so unlike the tanned locals, or that he was poking fun at me for being thin and a wimp, like soap, from over there: “The Diaspora.”

I attacked him without thinking. The beating I received from him was worse, but I was so angry I did not feel the pain and injuries at all. Full of rage, I hit him as much as I could before we were separated.

I washed my face in the water fountain to take away any sign of the struggle so my parents, God forbid, would not know. Then I went home and did not regret my reaction at all.

In the restaurant when Karl stood up in front of us, I noticed he was very tall and thinner than I was. I estimated his height at about 6 feet 3 inches. His body showed he was a man who was aware of the needs of the body and who exercised to stay fit. It

was clear Karl did not succumb to overeating influenced by his memories of hunger, or to the local junk food which is readily available, fattening, and satisfying. Karl knew how to keep his body strong and well balanced.

I am convinced that even in America, he did not forget that only the strong and healthy survive. Back then and there, the weak were trampled on – and only the strong were able, with strength of arm or strength of mind, or both, to endure.

Perhaps Darwin's theory of survival and evolution proved its validity there and then, in a hideously expedited manner.

Perhaps it is still valid for us, the survivors.

Karl's back seemed slightly bent, as expected at his age, and he also used the cane to straighten his back. I guessed he was over 80, although if I knew him without knowing of his past, I would believe him to be younger.

During our first meeting and our extensive tour of the Holocaust Museum, I still did not assess his age. My estimation for him grew now, and I could sense his pride. His self-assurance and awareness of life overcame the heavy load he was carrying since being a lone boy during the war and after it.

Karl sat down again, and nibbled at his cooling dish. But he quickly stopped eating and continued telling about his parents at the ghetto, who understood they had reached a dead end and were

tempted by the Germans' promises for going "east." "Today," Karl confessed, "I do not know whether my parents truly fell for the German promises, or they clung to that hope out of desperation in a final attempt at survival."

As I was listening to him, my mother's story of her older sister Guta unknowingly passed through my mind. We remember the sister, her husband, and their son every year at our family memorial ceremony for those who did not survive. I did not dare embarrass Karl with questions about the surprising similarity in names between my mother's sister and his daughter, so the matter remained undiscussed.

Karl went back to happily bite the fragrant French fries on his plate and continued reminiscing. He mentioned again the uncooked potatoes that made up the majority (and almost entirety) of his food during his escape south from Treblinka. He still remembers the intoxicating fermentation of some of the potatoes he ate, and their repulsive taste, but he ate them because he was hungry.

I can remember half-rotten potatoes very well too. The farmers in Przyszowa, the small Polish village where I spent 2 years after the ghetto, would produce an alcoholic beverage called Biber. I drank this beverage often from bottles when I was forced to bring them, through the freezing, terrifying forest, for Roza's husband and his friends for their frequent drinking parties.

The dog, which I mostly dragged with me for safety, would shake

with fear of the wild animals of the forest. To tell the truth, he was more afraid than I was. Now, in the restaurant, sipping pleasantly from the fine, cold beer, the burning taste of Biber comes back and burns my throat and my memories powerfully.

Karl stopped from eating. Only his eyes kept staring at the plates that were still set in front of him. I noticed that when I mentioned the dog that accompanied me in the forest, Karl's body shivered in apprehension. I did not understand his reaction and did not bother him with questions.

I could tell Karl was not with us in his thoughts from the deepening folds in his forehead and the movement of his lips. He repeated the story of his arduous journey on foot to the displaced persons' camp he was placed in after the war. "My leg still hurt, the hunger and fatigue of the months of walking grew, but I remembered – I remembered that my friend Ignac warned me in advance against succumbing to exhaustion, for if I sat down in the snow, I would not get up again. From what he told me, I knew that if I stopped to rest – I would probably fall asleep, freeze to death, and become another snowy bump in the terrain.

"I struggled with myself. I found barns and sties for rest, and moved on, until, at the edge of a road I cannot recall, I gave up. I fell in the snow, and as expected, could not get up and move on. I did not freeze to death thanks to a Russian army truck which picked me up on its way west, toward crumbling Germany. The soldiers fed me and clothed me, and I was then treated by a military doctor in an improvised military hospital for Russian soldiers, where I was taken.

“I was admitted to a giant hall with dozens, if not hundreds, of cots, all of them with injured and sick men. Some of the injured wore bandages from their head to their toes and were called ‘the burned ones’ by their neighbors. Some only had their abdomen, back, arm, or leg bandaged, and some did not have an arm or leg at all.

“Next to me lay a young man whose entire head was bandaged and only small slits in the bandage wrapped around his face suggested the existence of eyes and nostrils. He was quiet and only sighed day and night. Many wounded screamed and yelled in pain, but the screaming of the burned, especially when they were bandaged, overcame the voices of all the others.

“There were many sick, wounded, and dying in Treblinka as well, but they did not scream there. There, they barely sighed, because they had no strength to yell. There, everyone knew that yelling would not hurry any assistance. There was no help there – from above or below.

“We were treated by several doctors in white coats, with military uniforms showing beneath them. The doctors were accompanied by female soldiers and local volunteers. When the young women passed by the beds of the lightly wounded, the sighs increased, and the sighing men were sometimes the lucky recipients of a stroke or encouraging embrace.

“I was the youngest one admitted. The only one who did not shoot, who was not shot, and whose body was not burned at the

front. I was as a human skeleton lying alone, a boy whose flesh was pierced by an angry farmer's pitchfork, and infection spread in his body. The doctors, who saw my case as relatively easy, did not understand why I was so thin and malnourished, but paid no special attention to it.

“The spoken language was not much of a problem for me. Russian is similar to Polish, and I understood most of the complaints of the wounded and their stories. They, the wounded and sick, did not understand how and from where I came to be with them, but most of them were not interested in finding out. The doctors spoke very quickly, and I could not understand them. They were only three, charged with caring for the hundreds of injured soldiers, but I, ‘the civilian,’ also received devoted care from them. To the young female soldiers and volunteers I was just a sad, abandoned boy, and they passed me over in their looks and did not stop next to me either.

“Some of the wounded who were conscience were curious about me, because I was not like them. I could not point them to the front where I was injured or tell them why I was here with them. They did not know or hear of the industrialized extermination in the camps. My scrawniness stood out to them, and they cursed the greedy supply officers and the broken roads, assuming they were the reason food could not make its way to me.

“They were not familiar with the intentional starvation in the camps. They did not know I was a Jew who survived and evaded annihilation; a Jew who was able to get away alive and break, by his very existence, one of the Nazi's goals of the war.

“My fellow hospital patients did not know what the meaning was of being Jewish at that time. They did not understand why I asked, again and again, for another portion of food, and especially more and more bread. Why I hid and kept some of the bread. They did not, could not, know then that in Treblinka, God, if he existed there, manifested himself to us as bread. A thicker slice, or if the soup had something solid floating in it made the presence of ‘God’ more tangible to us.

“The wounded did not understand why I passed on the daily glass of vodka and asked for bread instead. The entire hospital hall stank strongly of alcohol, and I did not know what part of the intoxicating cloud that made my head spin was the smell of the alcohol used to disinfect the wounds, and what part was vodka.

“The Russian wounded kept on arriving, and I, the strange, skinny ‘child,’ was turned out, and rightly so, after about a week. The week’s hospitalization was the first time since being deported to the ghetto when someone official paid me any attention, was considerate of my needs, and cared for me.

“I was transferred to a safe place well bandaged, without feeling almost any hunger, and, for the first time, properly dressed. It was also the first time I thanked men in uniform instead of fearing them. It was the first time they spoke to me and did not scream or threaten me, and I answered without being terrified of the bullet, rifle butt, or lash they would inflict on my body.

“The Russians transported me to a displaced persons’ camp set up

by the Jewish aid organization – the Joint – in a military vehicle.

“Very late, and too late for the 6 million, the world’s conscience, and especially the Jewish one, stirred slightly. Aid and rescue missions began for the survivors.

“I found myself in a very different atmosphere in the displaced persons’ camp than in the military hospital. Again, I was a boy among adults, but these were adults who looked like me, adults who survived but for the most part did not fully comprehend it yet. Many still did not accept that the war was indeed over and we were no longer kept in camps. Many were very sick in body, and usually also in spirit, and were even more hurt and emaciated than I was.

“Many, like me, wandered aimlessly in the large yard. We touched the fences – and were not electrocuted to our surprise! We touched the exit gate – and were not shot!

“We all asked for more food – and got it. Many of us swallowed some of the food we got without chewing it and hid the rest in our pockets or in other hiding places. We were all from the same ‘village.’ I assume I behaved in the same way. I understood my camp mates, and they understood me, but continued stealing food from me as they did from others.

“The caregivers and nurses who cared for us there tried to explain that there was enough food and there was no need to steal or store ‘for tomorrow,’ but what did they understand? What did they

know? Which one of them fought to eat a potato peel? Which one of them stole food from the dead or the weak?

“What did they know about pain from beatings by rifles and lashes? What did they feel when they heard the rage of the biting dogs?

“We and they came from completely different worlds.

“I could communicate with many of my fellow camp mates. Polish and Yiddish were the most common language there. When I asked my neighbors where they came from, they did not answer. Maybe they were still afraid. We were all searching for a familiar face, faces of family, friends, but I did not see any happy reunions.

“I ate well from plates, and I had silverware, but I did not stop using the rusty bent spoon, Father’s spoon, which I kept with me at all times during my escape – my heirloom that was always with me.

“We were asked not to sleep on our clothes and shoes. They explained again and again that there was nothing to be afraid of, and we can take our clothes off and put on pajamas. They also explained it was highly recommended to wash every evening and brush our teeth as well!

“They tried to explain to us that the wheel of our life was already back on its proper path. They explained, but only few of us could understand.

“Only a few of us responded to the requests and explanations. Most of us did not understand why they did not understand us. Who among us bathed or brushed their teeth in recent years? We wore striped pajamas there every day and not just at night, and we guarded our shoes well, so they could not be stolen. We would freeze without shoes! After they understood none of us would wear striped pajamas like we did there, they brought thin, colorful pajamas, and some of us gave in and wore them.

“Even today, at home in America and 70 years later,” stressed Karl, “I sleep in a cotton shirt and shorts. I rarely wear pajamas, and only colorful ones, like children’s, at that.

“The good treatment given to my leg and the nourishing food gave me back some of the weight I lost in Treblinka and in my long trek. I was also cured of the many infections in my body, and they helped me let go of the frightening sounds and voices that took over my mind.

“The administrative personnel helped me search for any family I was hoping I had left.

“The Joint representatives could not locate anyone from my father’s family or my mother’s family. I received no reply from the families of my uncles in Poland. Luckily, I remembered Moishe, a distant relative of my father’s, who migrated to America before the war. The Joint found him in Brooklyn, and he agreed to vouch for me and help me get a visa to enter America.

“About a year after the war I arrived, following a long boat ride, to New York, to a free America.”

The Life of Sarah

“Moishe, who had changed his name to Moses,” Karl went on, “lived with his family in a small, cramped apartment. He worked from morning to night in a sewing workshop that belonged to a wealthy Jew and helped me get a job at the same workshop, where I worked hourly and for the minimum wage. I found a common language with most of the workers at the workshop. Polish, Hungarian, and mostly Yiddish were the main languages, and English, broken for the most part, was only used to communicate with the locals, mostly the dark-skinned ones.

“At first I stayed with Moses. They made it clear, however, that even in America I must take care of myself and manage on my own, so I rented a room with a Jewish family. I worked until the evenings and was only free to study in the later hours. I learned English quickly, and was accepted, as the oldest student, to a night school to receive my high school diploma. I graduated from night school in a year, and graduated from college 3 years later, where I studied under a scholarship for needy refugees. When I settled in work and in life, I continued studying and developing professionally.”

Karl was silent for a moment, and I was struck by the similarity in the speed and scope of his studies in America and mine in Israel.

“I was only about 5 years old when the war broke out. When I was 6, instead of being taken to school, I was taken to the ghetto and imprisoned there.

“Between that time and my arrival in Israel at the age of 12, I did not know what schoolwork was. Childhood matters, matters I did not enjoy before, and attempts at fitting in and belonging to Israeli society kept me busy and were more important to me than school. I joined a youth movement, I was an active member at the movement flotilla, and we rowed in the Yarkon River, and at the same time I was active in the aeroclub, where I built model airplanes and glided. I even had a girlfriend my age.

“Relationships between boys and girls those days and at our age were not common, especially not between an Israeli-born girl and “a new immigrant from the Diaspora.” I was not part of the gang, and girls did not want to connect with me or were embarrassed to do so. My girlfriend only dared send me a letter after elementary school, when the cliques disbanded. When I realized that, for the first time in my life, I was asked to be her boyfriend, I agreed immediately and gladly, with the utmost joy and devotion.”

“We spent a great deal of time together, and I was an attentive ear, a supportive shoulder, and an advisor with plenty of life experience for my age.

“It wasn’t until I was 16 that I clued in on my mother’s conspicuous hints that without studying I would have no future. She was smart and sensitive enough to leave me to my business until then. She

understood that being a child was more important to me than schoolwork. My experienced mother said, “No one can take what you have in your head,” and with that, my decision was made.

“I responded to Mother’s suggestions and devoted myself to intensive and grueling studying. I studied on my own, mostly, from morning to night, and completed high school. After that, I dedicated 4 more difficult but successful years to engineering school.

“I was in a rush in everything I did. I “ran” through everything I did and hurried, as though I were worried I would not be able to make it. After my first year at the Technion and 2 years of military service, I married Nehama, who was Israeli-born.”

“In college,” Karl continued revealing his side of the coin, “I met Sarah again – she was the young girl I met on the boat to America. Sarah was the first girl I embraced warmly and maybe even passionately, when we reached the shores of America, and she was the one I married after a short while.”

Karl’s brief and succinct description – “I got married” – piqued my curiosity. I knew you should not ask an American about matters of a personal nature, but this time I could not resist and asked frankly, “Did you love her?”

Karl was surprised by the intimate question, looked at his daughter hesitantly, and appeared deep in thought. He did not answer me directly, but continued his story with my question in mind. His

voice revealed a desire to lighten his load and share with others, and maybe mostly to his daughter, the feelings he had not shared with anyone until that day.

“I knew little about Sarah’s past, and she assumed, as early as on the boat, my story. In America, in college, Sarah was the only girl who paid attention to me, ‘the foreigner’ and ‘the new guy,’ and she was the only one I could talk to candidly. I knew she would understand me and accept that I was different. Neither of us spoke English fluently and often used our mother tongue – Polish.

“We spent together the few hours we had free from studying or work talking about ourselves or embracing. Her body was the first female body whose heat I felt. We were both starved for tenderness, hugging, understanding, and physical closeness. We took advantage of every free moment to be together in her apartment or my room, where I also had intimate relations with her for the first time – she was the first woman of my life.

“Sarah was staying with her aunt and uncle who had been in America a while and were financially secure. They inspected me with disappointment and suspicion. They probably hoped their only European relation would choose an American boy, older and more settled than I was. Even so, I found common ground with the uncle, and I was secure in his emotional and financial support for Sarah, whatever her decision may be. When the uncle would look at his wife, it would seem to me he was winking at her, as though saying, ‘It will be all right.’

“When we returned to my room one evening after watching a play, we sat on the edge of my narrow bed. I did not turn the light on, and we both sat close to each other as I softly put my arm around her shoulder. Her head rested calmly in the hollow of my neck, and we continued sitting in silence. I tightened my embrace and felt, for the first time in my life, an internal thrill that was both calming and exciting; a strong, warm thrill that was unfamiliar to me; a new thrill, followed by a strong, racing heartbeat. For the first time in my life, I felt I wanted Sarah very much, all to myself. I felt, again, for the very first time, a brief moment of love for a woman, a sentiment I had not encountered until then and did not know what it was. I felt the overpowering desire to only be with her, close to her, alone.

“I turned my head to Sarah and lightly and gently kissed her lips. I did not require more intimacy. I felt satisfied, overflowing, for a moment, with a love whose origins I did not question and whose reason I did not feel the need to justify. I did not declare it to Sarah although I knew she was waiting for it for a long time. I trusted myself that she felt the same way I did, and believed I would receive more from her than I could give her.

“We sat like that for many minutes, close and unmoving. Then the ringing of the doorbell startled us, and we left my room.

“We continued going out together, talking, sleeping together, but mostly supporting each other.

“That feeling that came over me that brief, unique moment –

of unconditional love – did not repeat itself, but we were happy together. I could tell Sarah decided what she wanted from her behavior at home, but also with others. I knew she loved me very much, and that she wanted to get married as soon as possible and start a family. I did not respond to her wishes immediately. I wanted to complete more studies first, but eventually I gave in to her silent pleading.

“One evening, in my small room and during an intimate contact, I asked Sarah to marry me and she agreed. I believed Sarah would give me the love and warmth missing from my life for so many years. I expected her to break the wall of my loneliness and help me establish myself in America because she was, I thought, able to understand me.

“Sarah quit her studies, and her family helped us generously. We bought our first small apartment and tried to have children. Difficulties arose quickly, but we were young and continued trying, even with the help of various treatments. We were successful only after several years, and Sarah was pregnant. We did not know the sex of the baby beforehand, but when I found out we had a girl, I said her chosen name aloud – Guta!

“Sarah understood my wish and agreed. She knew of my great love for my mother who was taken from me at the camp, and expected I would give our daughter some of the buried love I had for my mother.”

Karl turned his shining eyes to his daughter, stalled for a few

seconds as though still debating and struggling with himself, and finally said, “You did not know as well.” And then he dared and told her, this time outright, “Yes, you were named after my mother, Guta, who went up in smoke in Treblinka.”

Guta was overwhelmed. Her lips shook voicelessly and spoke for her. Guta did not imagine she bore the heavy and obligating load of her father’s mother’s name. She understood her parents kept this from her for fear of burdening her with the pain and memories of her grandmother’s name which she, her young granddaughter, bears in her honor and memory.

Guta brought her head close to her father’s face and gently kissed his wrinkled, sweaty forehead. She gave him the kiss of understanding and gratitude.

“After our daughter Guta was born,” Karl went on, “I immersed myself in continuing my studies and in work, and Sarah dedicated her time to raising our daughter and caring for the house. I grew up as an only child and dreamt of having brothers and sisters.

“After marrying and settling in America, I was looking forward to a large family. I wanted several children who would grow up and experience love and indulgences, children who would not find themselves abandoned and left on their own. I wanted to raise children who would not be lonely orphans like I was.

“We were unsuccessful. After you, Guta, we knew much heartache

and disappointment in not being able to have other children, and you remained our only child.”

I heard Karl and wondered whether during their attempts at having children he and Sarah, two secular people, thought of or recalled the story of Abraham and Sarah, who, because of a supposed physical limitation, was barren for many years. Did they remember the story of the biblical Sarah, who gave in to convention and family aspirations and pushed her husband Abraham into the arms of Hagar to father an heir, as adoption was not an option then.

Now Guta allowed herself to tell her father that children in the different schools she attended would make fun of her strange and unusual name. They would call her “gate-girl” because the word “Guta” reminded them of the word “gate.”

Karl stopped talking and quickly and methodically finished the food that remained on his plate from our lengthy meal.

He lifted his gaze, looked at my face, and asked why I seemed so surprised. And I was indeed surprised. Again, and more powerfully, the bells in my head went off and reminded me of my mother’s sister and her son, my cousin. And again I did not dare – or maybe I was afraid – to ask Karl about it.

From the various comments I heard from Karl and from between the lines of his story, I inferred that his and Sarah’s past in the camps had a profound effect on the course of their life together.

The suffering of war, the loss of her family, disappointment in friends and acquaintances in Europe and then in America, along with the expectations she had for herself which fell through – these all burned Sarah’s spirit and hurt her deeply. After experiencing several short failed relationships, Sarah hoped her marriage of love to Karl would provide reward and compensation for the hardships of the past. She expected Karl to be a “perfect” husband and a partner for life.

For the majority of their marriage, Karl received as much softness, concern, and love as Sarah could give him. But without meaning or wanting to, she would sometimes be overpowered by fits of bitterness and anger targeted at her husband. Karl believed that remnants of the past would resurface and bring about these outbursts and her frequent long silences. He was aware of his wife’s deep-seated frustrations, and held back, but on some occasions, he would respond with anger and complaints.

Karl had trouble accepting that past events would lead Sarah to such surprising and severe reactions. He tried to believe that he had overcome the hardships of his own past, and that he was a convenient target for his wife’s outbreaks, outbreaks sometimes caused by secondary factors he was not aware of.

Sarah frequently declared her intention to leave him. He replied that he did understand her, and saw no reason for them to separate, but he would not prevent her from leaving.

Sarah stayed, and Karl believed she never truly wanted or intended

to leave him. He assumed she really wanted to get his attention and awake his jealousy for her; that she wanted more displays of love from her withdrawn husband and desired him to pamper her more than he did. He tried, but could not.

They turned to a marriage counselor by mutual decision, but he too was unable to improve their relationship or reveal the source of their discord. Sarah turned, of her own volition, to seek psychiatric help for a few years, although she did not explain to Karl the real reason for this desire. Karl was supportive. He did not ask or try to coax her for information on the matter, so as not to embarrass her and deter her from continuing treatment.

Sarah did not share what was discussed between her and her doctor with Karl, but the treatment did not improve their relationship either, as the arguments and fights would start up and wind down as they did before. In his practical logic, Karl assumed that either intentionally or not, Sarah did not reveal the extent of her frustrations or the past events that still weighed on her which the doctor did not uncover.

Karl mentioned nothing to her. In addition to the disappointment he felt, he thought his wife's expectations from him were exaggerated and unattainable. Karl believed that if Sarah would be able to understand the connection between his withdrawn nature and his past, she would not have a motive for her bitterness.

Karl sensed that Sarah was envious of him, without even admitting

it to herself. He was successful in everything he did in America – he found an interesting and lucrative job and stayed at it for a long time. In contrast, once Guta grew up, Sarah held a series of administrative and clerical positions, and for shorter periods than she would have hoped.

Karl devoted his talent and spare time to admirable hobbies. Sarah tried to follow him unsuccessfully. She tried, and put in effort and time in extensive preparations, but was unable to execute most of her plans. She did not gain Karl's support or esteem in these attempts, and although she did not ask for them, she wanted them dearly.

Past lessons taught Karl to rely on himself alone, and he applied this to his life, work, and pastimes. He learned that if you rely on physical or emotional support from others, you will be disappointed. Karl learned that if you can get help – how nice, but you must go on without it too.

Sarah, on the other hand, yearned and hoped for support and encouragement from her many friends and acquaintances, and was repeatedly let down.

And Karl continued. "Sarah's health was greatly compromised in the work camps, so we both bore the physical and emotional scars of our imprisonment. We did not test which one of us was more hurt, who was responsible for our inability to have more children. We preferred, for the sake of our marriage, not to know.

“Sarah passed away at the age of 55 – close to your age now, Guta! You were the highest compensation your mother and I had for our suffering in the camps, and our best defiance of the Nazi extermination plans.”

I mentioned that unlike Sarah, my wife Nehama was not in the camps and knew nothing of that suffering. She was raised in Israel, in a healthy, loving environment, but she also passed away from cancer when she was only 60.

“It is surprising how similar we are,” Karl sighed and went on. “In America, I avoid talking to people about what happened to me during the Holocaust and the difficulties I experienced afterward. Americans are not interested in hearing about difficult matters that are so foreign to them. An American who was born as a free and independent person cannot understand it can be otherwise, and so I kept quiet. Only here and now can I finally express myself freely and speak with almost no limitations about the subjects that have built up inside me, and I feel such relief!

“Now,” Karl continued, “it is clearer to me than ever that life in the camp built my personality differently from the way a regular person’s personality is made up. Over there, anyone who wanted to survive had to learn quickly that it is up to him, and him alone, to take care of himself – food, protection from the Germans and other pursuers, health, clothing, and position. There was no partnership or division of work in the death camps. Each man struggled for himself and survived by his own cunning, cleverness, daring, and self-preservation he was forced to develop.

“Conditions there forced us to abandon our habits, our original human social customs. To survive, we had to steal food and clothing, we had to inform on others, and even frame them to save ourselves. When we worked we had to put a greater load on others to save our own strength. We could not trust any of our friends and sometimes not even our family members. I saw sons take food from their fathers. I saw sons abandon their parents in work and during the long marches. I saw how many of us avoided helping our loved ones, for fear of collapsing ourselves, and some even snatched the thin, worn blankets from their relations.

“In the camp, the urge to exist overcame any mental or physical block. We wanted to live another hour, another day, another week – to live without knowing what tomorrow holds – without knowing this suffering might possibly, someday, end and without knowing we would survive until then.

“The prisoners in the camp could not remember their incarcerated mothers, wives, and children. We did not know if our loved ones were still alive or suffocated, shot, or died of starvation or even disease. We were alone, even if we came to the camp with family or were there with them. Everyone struggled by themselves and for themselves.

“Those of us who survived physically, like me, like Sarah, like your friend Sammy, did they survive mentally and humanely as well? Can those who survive shake free of the recesses left by the struggle to survive?

“Will the survivor go back to being social, considerate, and fair in his environment? Would he be able to love?”

“In college, when I met Sarah again and we became friends, I tested myself with her. I knew I was different, that my response to others, planted in the camp, was still in me. I wondered whether I would be able to give of myself to another. Would I be able to love and be a partner to someone?”

“I knew Sarah also had experiences which were difficult, depressing, and humiliating. I knew her struggle for survival could also dictate selfish, inconsiderate behavior, and I was worried.

“I wondered – will we be able to live like a couple despite our past, or would we each live for ourselves? Would we be able to love and give each other support and help? Did we have any humanity left? I was afraid and concerned for the future.

“An older survivor who was single,” Karl mumbled, “told me that when he arrived in America, he did not even want to meet young women who survived the camps like he did. He was afraid of marrying a woman who may have been hurt so badly she was incapable of giving him love, tenderness, and enjoyment. He was afraid she would not be able to bear the effects of the burden he carried with him.

“This survivor married a ‘local.’ He adjusted to her spoiled attitude to life with difficulty, and she was unable to understand

the weight of his burdens and could not help him.

“I believe,” Karl went on pondering aloud, “that Sarah had similar worries to mine. In addition, her family members tried to convince her to let go of the past and marry an American man who would be of sounder mind and wealthier than me.

“Despite our worries, we married and promised each other to support one another and help each other be free from the suffocating past.

“Were we capable of this?”

“Did we each expect, deep in our hearts, that the other would relent more, that the other would change, that the other would do what was expected of him or her?”

“Wasn’t I afraid of failing in love? Wasn’t I worried that again, like the Selection in the camp, my loved ones would be taken away from me and I would be left alone?”

“Maybe it was better to stay alone and not be disappointed and hurt again. Maybe the second injury, if it came, would be harder and more painful than the previous one, and I would not be able to stand it.

“Was I afraid we would not be able to find love because we were both incapable of feeling or giving it?”

“Were our feelings faded and our souls so crippled with no hope of healing?”

Karl stopped the flow of words and sat thinking, as someone who knows he would not find an answer to his quandaries.

I took advantage of the break and shared him with a difficult saying I once heard from my brother. He divorced after a short and painful marriage, and years later confessed to me, “I did not treat my wife fairly and gently. I tried to make her love me less, so she would suffer less when we separated.” My brother knew that the severe and heavy injury he carried in his soul would quickly dissolve his marriage, and out of true love for his wife he decided, in his sick mind, to help her and ease the coming separation. His “gift” to his wife was that intentional harm to her love for him, to lessen her pain after their separation.

Karl smiled at me. He understood the twisted ways of my brother’s mind and said, “Sarah and I held on to our marriage strongly, even though we had fights and were often angry and did not understand each other. Maybe I was the one who did not know how to give her love, but despite the difficulties, I believe we both wanted to continue living together because we felt and believed it was the lesser of two evils.

“When Sarah passed away, I found out we were right. I missed her greatly and respected her ability to acclimate to who I was, and that is why I did not remarry.”

I will admit that from the moment I learned of the origin of Guta's name, I stopped being an attentive listener. The same shiver in my body I felt when I heard his daughter's name during our first meeting returned, and more strongly. Even now, doubt ate away at my mind. Many details from Karl's past remained vague and unclear to me.

Indeed, my mother had a sister called Guta. Could there be a connection between her and Karl's mother or daughter?

After all, my mother told me with confidence that her sister, her husband, and their son were killed in the camps, as they did not return from there. The question lay at the tip of my tongue, but I still hesitated. I was also afraid for Karl's health, as he seemed very emotional and pale. Guta reached for a small silver box in her purse and quickly took out a small white pill from it which she placed, as though in secret, under her father's tongue. He sucked on it slowly and sat, resting for a few minutes. Later, he sipped from a cold glass of water until the color gradually returned to his cheeks.

Karl addressed me in a voice that held, for the first time since we met, pleading, and asked us to join him.

Anticipating Karl would disperse the thick fog between his mother's name and the name of my aunt Guta, we found ourselves in their hotel room.

The Discovery

In his spacious hotel room, Karl sat in a large, soft armchair and asked me, for the first time, to sit closer to him. I nervously anticipated what he would say, but was disappointed.

Karl continued speaking, but not on the subject I was so looking forward to.

He revealed to us and to his daughter, for the first time, his difficulties after the passing of his wife, Sarah. He confessed shyly, “I tried, unsuccessfully, to start new relationships with other women. My friends, and even you, Guta, introduced me to American widows and divorcees, but the lack of shared history and their difficulty in understanding me and my moods, the differences in thinking, and the differences in the importance we attributed to daily matters, these all obstructed communication between me and them. After a few failed attempts, I realized that despite my many years in the United States, I still have not become an American, and I am still different. I felt it was better, for me as well as for my daughter, not to build a new relationship that would be so different than the previous one.”

Karl gently touched my shoulder and pointed to my wife Adina. “You succeeded. You were able to marry a suitable and beautiful second wife,” he noted with a smile. I did not contradict him. Karl,

apparently, did not understand that neither Adina nor my first wife shared my past and childhood experiences. My efforts to be absorbed in the country and fit in with the Israelis included my desire to have a healthy family detached, as much as possible, from my past and its effects. I wanted my children to grow up like others born in this country, without the burden of the memories of the struggle for survival. I wanted to prevent them becoming the “second” injured generation.

I did not know then, and I am still not clear on whether we survivors passed on our traits to our children through our genes. Did our outlook on life, the few things they heard from us about our past and misery – did they affect the way our children turned out?

Karl and Guta did not fully understand me. “But you came to the land of Jews,” Guta said, surprised. “Were the Jews in Israel different than you? Didn’t the Jews in Israel understand you, the survivor, easily, understandably and willingly? Did they not accept you warmly?”

I was not surprised. These were common questions from foreign Jews. Guta was not aware of the many prominent disparities that existed in Israel between the locals and the new immigrants; some disparities exist to this day.

When we immigrated to Israel, we felt the condescension of the locals toward the immigrants who came from the Diaspora, and their accusations that they went “like lambs to the slaughter.”

Guta thought only a born American could not connect with and understand a European Diaspora Jew – a Jew like her father, a foreigner with a burden of physical and mental wounds.

I had to disprove their beautiful theory of one country for all and equality for the entire Jewish people. This was not what it was like in reality. My actions and thoughts, since the day of my arrival, concentrated on how-to-do-what: how to act and who to connect with to stop being the “new guy,” the different and rejected one; how to talk; how to react; how to dress – to fit in with the local culture that looked down on us.

When I arrived in Israel I joined a youth movement. Despite the lung doctor completely forbidding it, I stayed out in the sun so I would tan and look like the locals, and pushed myself into every social activity I would be allowed to join, even if it risked my health.

I was so busy with various activities I did not have time or the will left for schooling, which I so missed. I only started studying when Mother made me realize I had no future without an education: “You will not survive without your most important possessions – ” she told me – “the possessions you will always keep are the one in your head, possessions no one can take away from you.”

Ever since, as a student in school and at the university, I aspired to be one of the best, and succeeded. I graduated with honors and proved that I, the new immigrant, am just as good as the proud Israelis.

Karl and Guta were surprised. They could not imagine that a Jewish boy who survived the Holocaust would experience such difficulties in his attempts to fit in with the locals. Karl thought young people in Israel heard about the atrocities of the Holocaust, and they showed sympathy and understanding to those who came from over there.

Karl was wrong, as I mentioned. My new young friends in Israel knew nothing, asked nothing, and showed no desire to understand, and I grit my teeth and “met them halfway.” Karl was wrong to think that the difficult conditions and alienation he experienced were only his, the exiled Jew who came to a country of another people and another religion. He wanted to believe that equality, brotherhood, and mutual assistance ruled in our young state, and I replied by explaining why I did not grow up on a kibbutz, an Israeli-developed agricultural socialistic settlement.

Our parents believed that my brother and I would become acclimated in the quickest, easiest, most efficient manner in a kibbutz. The kibbutz was afraid to accept me because my lungs showed clear remnants of my tuberculosis that had healed. The kibbutz was worried my health would be a financial strain and preferred not to take the risk. They agreed to take in my brother, who was seemingly healthy. Our parents, I am happy to say, decided not to separate us again.

Karl smiled to himself in satisfaction. “You remind me,” he said, “of my decision whether I should immigrate to Israel when I completed my studies. I pondered the matter, and decided to stay

in America and become an American like the others. I preferred to try and repay, at least my daughter, for my difficulties in fitting in. I put great effort in allowing our daughter to study and enjoy a life of the utmost comfort. I sent her to excellent private schools and provided her with comfortable studying and living arrangements until she graduated from the university. My ambition was that she study humanities and philosophy, but Guta was more practical and chose to combine the subjects. She studied philosophy for the soul, and became an accountant for her livelihood.”

Karl was carried away in his newfound openness, and he turned his head to Guta and went on. “You surprised us in your marriage as well. From the many determined suitors you had, you chose a Puerto Rican man, of all things. And now that you are a mother of two boys who call me Grandpa, they innocently ask me what this dark mark on my arm is and where is Grandma.

“When you chose your mate and decided to get married, your mother and I agonized and could not decide. Your decision was difficult for us. You chose a man whose skin color and religion was different than ours. Your mother and I, two survivors of the racist Nazi regime, struggle greatly with ourselves – a struggle between emotion and common sense and tradition.

“We gently hinted to you that maybe it would be better to start a family with a man who shared your roots and religion. We spoke in lofty ideas such as ‘the continuation of the Jewish people.’ We quickly realized that these considerations and outlooks had little

impact on a young American woman such as you. You stood your ground and convinced us Mike was the most suitable man for you. It was clear that you did not find the differences in background important. After all, we were glad to learn that our pain did not adversely affect our second generation and did not limit you or stand in your way.

“‘The home we will have,’ you told us, ‘will be without hindrances, and my children will be free of prejudice.’ We understood that you wanted to stay away from the past and be free of it, and spare your children from our difficult memories. We accepted your choice, and Mike became the son we unsuccessfully tried to have. Your two sweet children – third generation to survivors – are unaware of their parents’ differences in race, religion, and background, and I happily became an ordinary and spoiling grandfather, like all grandparents.”

I completed the picture from my side, and told them my children married partners with different backgrounds and skin colors as well, and they gave me five, sweet, loved, Israeli grandchildren.

Karl’s face radiated. He took a picture of his grandchildren out of his wallet and showed them off proudly, and then asked to see pictures of my grandchildren. I was a little embarrassed. I do not carry family pictures in my wallet, because showing them feels forced and unnatural to me, and the close family members know each other well as it is.

Karl’s face fell, and then I remembered that in a bag that

I carried, I had the first copy of my book that I received from Yad Vashem. I took the book from the bag and opened it to the pages of family photographs. I wanted to show them the picture of my grandchildren, but Karl was speedier than me and he gently but quickly took the book from my hands.

His eyes focused on the cover: a colorful collage that also included a picture of a boy walking in the Warsaw ghetto with his hands held up in surrender. Karl remembered, “This collage is hanging in the hall, across from the front entrance to your home. It was the first picture I saw in your home – a picture that made me stop in my tracks and sent me, right as I entered, a clear signal from the war and the ghetto. I did not ask you about it, because I did not want to meddle in your past. Now I know and understand what moved you to draw it and place it prominently at the entrance to your home.”

Karl leafed through the book slowly and meticulously. He could not read what was written in Hebrew, but he turned page after page as though he could understand and sense what was written. Guta stood closer to him and glanced at the printed pages over his shoulder.

Karl went on slowly turning the pages to the middle of the book. Now he saw the pages of my family photos. He stopped turning pages and carefully looked at the many faces in the first, faded photo which was over 100 years old. It blurrily shows my mother’s parents and next to them, in order of their birth, their six children: three girls and three boys. My mother, who was about

2 years old and the youngest child, stands closest to her parents.

A small black dot appears on the foreheads of two of the children, and Karl “scolded” me for not retouching the images and cleaning the staining before printing it. I could have done so, but did not want to. My mother found this old photograph after the war with her sister Pola in Paris. My mother is the one who made those black marks on the foreheads of her sister Guta and her brother Pavel, who did not survive. Karl stalled on the photo and delved into it for a long time, changed his glasses, searched for a magnifying glass, didn’t find one, and great wondering was evident on his face.

He then turned to look at the other two photographs on the page, which showed my brother and me – I was about 2 years old, and my brother 3½. The creases in his forehead deepened. It seemed like he went on deliberating and arguing with himself. It seemed as though something in the three photos was familiar or troubling to Karl, but he was unsure of it. His eyes turned to me, questioning, but I was no help, and he turned back to stare at the photos.

“I have no photos left from those years; they all burned with the ghetto,” Karl sighed. He turned the first page of photographs and his eyes, which were moving in a frenzy until then, became glued to the two photos on the next page. His mouth fell wide open, and his face froze. His thumb clung to the photos strongly, and the book closed around his thumb as if on its own volition. Karl’s entire body shook, and his head sunk between his shoulders. His lips

remained open and moving, but his voice was not heard. Guta held her father closely, stroked his forehead which was wet with sweat, and tried to soothe him while, at the same time, preparing another pill for him.

Karl shook himself, and in the silence of the room his whisper sounded like a scream:

“That’s me – those are Father and Mother!”

His body continued to tremble, and then he was quiet again.

A terrified Guta brought her hand to the book. She gently moved her father’s thumb, inspected the photographs closely, and became even paler. She saw a young man, meticulously dressed, sitting peacefully by a desk with an open book in his hands. In the face of the boy in photo, the face previously hidden by Karl’s thumb, Guta recognized her father’s face when he was young.

None of us dared disturb the silence. I froze too, as stunned and shaken as Karl. I knew which photo they saw, and could not make a sound.

Guta took the pill she was searching for earlier out of a box in her purse and firmly but gently shoved it under her father’s tongue.

Several seconds, or possibly minutes, passed, and finally Karl shook himself. With surprising speed, he turned the page of photographs he had just seen, looked at the next photographs, and immediately returned to the previous page. He again stared

at those two old photos for a long time. We waited with strained silence, and then he turned his stunned face to mine, which was also very pale by now. He mumbled to me slowly, as though stuttering, and whispered,

“The boy in the photo is me. I remember it was taken in my room before the war. The second picture, the couple at the wedding, those are my parents – my mother Guta and my father Ignac Shparok. I am Kazik Shparok.”

Karl could not get up from his seat, and neither could I. We stared at each other with wide open, wet eyes. A smile gradually spread on our lips. I expected Karl to speak first, and he expected I would, but we both remained frozen in our seats. We expelled hot air from our lungs and remained silent. His eyes wandered from my face to the photos, back and forth.

The silence continued. Guta got up, brought both of us glasses of water and small shots of cold vodka from the refrigerator in the room.

After we both calmed down slightly, I took the book from Karl’s hands. I concentrated on the photograph of the serious young man in the photo and then at the wrinkled face of Karl, who was sitting next to me, and could not find a resemblance. I read the Polish translation of the captions printed next to the photos in a confident voice; next to the photo of the couple at their wedding it said:

Aunt Guta and Uncle Yitzhak Shparok

And I added: “Guta is my mother’s sister. She is the little girl in the first photo in the book, with the black dot on her forehead.”

Next to the boy it said:

My cousin Kazik, about 1939

Again I examined the face of Karl, who was sitting beside me. I did not recognize him as my cousin Kazik, who I last saw when I was only about 6 years of age, over 65 years ago.

Karl did not recognize me as the 2-year-old he saw in the photo in the first page or the smiling boy with the long blond curls he saw in the large photo in my home, near my bed, and the skinny boy with short hair he last saw in the ghetto. My childhood face looked nothing like the bald head and adult face with the mustache and pipe sitting next to him now.

It was still silent. Karl sipped the remaining vodka, took the book back to him, and gently put his lips to the picture of his parents on their wedding day; the parents he last saw together when they arrived in Treblinka, humiliated and downtrodden.

Karl turned his eyes back to me. Just to make sure he asked hesitantly:

“Are you really Bobus?”

I smiled at him in embarrassment and happiness. Bobus was

my nickname in my childhood in Poland, and only close family members used that name over my Polish name Robert.

Karl continued:

“For a moment I worried that your friend Sammy was my cousin Bobus.”

Now I was certain the man next to me was indeed my lost cousin Kazik. He survived and was sitting here next to me, despite what my mother told me. Karl did not need my approval. The joy on my face showed that I am indeed the same Bobus, son of Roza, his aunt – his mother’s sister. He came near me, hugged me tightly, and whispered clearly in my ear my last name and my brother’s name.

I clung to him and felt the shivers pulsating through his body. A calming wave of warmth spread in my body as well.

I was peaceful. The inexplicable tension I felt since the first time I saw Karl, the tourist and heard his daughter’s name, dispersed. Now I understood. I felt great kinship with the old man next to me, who now took off his glasses, and his beaming naked eyes were looking at me.

Kazik did not live with us before and during the war. To me he was the old cousin, and I was the youngest one, who was played with fondly. In our annual memorials in the Forest of Martyrs Father would mention them as well, and Mother’s eyes would well up. I believed then, or perhaps I only imagined, that I vaguely

remember them from the distant past.

When I wrote my memoir and I looked through the papers my mother left me, I found two photographs among them – that of young Kazik, and the one of his parents at their wedding. I felt an urge to memorialize them in my book, as part of my past. And now, this bit of life in the distant past had returned and appeared before me in the form of “the tourist” Karl. It seemed my past returned to me when I heard the name Guta and before I noticed it myself, and in an unaware way that was not of my doing.

I now believe that the fingerprint left in me from my distant past unwittingly guided me. The memory of the past created the urge I could not understand or explain to get close to the two strangers we met at random at the restaurant.

I see myself sitting across from my only living relative from my mother’s large family, and I am still surprised and thrilled by the discovery. I still wonder and do not fully comprehend what I feel about my long lost cousin, other than joy at the surprising knowledge that he survived after the ghetto and Treblinka.

Will my feelings toward Kazik who was found again will grow and become similar to the warm feelings I have for my cousins on my father’s side, who are here in the country?

Would family relation on its own develop again into deep emotional closeness?

Can the distance and lengthy separation we experienced be overcome?

Have we become only virtual characters to one another?

Will the relatively short time we both have left to live be enough to unite us?

Won't the geographical distance between us prevent us from staying in touch?

It will take more time, if ever, until I know the answers to these questions. For the moment, I am satisfied with the feeling of pleasantness, warmth, and empathy my heart is transmitting to me.

Gradually it seemed like we all settled down a bit.

Guta pulled the open book back to her and inspected the faces in the photographs. She looked at the face of the boy who would become her father and for the first time saw the faces of the grandparents she never knew, either in life or in pictures. Her imagination only had descriptions she heard from her father, which now became more real.

Guta could see the similarity between her father's adolescent face and his father's face in a photo from his wedding day. Her grandfather's face, which was revealed to her in the photograph, was younger than the face of her father sitting next to her. She now looked at her young grandfather and his aging son.

Us and the Animals

Guta opened the windows of the room and a cool sea breeze came in. Kazik's room was on an upper floor of the hotel, and no sounds could be heard from the street, where only a few cars still passed. We continued sitting in silence.

I will never know how long we sat like this.

Suddenly, at once, the silence was broken. Kazik made a short, fearful scream, and his armchair screeched as he strongly held on to its armrests. His entire body shook, and he tried to stand up, but his legs failed, and he gave in to his shaking and sank back deeply into the armchair. Only then did I hear the faint barking of a dog that probably passed in the street below. The groan Kazik made and the screech of the armchair were louder than the barking, which soon stopped.

“What happened to you?” I asked, scared.

Kazik closed his open mouth and eased back into the armchair. He listened to the quiet that returned to the room, let a large puff of air escape from his lungs, paused for a few seconds, and answered loudly, angry, and firmly:

“Dogs!!”

I only heard the soft barking of a single dog, but I did not respond. Guta was not moved by her father's reaction this time and continued looking at him with compassion and understanding. It was clear she knew his sensitivities.

We did not know what frightened Kazik; why he yelled and groaned in fear, and why his whole body shook.

He sensed our surprise and embarrassment, but it was clear to us he did not understand how we could not understand his distress. In a loud, enraged voice, he sputtered a stream of angry phrases:

“Anything but dogs!

“I remember them from Treblinka!

“I remember them – huge and standing near the legs of the SS guards!

“I remember their bites and frightening barking!

“I remember their large food portions!

“I remember the dogs kept me from getting close to barns and stables and finding food!

“I remember that during my escape, before I dared come close to a place of residence, I listened to hear if there were dogs. I was more afraid of them than of the farmers!

“I hate dogs!”

Kazik unloaded some of his anger and a small apologetic smile returned to his features. I looked in my cousin’s eyes understandingly. I heard similar reactions by survivors before – reactions of recoiling and fear of dogs. In addition, in the book *The Story of a Life: A Memoir*, by Aharon Appelfeld, describes a work camp called Klatcwud, which had an enclosure for guard dogs called keper. They said they shoved little children who were unlucky enough to be there into this enclosure, and the dogs tore them apart and devoured them. Did Kazik have a similar experience, or maybe he heard about its existence?

Kazik, who had calmed down a little in the meantime, concentrated on the plate of cookies on the table. With two shaking fingers, he picked up a cookie, but did not put it in his mouth. He waved it in the air, turned it toward us, and said, “This is what we struggled for there with the dogs. No – there were no cookies in Treblinka, but small bits of leftover food like this cookie were like a treasure for us then. The dogs’ bowls had leftovers mixed with bread and even fresh meat, and we coveted them.

“We tried stealing these leftovers, the dogs’ large food portions, out of their bowls, but for the most part we failed, and the dogs would bite us savagely.” Kazik rolled up his right shirtsleeve, pointed to many small dark circles on his flesh, and said angrily, “This is what I have left from the teeth of the dogs whose food I tried to take for myself! Sometimes I even succeeded,” he added with a smile and continued.

“The large German shepherds stood close to the legs of the SS guards at the camp. Their mouths were always open and their sharp teeth could be seen through their lowered lips. The dogs were trained to see us as a target for attack. We were terrified the SS guard would command his dog, ‘Man, bite the dog,’ a command the dogs executed joyfully and with no hesitation. If you did not stand in line properly in the opinion of the dog-leaders, if you did not remove your hat quickly enough, if you shoved in line for food, if you did not respond immediately when your number was called – the dogs, which were called men, were ordered to attack us – the dogs.

“When we escaped from Treblinka, there were many dogs in the villages and at farmers’ houses. They were not trained to attack Jews like the camp dogs, but they barked loudly when they smelled strangers. When the dogs barked, the door would usually open and the farmer or his wife would stand at the doorway with a stick or a pitchfork. They understood why their dogs were barking, and we had to run away, hungry.

“The pigs and horses were much friendlier to us. They made no sounds of protest when we joined them for sleeping or a meal. They ignored us, and our smell did not bother them.”

Kazik did not bite the cookie. He placed it back on the plate and smiled. “Now I do not need to grab food. I am full, and I can buy any food I want. But the desire, the impulse, the craving for every bit of food from back then, I cannot forget anymore. I will always remember the large dogs and their threatening, sharp teeth being

bared while they forced me to surrender to them, to withdraw and stay painfully hungry.”

I did not disagree with Kazik. I also saw the German dogs in the ghetto; dogs trained to identify our scent, dogs who specialized in identifying the scent of children and the elderly who were hiding from the Selections. I sometimes heard them from my hiding place, sniffing close to me, accompanied by the clicks of the boots of the German soldiers hunting for us. I may have been too young, maybe I was not aware of what the dogs could do to me, and so I was not deterred by them.

Unlike the large German shepherds in the ghetto, I fondly remember the small, innocent puppy, “my partner,” in my hiding place in the Polish side of Warsaw. After we all escaped the torn-down ghetto, one of our hiding places was a room in the apartment of an elderly Polish couple. The room was on the ground floor and its window faced the street. Most of the time, my brother and I were the only ones in the room. We had to crawl on all fours or lie down, covered, on the bed so we would not be seen from the outside. To alleviate the fear and boredom, Father brought us a small, black puppy. We were thrilled with it and played with it, crawled after it in the room, and argued about which one of us would get to hold it and hug it.

After a few days, however, the puppy disappeared suddenly. We found out later that Father was the one who threw it out in the night, afraid that our running around after it would expose us.

In the 2 years I lived in Przyszowa, the small Polish village, I saw many dogs and was friendly with most of them. I was not a stranger to these dogs, and they accepted me as one of the locals. These village dogs were not trained to tell apart the scent of a Polish person from that of a Jew. They were not trained to hunt men, and their nature was not perverted.

When I was required to bring the bottles of alcohol and pass through the threatening forest, I forced dogs to accompany me. They were even more afraid of the forest wolves than I was. I dragged them along with the childish illusion that they would protect me, and they surely expected me to protect them. Often, I had no choice but to carry in my arms a dog that was shaking with fear and cold and that had sunk in the deep snow.

I hugged dogs, I kept warm with their body heat, and I loved them and felt safer and less lonely in their company. Even in the few photos I found of my time in the village, Vladek and I were sitting and hugging dogs larger than us. In the village, dogs were my only friends, and the only ones who were not a threat to me.

In this very village I heard the fearful howling of the female dogs that were in heat and at night were tied by the peasants to trees in the forest, for breeding. I was told what would happen to them when they were surrounded by the wolves, and I felt sorry for them.

Those females in the forest were not the only ones howling. Pairs of dogs coupled in the village too. After the male finished his

business, the dogs would stay attached to one another for a few minutes. The angry farmers, who preferred forest wolves for breeding, tried to separate the pairs and beat the dogs with sticks. I heard their whimpers of pain, but never saw that the beating separated the joined dogs.

I did not understand everything I saw, but I played with dogs and loved them.

I did not love just the dogs. I very much loved the small canary bird that sang in our house before the ghetto. When we moved to the ghetto, I carried her cage in one hand, and held my mother's hand tightly in the other. My canary was not imprisoned with me. A German soldier stopped us on our way and screamed at Mother that no pets were allowed in the ghetto. They, the Germans, would take care of it, he said, and ripped the cage out of my hand. As we walked on, I heard the sound of the cage being crushed behind us. I will never know if my canary was crushed with it, or whether it managed to escape and be free.

As a lonely boy in the village, I also loved the brown foxes that came from the forest. I thought they were beautiful and not threatening. The village peasants, on the other hand, were not impressed by them and were happy to catch them. The foxes would often sneak into the chicken coops at night and cause pandemonium and injuries, and usually were able to flee with one of the chickens in their jaws. In the morning, the farmers would follow the path of feathers, and were sometimes able to find the culprit and enjoy its meat and fur.

The farmers built a cruel trap to defend the coops. They built a wooden tank shaped like a cone out of planks with no top, and closed the larger opening, while leaving the smaller one open. They put many nails around the small opening. The nails were pointed toward the bottom of the tank, where they placed a large piece of fresh meat. When the hungry fox smelled the meat in the trap, it would be tempted to put his head inside, but it would not be able to take its head out. The nails would pierce its neck deeply, and its cries were heard all night. In the morning, the farmers would be pleased. They protected the chickens and caught the fox and would eat its meat and make winter clothes from its fur.

During the day, the squeals of pigs joined the howling of the dogs and foxes. The farmers did not need that many for breeding and preferred to force-feed them for eating. The males were neutered with a kitchen knife and would squeal for long hours. When they grew and fattened up, they met the knife again and were killed for food or sale.

I loved animals, but hunger forced us to catch them and eat their flesh as well. In the snowy winter we learned, by the tracks in the snow, that the rabbits would come and go on the exact same path. To hunt them, we set up traps from metal wire with a loop at the end. We tied one end of the wire to a tree, close to the tracks, and the other, with the loop, we buried in the snow under the tracks. We spread a number of these traps out at dusk, and in the morning, we usually found a twitching rabbit in it.

We became more sophisticated with time. We built an enclosure

for rabbits near the house, and they bred quickly and improved the quantity and quality of our food. In addition, Roza's husband made us coats and hats for winter from their fur.

“There is only one animal that you, Kazik, know well, that I hated and loathe to this day: lice. After a relatively short time in the ghetto, we were all itchy. I spent hours sitting in hiding places and scratching myself until I bled.

“My parents did not have a solution for our ‘little’ problem. ‘It will pass,’ Mother said in her soothing voice. But ‘it’ did not pass. With no other choice, we became accustomed to the scratching:

“The itching continued in the remote village of Przyszowa. Vladek scratched himself too, but he did not see it as a particular problem. ‘This is what it is like in the country,’ he said with indifference.

“Roza, my angel, was aware of my discomfort and shaved off all the hair on my head. This is how the pesky problem was solved, at least partially.

“When Mother came to the village, she also joined the fight against lice and taught me how to delouse. I learned that clothing must be turned inside out, and one should look, especially around the stitches. There, tiny creatures, usually gray or white and innocent-looking, would hide. They were to be crushed between the fingernails until a cracking sound was heard, and another cause of itching was exterminated.

“I repeated the extermination method Mother taught me often, and felt relieved.

“Even today, when I get a mosquito bite, I feel pins and needles all over my body. When I hear about a lice epidemic in schools, I remember my shaved head, and do not recommend this solution to my children or grandchildren.

“When our eldest son was born, we bought him – or was it for me? – a pair of colorful parakeets (a canary was too pricey) in a cage that we placed on the windowsill. The parakeets lived with us for several years until the male managed to escape, and then we set the female free, so she would not become sad by herself.

“For his Bar Mitzvah, we bought my son a black Labrador dog, which reminded me of the puppy from our small hiding room in Warsaw. We named her Azit, after the paratrooper dog from the famous Israeli children’s book written by Major General Mordechai Gur.

“We all took care of the dog and spoiled her, and she passed away at the ripe old age of 14.”

When I see our dog in my mind’s eye, I wonder what would have happened if she were still in our home. She would obviously have greeted Karl and Guta with barks of joy. How would Karl react?

Would our beloved dog prevent, by her very existence, the discovery of our family connection?

We traveled the world extensively. We visited the great nature reserves in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. We visited the lakes and forests of Canada. We saw lionesses hunting to feed their males and cubs. We saw packs of hyenas hunting. We saw clever ambushes of crocodiles at the banks of rivers where thousands of wildebeests passed in search of food. We saw hyenas and birds of prey “clean” the outback of carcasses. We saw bears catch fish, and giraffes and giant elephants satisfied with grass, bark, and leaves.

We saw deer and other animals giving birth – we saw the entire circle of life in the animal kingdom, but we never saw true cruelty or prey for the sake of prey. We did not see animals hunt solely for extermination or annihilation. We saw the struggle for existence and survival that is necessary in nature. We learned that the world that is cruel – the one where some will destroy and murder purposefully – is the world of man, not of animals.

If the Germans and their aides were mimicking the hunters of the wild, the 6 million would not be extinct!

Finally, Kazik settled from the dog barking. Quietness spread in the room again, and with it, fatigue. The open window let in the sounds of the waves of the sea and the pale light of the moon, and Kazik faded from my eyes.

The Memorial

I have suffered from difficulties and interruptions in my sleep ever since I can remember. Usually, sleeping pills help me battle the disturbing phenomenon, but tonight, the difficulty, excitement, and dreams were unusually powerful. I took another sleeping pill and a sedative and lay on my back, motionless, trying to merge with the darkness and the quiet around me. I did not feel tired because of the stress and excitement, and did not even know if I were awake or still sleeping and dreaming. My mind stormed and stirred unwillingly and with no control over the thoughts in it. Events and emotions from the war and the long years since then flashed and mixed before my eyes.

I felt cramping in my stomach similar to the sensation of hunger that was familiar to me from then. Images of members of my family and people from the Polish village where I stayed after the ghetto floated before me. I also saw some characters I had difficulty recognizing.

The image of a young Kazik was present in every place and every event. He was also in places where I was surely on my own. I could sense him in hiding places in the ghetto where he did not stay at all. I could see him in the village where I was while he was, in fact, traveling south from Treblinka.

I could see in my mind's eye my grandmother visiting us in the ghetto with a small box of chocolate for my brother and me. She did not give chocolate to Kazik, who I could see with us. Did she know he was not there with us?

Again, I saw Mother in our room in the ghetto, sitting bent at the weak lightbulb, sewing and hiding jewelry and gold coins in the hems of clothing, and explaining to Kazik's image that these are our protective safes.

Apparently we had a good and a large meal a few hours ago, but on the tip of my tongue I could only feel the taste of the soft-boiled egg, without salt, that Mother cooked for us occasionally in the ghetto. I could not feel the taste of the juicy steak it seems I ate only a short while ago, but I could feel the taste of the canned milk we sucked out of the tubes.

I sensed my brother near me, always worried and tense. I saw in my mind that my brother, who was older than me, looked small next to Kazik. I heard again and clearly, as I did 65 years ago, my brother's desperate cry preventing my parents, possibly at the last moment, from opening the choking gas pipes, and I looked for big Kazik next to us.

I saw my father, young and energetic, extracting my mother and me from the shipment line to Treblinka and preventing the rifle bullets from hitting our backs at the death wall in the Numbers Action, and was surprised Kazik was not with us.

I watched my uncle Pavel putting down his two small children for the Selection in the street. They were packed into backpacks and sleeping soundly, a sleep from which they would never wake up again. I now saw, clearer than ever, my aunt Guta and uncle Ignac with their son Kazik standing between them, but this time they faded from my sight and disappeared into the mist.

I felt again, and in every part of my body, the cramps caused by the extensive sitting in cramped and suffocating hiding places. I was hungry and scared, but I did not make a sound or dared to cry.

Again, I felt the pricking in my feet of thorns, small stones, and droppings I stepped on in the village when I had no alternative but to walk barefoot. I remembered and physically felt the pain of the beating and curses of the owner of the house – Mr. Taulec – Roza the angel's drunkard husband. I imagined that if Kazik were there with me then, maybe he would have helped me.

Maybe if Kazik were with us, Mother would not have to go on walks with the drunken Taulec.

When Mr. Taulec would start drunkenly raging in the evening, when he angrily, savagely, and violently unloaded his venom, frustration, and hate on his wife (my angel), his son, and me – Mother would intervene.

Speaking and requests could not penetrate the master of the house's alcohol-ridden head at all. Mother would suggest that he

come outside with her, to the fresh air, and cool off. He would agree immediately, and we would have temporary peace.

Only Mother knew how to calm down Mr. Taulec, and it never occurred to me at the time to ask her how she did it. Neither Mother nor I brought the subject up in later years. Today, being an adult capable of understanding, I still ask myself how she was able to, and I have no clear answer. Mother never told me a thing. It was one of her best-kept secrets, an act of grace and sacrifice for me, and I did not understand it at all at the time.

Maybe Kazik would have gone to bring the bottle of Biber in my stead through the scary black forest.

I felt, in every part of my body, the movement of the ship that brought us to Israel, and I felt the salty sea air from the Tel Aviv breeze that blew in our faces as we walked with our visiting tourists.

I imagined myself watching a movie that is part documentary and part possibly fictional; a movie now unfolding before my eyes in changing speed and skipping ahead and going back; a movie no one edited or prepared for screening; a movie where every act stands alone; a movie which began many years ago, but has not ended yet.

At daybreak, fatigue overpowered me, and the light sleep gave way to a deep one. In my “light” sleep, I feel as though I am both awake and asleep. As though both worlds combine and rule me at

the same time, as though I am both in a dream and in reality at once.

In this weak, frenzied sleep, my dreams are different than the ones I have in my regular, calmer sleep. In these frenzied dreams, I feel as if I am actively taking part in events, places, and conditions that are completely different from my everyday life.

When the frenzied sleep nears waking stages, the impressions of the experiences I underwent are still with me, and I try to inspect and analyze its details. When I wake up, surrounded by the feeling of what I experienced and “did” in my sleep, it becomes clear to me that most of those things never happened, because in reality, they cannot be done, and that, in fact, I only dreamed or imagined them.

In the morning, but before I made sure I was already awake, I called their hotel. Now I already knew their last name and room number.

Kazik answered. “Karl redder” – “Karl speaking,” he said in Yiddish. I paused for a few seconds. Was I still dreaming? I asked myself. I recognized Karl’s voice easily, and I understood the words, but I was surprised that he would answer in Yiddish; has the wheel of time moved backward for him too?

They did not speak Yiddish in my parents’ house. If I spoke Yiddish as a child, it would surely be heard on my Polish accent. If that were the case, I could not have kept up my disguise as a Polish boy

in the hostile village. I told many of my acquaintances, "If I knew Yiddish, I would not be alive." My accent would have revealed me, as it did for many Jews then.

Kazik recognized my voice, felt my embarrassment, and immediately repeated what he said, this time in Polish. We were embarrassed, but we both understood what we went through that night, and avoided speaking about it.

I asked Karl to go some place, and he agreed without asking where.

At the arranged time, I saw them waiting at the hotel entrance. The two women sat in the backseat and my new-old cousin sat next to me. I looked at his face, and it seemed vague, tired, and tense.

I had a surprise planned for them.

I purchased a large memorial wreath. The black ribbon only had the inscription "Shparok" in Hebrew on the right, and in Latin characters on the left, in large white letters.

I placed the wreath in the trunk of my car.

We drove to the old, small cemetery in Nachalat Yitzhak, in the city of Givatayim. I entered the cemetery grounds with my car and stopped at the end of the paved interior road. Kazik and Guta recognized where we were and were very surprised.

I stopped the car next to a large stone memorial that towered over its surroundings like a mountain.

My guests were astounded. To their left they saw a tall structure that appeared, in shape, to be an unfinished pyramid, built from large, heavy lumps of stone. These stones looked like they were just placed on top of each other, from the wide base to the top, which was also a lump of stone, and to which a thick metal plate was attached.

At the bottom of this unique structure, in the front, was a space only open from one side, so it was all dark. The opening, in its size and shape, was like half the height of a person. The shape of the internal space was like that of a stove or oven. The sides of the rocks inside the dark space were covered by a thick layer of dark soot, built up from the burning of numerous memorial candles, some, of which, were left behind. Many empty metal containers were left scattered about.

The dark, thick, metal plate on top of the pyramid had burner-scorched spaces that made up the letters of the name – Treblinka.

This is the only sign here. There is no additional explanation, no description of the place, no list of names of the exterminated. The name burned in fire is the only written explanation for the structure and the past it represents.

A narrow path leads to the blackened entrance of the tall memorial, a path a man cannot walk on. It is covered with many

small, sharp stones, and between them is black soil. There are also shards of upright rocks on the path, large and with sharp edges. All along the path and between the rocks in it is old, rusted, blackening wire.

The memorial candles can only be inserted through one side of the black space, facing right toward a paved path.

A large cement slab, covering a deep space, is sunken into the ground at the beginning of the path. Remains of the bones of about 800,000 Jews whose lives were taken in Treblinka are buried in this space. These few bones represent the fate of all the victims, whose names are only memorialized here by the name of their last stop – the name burned at the top of the monument.

I took the wreath out of the trunk of my car and gave it to Guta and Kazik. Even without understanding the Hebrew sign burned at the top of the monument, they understood clearly where we were. Kazik's hands shook as he held the wreath. He and his daughter, who now carried both the flowers and the name of her grandmother who was destroyed in the smoke of Treblinka, clung to the wreath of fresh flowers and placed it, very gently, in the black space at the foot of the monument. There were no remains of previous flowers near the wreath. The flowers of this solitary wreath, once they no longer give off their scent, will also dry up and shrivel away. Only the metal wire, which holds the flowers together, will join the remains of the metal cans from the memorial candles lying about.

Apparently the many visitors who preceded us chose better than I did. Memorial candles burning for the souls of the burned of Treblinka are more fitting the spirit of the place than our blossoming wreath. Even so, I was comforted by the thought that the souls of our loved ones would be happy to smell blossoming fresh flowers once again.

Kazik and Guta bent their heads, mumbled soundlessly, and cried. They stood silent in front of the momentous stone structure and stared at the letter-shaped spaces burned into its top.

When we moved away from the monument a bit, we noticed that around us, only a few paces away, are vast areas of hundreds of graves. These graves were different in shape than the other graves – graves that are identical and very close together, almost touching one another. They all had the same dimensions and structure, all in the same color and made of the same stone. They all included, in the same lettering, the name, the age, and the same year of death 1948.

The remains of the dead of Treblinka are surrounded, only paces away, by the soldiers of the 1948 War of Independence. These soldiers died here in Israel, to ensure that us Jews, and the survivors from over there, also had a safe and protected country. Many of those fallen came to Israel after surviving the camps and the hunger, after surviving and escaping, like Kazik, and like me, the Nazi effort to have us reunite only in the deep hole at the top of the pathway to the monument.

There are about 6,000 military graves like these across the country. These are the graves of the 6,000 fallen soldiers in our War of Independence – one killed in battle for every thousand people exterminated there!

As I look at the tall memorial surrounded by the military graves (that are, in turn, adjacent to the civilian graves), I could demonstrate to myself our circle of life there and here — the proximity between the weakness and powerlessness there, and the determination and daring here.

Guta and Kazik walked a few steps away from the monument, looked at the silent surroundings, and after a few minutes of complete silence, turned to me and only said:

“Thank you.”

In the car I asked Kazik if he ever returned to the camp in Poland. He answered me by shaking his head a resolute “no.”
“I visited Poland again, but I did not go back there. I was afraid of the place, the memories, and my reactions, and did not dare.”

I took a postcard from my wallet with a picture of the Polish memorial site in Treblinka. The photograph shows a considerable area paved with large, rough stone slabs, and on top of it hundreds or thousands of unplanned rocks in various sizes scattered in no orderly manner. These rocks bare the names of the countries and towns the victims came from. It does not mention that most of the victims were Jews.

One of the rocks in the picture has a small bouquet of yellow flowers, and there is no telling – was the bouquet brought as an offering by one of the survivors who visited the spot, or was it only an “artistic” idea by the postcard’s photographer?

At the center of the site a tall monument was erected and on it was etched in several languages, including Hebrew, the oath, or promise – “Never Again.”

This site is all that is left from the camp where more than three-quarter of a million Jews were slaughtered, and the Nazis made a methodical effort to eliminate its very existence and what was done there. They were very advanced and orderly in their industry of murder, and, at the same time, put in thought and effort for the day after the war – the day when the world would open its eyes. They did not want a trace left of the genocide they performed.

When they could sense the smell of defeat, the Germans tried to remove all traces of evidence. Remains of bodies were taken out of the cremation pits, and the bones were crushed to dust and returned to the mass graves, along with the ashes of the bodies.

In the time that has passed since then, the fields returned to their innocent green appearance as they were before the camp was built, before the massacre, even in this blood-soaked land.

Kazik’s eyes concentrated on the postcard, and his face revealed that he was once again remembering the events of the past and the facilities not visible in the postcard. He seemed deep in thought,

or maybe he was wondering if this visual expression given by the Polish designers of the site does represent it adequately.

Is there any way to visually express or memorialize concentrated, industrial, willful destruction?

Kazik thought and said, “The monument here, in our cemetery, is more suited and faithful to the past that has been etched in me there.”

Without asking, with only a glance, Kazik perceived my silent agreement and placed the postcard in the left inner pocket of his suit jacket. His eyes stayed on me, and a faint cynical smile appeared at the edges of his lips. “Do you remember?” he asked.

I did not understand and shook my head no. “You remember,” Kazik went on, “the restaurant near our hotel? Do you remember I insisted on sitting only at the far table?” I remembered this, but did not understand the connection. Kazik noticed my embarrassment and explained, “I wanted to sit at a table as far away as possible from the kitchen; a table where the smell of roasting meat will not reach. I cannot bear that smell.”

I understood and shook my head in agreement. Karl smiled bashfully again and confirmed, “Yes, the smell of roasting meat disturbs me. It reminds me of the smell that was imprinted in me over there – it takes me back to the camp!”

I was “fortunate” and was not at the camps. Some of my close

relatives went up in smoke there, but I did not smell or breathe that air myself, and the smell did not penetrate my lungs or become absorbed in my lungs. The smell of roasting meat does not deter me.

From the cemetery we drove to the highway going to Jerusalem. I informed my guests we were on our way to face the memorials for our family. They did not understand what I meant. I briefly told them about the planting of an unusual forest – The Forest of Martyrs – and the memorials placed for the memory and honor of many of the 6 million. I promised to elaborate more when we reached the forest itself.

We were quiet during our ride. This time it was a different quiet than in previous times. This time it was a calm quiet, accompanied by mutual grins – the quiet of sympathetic looks.

We were awkward. We did not know how to express feelings that were frozen for so many years. We both deliberated voicelessly how we could sustain an amiable connection or at least an intimate conversation between two relatives who were separated as children, and who now saw each other again when they were parents and grandparents.

How could one accept, in actuality, a surprising reunion between two people who have both already mourned the death of the other? How to make up for lost time? How to complete the task of getting close again, without disturbing the normal flow of both

our lives, men who already bear a heavy load from the past and the present?

When we arrived at Eshta'ol Junction, I turned left, and we slowly climbed up the narrow road. Soon, we turned right – this time to “our” road: a narrow, unpaved road lined on both sides with trees, memorials, and green scenery.

At the Forest of Martyrs

I parked in my usual spot. This is where I parked, for over 40 years, every second day of Passover.

We left the car, and Guta supported her father, who also had to use his cane.

To calm down, we sat on the large rocks at the side of the path and sipped cold water Adina made sure to bring. All around us towered the planted cypress trees that took root, thickened, and grew taller here in the vast area of the road to Jerusalem. We were in the Forest of Martyrs, the forest of the 6 million – the forest of the destroyed by the Nazi rule of Europe, the rule that decided, on its own accord, that the Jews were a lowly and unnecessary race, rulers who decided, executed, and almost succeeded in completing their mission!

Nowadays, this unique forest overlooks a blossoming area of towns, of the city of Beit Shemesh, of green fields and pastures – a scenery of life that blooms and continues.

Kazik and Guta looked around in surprise and concentration. Their marveling eyes expressed pride and spoke on their own. They saw – not just the trees and the scenery. They also saw the multiple memorials visible among the trees.

Without coordinating among us, in small, slow steps, we approached the heap of stones with the marble sign with black Hebrew writing attached to its front. We reached a headstone without a grave beneath it. A headstone for some of our family who did not receive a burial in their death, and only their ashes are concealed or scattered somewhere far away from here. A headstone surrounded by many live, erect trees.

Kazik and Guta could not read Hebrew, but they immediately realized what this memorial was. Kazik stalled in silence for many seconds in front of the “headstone,” and when he shook himself, he asked me to read to them exactly what was written on the sign, and translate every single word.

Loudly and in English, I read the inscription on the sign, emphasizing every word on it:

A forest in the memory of
Tauba and Yaacov Windman...

I explained that every year I remind those present at the memorial that these are the names of my mother’s father, who passed away before I was born, and my mother’s mother, who did not survive hiding in the burning ghetto during the Jewish uprising. For many years I was the only survivor who remembered Grandma Tauba, and now, for the first time, I turned to Kazik and asked him bluntly, “Do you remember our grandparents?” I paused for a moment to allow him to comprehend the meaning of the question and picture them in his mind. He nodded his head quickly and vigorously, “yes.”

I continued reading,

Guta and Yitzhak Shparok and...

I held back. I pretended to clear my throat, as I had trouble continuing reading. Kazik, with a light touch of his hand, encouraged me to go on. I continued the sentence I cut off.

... and their son Kazik.

Yes, the name of Kazik, the “living dead” I am witnessing now beside me – is also etched here.

Guta stood by her father, supported, and hugged him. Kazik stood silently and stared at the marble plaque with the prominent black letters – the names of his parents next to his own. He leaned on his cane and his daughter’s shoulder heavily and said nothing.

He swallowed, wiped the sweat off his forehead and what looked to me like tears going down his cheeks. Loudly, he blew his nose and continued staring at the still plaque as though under a spell.

And then he asked me to read on.

Helena and Pavel Windman

And their children Bolek and Yanechka...

These names include an entire family who did not survive – the name of our uncle, our mothers’ brother, and the names of

their two children – two of the five missing cousins Karl already mentioned.

Kazik now realized he already saw their picture in my book. More than 65 years had passed, and he did not recognize them in the old photo he saw in my memoir.

In the many Actions in the ghetto, our two cousins slept in backpacks carried by their parents after they were put to sleep using sleeping pills. Their parents were able to hide and save them in this way for most of the Selections, but they failed once, and all four of them perished.

I went on reading and translating:

Bernard Berliner and his son Helmut

Planted by:

Pola, Rosa, Henrik, and Stefan

The initiators of this memorial were the four remaining “children”; four of the six children seen in the first picture of my book, without the black mark on their foreheads, the four survivors.

Bernard, who we all called Benio, was not in the ghetto or in Poland. He and Pola, our mothers’ sister, fled to Paris before the war and passed away there after it.

We had a special reason for adding Benio's name to this memorial plaque. My parents wanted to thank him and show their appreciation, in this humble but meaningful way, for his daring while we were imprisoned in the ghetto.

Despite the Nazi occupation of Paris, and despite Benio probably pretending to be a Frenchman of German origin, he took the risk and always sent us special food packages to the ghetto. Many of the packages were stolen, but of the few we received, our parents were able to sell off some items and buy basic food supplies, and the rest was given to us children. These packages were the source of those tubes of condensed milk my brother and I yearned for.

The Germans did not overlook these shipments of Benio's. He was interrogated vigorously by the Gestapo, but held on and continued taking the risk of sending us food packages until the destruction of the ghetto.

Kazik knew about Helmut, Benio's son, but did he dare tell young Guta about him?

Helmut was the sixth and youngest of Benio and Pola's children, and he passed away at the age of 6. After his death, his parents did not dare have any more children and were left alone. The five children before Helmut died at birth or shortly after. Apparently all six children, as their two parents following them, passed away from cancer.

I will never know if the death of all of Benio's children was what

motivated him to risk his life in sending food packages to the ghetto, to help save two children from starving – my brother and me. He told us nothing after the war, and took his secret to his grave.

Hemio, our mother's eldest brother, and his wife did not have any children, and they both died at a ripe old age in Paris.

I saw Kazik calculating using his fingers, and by the look on his face the result did not match his expectations. He did not ask me and I preferred, for the time being, not to elaborate about Alex, my older brother.

Kazik went on standing still in front of the memorial. He stood frozen across from the plaque that bore his name too; a plaque that announces, black against white, that he was left there too and is not with us. Kazik did not speak, and I did not break the silence of his thoughts.

I came up to my cousin and hugged his shoulders. I promised him that in a few days I would happily take care of removing his name from the memorial plaque. Kazik did not reply or move, but nodded his head in agreement.

After a few minutes of standing in frozen silence, Kazik took a step back and asked that we say Kadish, the Jewish prayer for the souls of the dead.

I took the page with the Kadish prayer written on it from my

pocket – a wrinkled piece of paper, stained and worn from use. This page is with me for many memorials: the Forest of Martyrs, next to the graves of my parents and brother, and next to Nechama's grave. I spread the page out gently in front of us. The prayer was written in Hebrew and Kazik focused his gaze on the black letters. I put my left hand on my head, like my father did back then on the train traveling from Poland to France, and read the Kadish slowly, one word at a time. Kazik repeated the words in his American accent.

This unusual minyan only had two men saying a prayer, instead of 10, but we knew we were not alone. We sensed the souls of our parents and my brother beside us, and with them, the souls of the rest of our family who were not with us in body. And there were many more next to them. I read the entire prayer and Kazik was sure not to miss a word. The women standing by us joined us in saying "Amen."

"This is only the second time I have said Kadish for my parents," Kazik said sadly. "I do not go to synagogue.

"The first Kadish for my parents," Kazik told us, "we mumbled in a whisper and not from writing, over 70 years ago in Treblinka. My friend in the camp, Ignac, and I mumbled part of the prayer, the part we remembered, while walking to work when I realized I was an orphan. The large and mute 'minyan,' the long line walking to hard labor with us, did not know it was taking part in the Kadish prayer of an orphan. My friend Ignac could not foresee then that he was saying Kadish for himself in advance.

“Indeed, even in Treblinka, the kingdom of death, the still-living did not say Kadish for themselves. They hoped – or deluded themselves – and expected salvation from above. When this did not happen, they passed away anonymous and mute.

“We lived in a different world then, a world with strange, unique rules. A world with other ideas. A world without feelings, a place where human life was momentary and passing, moments that fled by, but we said the Kadish prayer for my parents.

“Ignac, my only friend, did not know during that ‘minyán’ march to work that he was anticipating his future with that prayer.

“The second Kadish for my parents I am only saying now with the cousin I thought, for 70 years, was also buried in the ruins of the ghetto.” Kazik turned his head to me and continued in Polish, “Thank you, Bobus.”

Without turning his back to the memorial, Kazik took a few steps back, sat across from the monument, and pronounced slowly, clearly, and aloud, every name on the plaque. He was not reading them, but was bringing them back up from his memory after the many years of silence. I could hear how Kazik pronounced each name with the exact Polish pronunciation, and with a continuing melody that felt like a prayer. Perhaps he thought this was the appropriate way to voice the names of those who were forcibly “pushed” to heaven.

Kazik’s lips continued to shake voicelessly until he regained his

composure and said, “Six brothers and sisters, our mothers and our aunts and uncles, brought only six children to this world, and I do not know how many of them are left.”

I continued Kazik’s thought process and completed his calculations. “In the closest circle of our family, in the Warsaw ghetto, we were 16 people, of them, five children. After the war, five of us, excuse me, six, survived, and of them, only three children – my brother, me, and you, Kazik.

“Our cousin Irene survived in Russia, so four offspring of our mothers’ line remain.”

We took a few steps away and stopped by another memorial plaque. This monument was placed in honor and memory of my mother – about a year after her death.

Mother lived with and for us about 35 years more after we escaped from there. I put up this monument for her because it was thanks to her and Father that my brother and I survived for the 6 years of destruction. We all knew that during those 6 years of hell our parents’ lives were dedicated to and aimed at only one main cause – to do anything possible, and at any cost, to save, protect, and rescue their two children. This cause, they believed, was worth any price.

Mother’s altruistic nature did not change even after we survived and left there. When we came to Israel she made sure ahead of time to donate her eyes after her death to the blind institution in

Jerusalem. A few years before her death, she donated her body to scientific research. When we buried her, a whole year after her death, I saw her face again. It seemed peaceful, as though she were satisfied that even after her death she could be of help to others.

Her body was buried in the cemetery, but we feel her spirit remains here, in the Forest of Martyrs, with the many who have no graves at all.

I read and translated every word etched on the memorial plaque in front of this monument as well.

I felt now was the time and place to tell my newly discovered family a bit of what had happened to my brother Alexander, whose name we added to our mother's plaque only a few years ago.

My brother was not killed there physically. Like me, he survived and came to Israel, and studied, and blossomed, but only until the age of 16 – the age his disease broke out. The 6 years of darkness in the Holocaust planted toxic seeds in his soul that were deep, powerful, and destructive. When he grew up, his physical strength was great – but his mental strength became weaker year by year.

He struggled with himself and tried to overcome it. He served his military service on a ship, tried various occupations, wrote poetry and philosophical essays, painted faces crying out, and even married and had a son, but he could not defeat the injuries of his soul and his suffering.

For about 35 years, Mother did everything she could for him mentally, physically, and financially, and he existed thanks to her.

As time went on, my brother could no longer bear the burden, and he gave in to his mental anguish and collapsed. He did not ask others for help, he did not want to be a burden on the conscience of his relatives, and he ended his life himself. He joined, after grief and struggle of another 40 years, the 6 million who were exterminated over there before him.

I did not mention this to Kazik, but to myself I wondered if his wife Sarah's fate was similar to that of my brother.

Sarah's injuries were different than my brother's, but their accumulated affect may have eventually caused a similar result.

We continued our tour of grieving in the forest and reached the first large monument that was erected here for us. This monument bears a plaque for my grandparents – my father's parents.

I last saw them at the ghetto when I was about 8 years old, and we hid together, in darkness and in cramped spaces, in one of the hiding places. We children and the elderly (they were younger than I am today), had something in common. We were the first the Nazis destined for destruction — the elderly — and we children could not help the German war effort. We were unproductive to them!

My grandparents lasted until the Jewish uprising in the ghetto.

When the Germans crushed and burned the remains of the ghetto, along with the remainder of its hidden inhabitants, their lives ended as well. There are rumors that my grandfather was no longer alive when their hiding place caught fire. According to these rumors, his mates in hiding strangled him during one of his asthma attacks for fear his groans would give them away. I do not know, and I do not wish to know, if this is the truth, and if that was the only right course of action.

The German officers were dedicated to their leader and thorough in their work. They promised to provide Hitler with a gift for his birthday, which was in late April: a ghetto “clean” of all Jews. My grandparents were part of this gift.

Father was the last of our family who was able to escape the burning, destroyed ghetto. He estimated that his parents met their Maker on the second day of Passover, and that is why that day was chosen as our regular memorial day at the Forest of Martyrs. On this holiday, a day when Jews around the world celebrate the holiday of liberty, the holiday of freedom from slavery, my grandparents and many others like them ended their days of slavery in the ghetto.

Kazik noticed that the plaque we stood before was thicker and larger than the ones he saw earlier. He was right. This memorial plaque is new, reconstructed, and reinforced. We found the previous one uprooted and cast aside — broken and crushed.

It was not the strong winds blowing in the hills around Jerusalem,

or an earthquake or disintegration due to time that broke the plaque: It was willfully ruined by malicious hands. This ruin, like previous ones, was not a result of the vandalism that is common in today's schools and public institutions, which the public seem to accept for lack of another choice.

Here, in the Forest of Martyrs, it was explained to us, the ones destroying the memorial plaques were Arab shepherds passing through with their flock. With this destruction they express and relieve their hatred for the historical significance these plaques represent, in addition to their hatred for those who placed these monuments – the hatred for Jews past, present, and probably future.

Does this hatred come from the current Arab hostility toward everything Jewish and Israeli, or does this willful destruction have motives with deeper, older roots?

All our grandparents' children, who appear on the plaque as planters, are no longer alive. I remain the last member of my father's family who was there and survived.

For years, Father conducted our regular annual memorials. He made sure not to overload the emotions of the young attendees and therefore did not elaborate on the details of the difficult events, and mostly brought up thoughts and conclusions from over there. When he would finish, we would all say Kadish.

After Father's passing, this difficult role passed on to his younger

brother Haim, who was fortunate enough to have already been in Israel during the Holocaust. In recent years, the heavy burden of running the memorials fell to me. Every year, over 40 of our closest relatives come here, none of whom was there. Unlike my father, I dare and bring up as many details as possible of what happened and what was there and then. I believe that for the sake of the future we must know and must – at least try to – understand the unbelievable. I know that after I am gone my family will no longer have a source to testify “first hand.”

It is obvious to me that young people alive today, at the age of advanced communications and the atmosphere of the global village, find it hard or even impossible to believe that only about 70 years ago, and out of a German motive of racist ideology, an organized, planned, timed, and hideously efficient genocide could have been executed.

Many people guessed and even knew what was happening at the beginning of this process of mass killing, but they did not intervene. Only few actively responded to what was happening, and fewer still lent a helping hand.

Has the world changed since then? Is it better? Did it learn any lessons? Will, thanks to the sacrifice of the 6 million innocents, the abhorrent phenomenon of a future Holocaust be prevented at least?

Only about 20 years before the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe another type of Holocaust occurred, one of a smaller scale: about

a million-and-a-half Armenians were massacred in Turkey, and the world learned nothing. To this day, there are diplomatic disagreements about the method, reason, and cause of their murder. There are further arguments whether this was genocide, or “just” riots, or “just” internal revolts. This does not matter at all to the dead.

To this day, the world that is called “enlightened” has not checked, investigated, punished, or reached conclusions from the horrible precedent. They went on about their business then, and the wheel of history rolled again, and more powerfully.

There was one person who drew his conclusions from the Armenian genocide. He learned that you could enact “I and I alone,” and that the world would remain “deaf and blind.” His name was Adolf Hitler. He “decided and did” – did not stop and was not stopped.

Did the leaders of the free world, the leaders of the nations who exterminated Hitler and the Nazis and learned about the destruction of the Jews, act any better in Cambodia because of this?

Did they prevent or reduce the murder of about 2 million Cambodians by their countryman and his emissaries?

What did the world do to defend hundreds of thousands murdered in the Biafra and later in Rwanda?

What is done now to stop the mass murders in Congo and in Darfur in Sudan?

Today, in a world that is exposed to the media, everyone knows about the horrors, but most people ignore them, and only a few of them help those affected, and maybe only to alleviate their conscience.

A question sneaks into my mind about race: Is it possible that the “enlightened” world did not address what happened to us then, did not try to prevent the annihilation, and did not act to help us because we are Jews, and now the world closes its eyes again because the murdered are black?!

Could it be that the excuse for this disregard, de facto, of the fate of Cambodia, Rwanda, Congo, and Sudan is that these are merely “civil wars,” “just” internal and tribal disputes?

I doubt it! In white Bosnia and Serbia, world reaction was speedier and more efficient.

We did not stop at the other monuments for our family. I figured the load was too great and difficult for them. We toured the paths of the forest and enjoyed the bloom and the smell of tree sap.

Among the trees you can see clearly the growing city of Beit Shemesh in the green valley below. A security factory has been operating in this town for many years. The forest and the monuments above can be seen clearly from the windows of the

production floor of the factory. I, who know both sides well, feel a sense of satisfaction from the thread connecting between the memories of extermination up there, and building strength and defense down here.

Before reaching the highway I stopped, at Kazik's request. He turned his head to the forest of monuments and said, "We will try to come to your, I'm sorry, I mean our, memorial." I patted his shoulder fondly. We will look forward to seeing them: Kazik, his daughter, and maybe even her husband Mike and their children. And so they will also join and come closer, if only a little, to our joint past and our growing family circle.

Kazik sat in the car silently and deep in thought. By his face and movement of fingers, it seemed he was concentrating on counting. He repeatedly bent and straightened his fingers and the wrinkles on his forehead. The counting was accompanied by pronouncing the names of his relatives who were killed there, and the names of those he estimated survived or were not there. This time his calculations added up. He already knew that in addition to me, my brother, as well as my cousin Irene who lives in France, survived. And so Kazik found three of his missing cousins.

I told Kazik I met Irene in Paris, and that she had two daughters, but her health was failing. After the war, when Irene returned with her parents from their refuge in Russia, she married a kind and friendly man in France and converted to Christianity for him. Karl flashed a glance at his daughter, and I remembered the two locketts I saw hanging from the necklace on her neck. I assumed

he considered the similarity between our cousin Irene and his daughter Guta. He may also have been considering the similarity between Irene's French husband and the American Mike, and the similarities between Irene's daughters and his grandchildren – his daughter Guta's sons. Kazik did not express his thoughts, and I guessed why, and said nothing. I felt the topic of religion and nationality troubled him, despite being secular.

Kazik became engrossed in his thoughts and only shared them with us by a short summarizing sentence. "From my father's family no one is left – I am the only Shparok." And added with sorrow, "And the last one."

I could see the sorrow clearly on Kazik's face and remembered my father's reaction to a similar case. In his last years, when Father was at a retirement home, he became more traditional and religious. When he found out his grandson, Alex's son, got married in the U.S. to a Christian, he was angry and wanted to write him out of his will. Luckily for my nephew, my father was no longer able to go out on his own and meet his lawyer to change his will. My father asked me to drive him many times, and I postponed the trip until Father calmed down, forgot, and passed away.

I know I "lost" financially from my actions, but I have no doubt I acted correctly and as Mother would have acted were she still with us.

Kazik asked many questions about our family, and I could not answer most of them. During the ghetto years and after them,

I was only a child whose memory functions differently than that of adults. We, who were children at the time, mostly do not remember names, places, and dates, as though we were not there. I only remember special occasions and people who were kind to me or hurt me directly.

In Israel, I could ask the adults, but did not. Other topics and occupations seemed more important and urgent. I also wanted to repress the past and make myself out as an Israeli, like others around me. Now, in my old age, the will to know and the urge to find out are much greater, but my sources of information have perished and are long gone.

I am angry with myself because, unlike Kazik, I had parents that I could ask to obtain the information, but I didn't. I tried, unconsciously, not to allow my past to affect my life and actions in Israel. Despite this attempt, I am not convinced I succeeded.

One would assume that at least some of my actions and decisions in life were brought about by the experiences I brought with me from there.

My strong urge for higher education was fed mostly by the power of being told by my experienced, survivor mother, "Only what you have in your head no one can take from you!"

Kazik was amazed at my mother's wisdom and said, "No one guided me. I did not have a mother anymore, and I did not hear a motivating sentence like that, but I clung, from my inner

understanding, to schooling, and I completed my education. Even now, after I have retired, I continue listening to lectures and take part in classes and professional conventions.”

Unlike Kazik, who had attended school several years before the war broke out, I was too young then, and came to Israel illiterate. Despite this, without lagging behind the Israeli natives my age, I finished primary school and high school and my engineering studies, and while I was working, continued, of my accord, to study for higher degrees.

Was the high mental and physical price our battle for survival took from us what pushed us to prove ourselves? Was the drive to prove ourselves what motivated us to study and surpass our peers?

“I,” continued Kazik, “lived in a cramped, stressful, immigrant environment during my first years in America. When I was settled, I moved to an American area, but I felt the stress again. It was not deliberate discrimination, but I felt the need to stand out in my education, skills, and financial achievements to fit in. For this purpose, I studied with diligence, worked in more demanding and profitable jobs, and moved to an upscale neighborhood.

“We needed a high income to finance our attempts to have more children. I also invested large sums of money in caring for my sick wife, without passing over even the experimental medical procedures.

“I also invested more than my local friends and acquaintances in the education of our only daughter. We provided Guta with the best conditions for studying, from childhood until the end of her university life. I also gave her all she needed for good health, possibly more than necessary, for fear she would end up like her mother. I helped her settle in life and supported her after her marriage too.

“Most of my American neighbors did not do as I did. They did not agree with me that a child should be helped also as an adult, but they appreciated my devotion to family. ‘You stayed Polish,’ they complimented me. My neighbors preferred to enjoy, mostly on their own, their money and property. To them, their adult children must learn to survive on their own. I, as a result of the reality in which I lived, struggled terribly only on my own, and so I tried to spare my daughter this difficulty.

“In hindsight, I wonder – did we act correctly?”

“I hope Guta will never have to fight for her survival as I did – but maybe we were wrong not to prepare her for it. Maybe she is too spoiled.

“Should we think pessimistically and prepare our children for difficult events like those we were exposed to? Maybe the tough American attitude better prepares young people for life’s difficulties and unexpected struggles.”

Kazik looked at me and said with sorrow, “Despite our life

experience, we could never know.”

We did not feel hungry, but we were both unwilling to pass on the “vitality” of a good meal. Despite the late hour, Kazik asked that we try a restaurant of a different sort.

We entered the Arab village of Abu Gosh and sat in the external balcony, far from the kitchen, in one of the local restaurants. At the paper-covered table, we ordered mixed homemade hummus and tahini, enjoyed spiced pine nuts and hot peppers, and were served a fragrant mix of meats. We enjoyed juicy lamb chops, skewers of other types of delicious meats, as well as seasoned rice. As a dessert, we drank from the sweet local Arak and tasted the juicy, honey-covered sweets typical of Arab cuisine. We finished with black coffee served in small cups and were fully satisfied.

I did not go back to the highway. We took narrow, winding roads in the green mountains. “Like Switzerland,” Kazik stated with a smile, and enjoyed the change in scenery and atmosphere.

We stopped near the monastery at Latrun. I wanted to explain the tales of the area, the great battles this area knew during the War of Independence, and the “evacuation” of its Arab residents about 20 years later, during the Six-Day War. It turned out there was no need for explanations. Kazik read and knew all about the history of the place and surprised me with his deep and current understanding of everything happening in the country. He knew the details of the struggles between us and our neighbors and our internal political turmoil very well. He regularly watched

television, followed Internet reports, and read what is published, in English, of course, about the happenings in Israel, he told us.

In an apologetic tone, Kazik again told us that he considered immigrating to Israel for many years, but eventually decided he could not. “After what we went through over there,” he explained, “and after my difficulty to settle in America, I did not dare gamble again. I did not have the strength or nerve to start over. I was worried I could not give my daughter and my wife the standard of living I worked so hard to provide for them in America.”

“Yes, I admit,” Kazik mumbled to himself, “I was afraid. Mentally, I was still not out of there completely and not free of the effects of the past. The long shadow from there still follows my steps and actions.”

Making a Toast

Because of the feel of excitement I did not notice how much time had passed since we visited the Forest of Martyrs. Suddenly, the screeching of a car braking shook me, and again I saw them at our door, dressed elegantly, and a large bouquet of red roses in Guta's hands.

We sat in the living room, and the women, as usual, chose the soft couch. This time, Kazik and I settled in, sitting closely together on the double armchair across from the coffee table.

From the depth of the bar, with the face of Bacchus shining on it, I took out a reddish dusty box, which has been standing there for about 25 years. From it, I took out a dark green bottle, also dusty, of the French cognac Martell.

For years I have been waiting for a special occasion to open this fine bottle. Uncle Stefan, Irene's father, brought the bottle for my parents when he came to Israel for the first time. It was his gift to my parents in honor of the family reunion, in honor of meeting his sister, my mother, who he had not seen for about 15 years.

My parents never opened the bottle, and when they both passed away, I took it knowing that I would only open it for an extraordinary event. Since I have had the bottle I remarried, my

daughter got married, and I had six more grandchildren, and despite that, I did not open it, as if I had forgotten its existence.

Now, unaware and without planning, I felt closure: my uncle Stefan, upon his return from exile in Russia, brought this bottle, and now that my long-lost cousin Kazik has been found, it is time to open it and celebrate. I brought four crystal glasses that were also my parents', and slowly and carefully, I opened the old bottle that had waited patiently for over 50 years. We heard a kind of sigh of relief in the deep bass sound of the uncorked bottle.

I poured the drink into the four glasses, which we lifted in our hands, smiled warmly at each other, smelled the delicate aroma of the cognac, and sipped from it with pleasure. We did not speak, but joy radiated clearly from our expressions. We celebrated bridging the extended familial gap that Providence granted us.

We sat relaxed. Only our eyes were insatiable, and we continued to examine each other gladly, happy for the unexpected renewed meeting we were privileged to experience.

Like at previous happy occasions in my life, when my children were born and later, my grandchildren, this time, too, the powerful, pleasant feeling of revenge on the Germans crept over me – the feeling whose complete satisfaction I will never be able to celebrate.

We grow and cultivate our families; we discover other survivors and thus continue defeating, bit by bit, the Nazi plan to destroy us all. We feel the satisfaction in every survivor, every infant born, and every human who joins us and raises their fist and cries loudly or silently, “You tried; you exterminated a third of our people, but you failed – we exist and are now strong.”

We drank another glass, smiled at each, and our tongues loosened.

I looked up wondering, and Kazik guessed my unanswered thoughts, thoughts that have been bothering me for many years: how and why did we children, of all people, manage to survive?

Thanks to what – or whom – did you, Kazik and me, and only a few more children, survive there?

What privilege and what power helped us then?

What was – if there was one – the special advantage we had, and many other children did not have, that allowed us to escape the claws of the industry of extermination?

Kazik answered as though he understood my silent questions. He also swung his head upward and his eyes seemed to wonder: Is it thanks to “Him”?

I bent my lips and shook my head no. Kazik made a similar gesture with his head, as though he agreed with what our silent conversation implied. I told Kazik about the autobiographical

book by a very active rabbi,¹ who was also saved from a concentration camp as a child. He too asked himself “why?” Why did he survive compared to the many other children who did not?

The answer, this rabbi guessed, was that he had the virtue of his ancestors stand for him. By virtue of the belief of his family, by virtue of centuries of a continuous line of rabbis, this virtue “sent” its hand in help and protection over him. Those who read the rabbi’s descriptions and the story of his survival might logically conclude that the hand that was sent in his aid and protection was in fact a human hand and not God’s hand. It was the strong, smart, daring hand of his older brother; the hand of his spirited older brother, who was able to hide him from the Germans and feed him his own bread. His devoted brother was the one who protected him during Selections, and made sure to guide and lead him in difficult situations.

I believe the rabbi’s older brother did not receive the full appreciation and “sole rights of saving” he is entitled to from his younger brother, the rights that thanks to him, he, the young boy, is one of the few survivors of the camp in which they were both held prisoner.

In an unplanned, uncoordinated decision, I picked up the cognac bottle, Kazik took our two glasses, and we moved to the large, antique, handmade dining table; a large, heavy table that surpassed us both in sturdiness and age; a table that has been in

1 Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, *Do Not Raise Your Hand Against the Boy*.

our family for about a hundred years. A white lace tablecloth was spread out on the table. Kazik's eyes and fingers inspected the old table and the delicate bright tablecloth in astonishment. He inspected the beautifully designed, strong, and sturdy table legs and the heavy wooden plank on them. He may have noticed that the attachment of the table's parts was done without nails, screws, or glue; instead, by manual fitting – a type of craft that was only done in the distant past. In contemporary America, you do not see products as elaborate, sturdy, and safe as this – products that give off an air of power, security, and continuity.

Kazik gently fingered the crocheted tablecloth, “a grandmother's tablecloth,” and perhaps he thought of the home of our grandparents in Warsaw. Kazik knew our mothers' father and our grandfather Yaakov, who passed away before I was born. With a whisper and hand movements, with eyes closed, he described my grandfather as a tall man, healthy in mind and in spirit, who would get up early and go out to work at his shoe store. When he was younger, Grandpa Yaakov was a hardworking cobbler, and over time, he opened a chain of shoe stores and was very proud of his profession. Grandfather told Kazik that the residents in the area knew him as a professional tradesman and a decent and honest merchant, “despite being a Jew,” as the Polish among them commented with a smile.

Grandpa Yaakov did not lay Tefillin in the mornings and his face, other than his thick mustache, was clean-shaven. He went to the local synagogue only on holidays. Grandfather and Grandmother's home, where they raised their six children, was

a traditional and liberal one. My mother's father was not strict regarding religious precepts between man and God, but was very meticulous about those precepts between man and his fellow man – honesty, integrity, decency, and helping others. I was not fortunate enough to have known him, but I could recognize his fingerprints and the outcomes of his upbringing in my mother's manners and character.

Kazik knew our grandmother, our mothers' mother, better than I did too. He described her as a smart, giving, optimistic woman. I only remembered her vaguely and from the ghetto as that good grandmother who brought us a small pack or a piece of chocolate on her visits, and always gave us warm, soothing strokes, as though there were no war, no hunger, and no fear.

Now, after bringing up and re-creating the memory of our grandparents, Kazik asked to look through my book again. He opened it to the first page of photographs and nodded his head. The faces of our mothers' parents, as seen in the faded photograph taken 25 years before he was born, now looked familiar to him. "Now I recognize them," he said. "The memories I lost are now sprouting anew!" He sighed with obvious satisfaction.

My father's parents' home was more religious. We both remembered Grandpa Menahcem, with the long white beard that tickled the backs of our necks when we sat in his lap. We saw Grandfather lay Tefillin every morning, and we were told he was sure to go to synagogue on Saturdays and holidays and that he was strict about working long hours.

Grandfather and Grandmother believed in the existence of a higher power, but in the ghetto – this higher power did not help them get out of the burning bunker alive.

Kazik returned to his memories of the days before the war broke. He could not remember if they celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. It was a time of worry and fears about the upcoming war, and the Bar Mitzvah, if it took place at all, did not leave any memory with him.

Meanwhile, I, as a new immigrant in the early days of the War of Independence, celebrated my Bar Mitzvah very modestly. For the first time in my life, I went to an established synagogue, one with a podium from which I read my Torah portion. This was a synagogue with Torah scrolls, a men's section and a women's section, a rabbi and a cantor. I still have the bag of Tefillin from then secreted in my wardrobe, and a powerful memory from carrying the Torah, even if at the time I did not know what I was carrying and what this heavy, decorated cylinder was.

To be honest, it was not the first synagogue in my life. The first house of prayer I witnessed was on wheels. It did not have a podium or Torah scrolls. There were no sections for men and women. The attendants sat together, in tight rows, one behind the other. It was likely that we – Mother, Father, my brother, and I – were the only Jews in it – the entire minyan in the train.

No one wore a prayer shawl or held a prayer book. The only

one praying was my father, and his pure prayer only lasted brief seconds. He stood upright in the aisle between the seats, placed one palm on his bald head and waved the other in the air. He then held his head high and sang in his loud, clear, bass voice, “...Kkkkollll Nnniddreee...”

The rattling of the wheels of the train did not interrupt Father’s singing, as he sang to me the first line of the prayer I did not know. His singing, to me or to God, I had not heard before, and I did not understand the words either.

The passengers in the train wagon looked at my father in surprise, but without much excitement: There was no shortage of strange, injured people then, after the war.

Father sat back down next to me and earnestly explained to me that it was the prayer for the eve of Yom Kippur – the most sacred of days in which we fast voluntarily. Only then did I understand why Father did not buy us food that day, as he did every day so far, on our long train journey from the destroyed Poland to France.

Father’s excitement stuck to me, and I promised him – vowed, without knowing the meaning of the word – to be with him every Yom Kippur Eve, from that day on the train and until...

Since then, I was in well-equipped synagogues in Israel, large and small, decorated and humble. I also visited many synagogues in my travels overseas – from old ones dating before the war, ancient ones, reconstructed, and new ones. None of them, in

Israel or abroad, moved me or penetrated me with its spirit like that dilapidated, cramped train, where my father sang the Kol Nidrei prayer for me in his warm voice.

Now with Kazik at my side, I looked into his eyes and understood – in my memory the synagogue train wagon is etched permanently, while in his memory it is the packed cattle car that led him and his parents to extermination. Kazik nodded his head as though approving, and quietly added that many whispers of the “Shema Israel...” prayer were heard in “his” train too.

Like me, Kazik did not turn to religion or tradition either. He went on with his story. “When I came to America, the only person I knew was Moses, a relative of my father’s. Moses, who settled in Brooklyn, was one of the few who sensed what was coming and escaped Poland in time. He did not stay put and did not expect salvation from ‘above’ or from others, but took care of himself and escaped before Europe’s gates were locked. In America, he also realized his future depended on him alone. He found a job in a small sewing workshop and worked long shifts until he was able to rent a small apartment and marry.

“Moses did not join the old ultraorthodox community in Brooklyn. The lifestyle they offered did not fit his life experience, his character, and his beliefs. The ultraorthodox way of thinking did not match his spirit and self-confidence, nor his desire to move on or succeed and take root in the new and different American society.

“Moses persisted in his independent attitude in America as well and maintained his right to decide for himself, as he did correctly when he left Europe.

“Back then in Poland, when the warning lights flashed, he did not heed the advice of many rabbis who suggested their congregation wait for the future. Some of these rabbis, and along with them a few other congregation leaders, ignored their own recommendations – left Poland in time, and were, in fact, spared. Moses met a few of them in America before the war.

“Even though he was already in America, Moses learned that even when testimonies of the mass destruction in the camps and towns reached Poland, most of the rabbis and congregation leaders did not become alarmed and misdirected their believers and congregations. Their recommendation to stay and wait did not change even after 4 years of war. Even when material evidence of burial pits and extermination camps was plentiful and the fate awaiting Jews was fairly clear, the recommendations of Hungarian congregation leaders and rabbis continued to oppose both escape and attempts at self-saving. The escape to Palestine was allowed only after the coming of the Messiah – and the Messiah had not come.

“If the sea of blood that spread over Europe at that time did not flood the Messiah out and did not speed his arrival, was there still a chance of expecting him?

“Moses knew that the Jews’ escape from Hungary did not begin

even when it was possible, before the arrival of the Nazis. He knew that during a mere 2 months, the Germans led to extermination about half a million Jews from the naïve and believing ‘delayers.’

“Moses understood that the Almighty, even though he already saw Auschwitz and Treblinka, did not help the Jews of Hungary, ‘the last in line,’ and did not stop the transportation trains. The few who were able to survive did so on their own or thanks to their money or reputation. The only train of rescue was by virtue of Dr. Kestner, and not by virtue of ancestors.

“Moses read, heard, and knew that in Hungary, like in Poland, the locals gladly helped hunt for the escaping and hiding Jews. He knew that, like the Poles, the Hungarians were not sorry for the ‘cleaning’ of their towns from their Jews, and at the same time, they ransacked their homes and remaining property with joy.

“Moses already knew that even after the war ended, the injuries to the lives of Jews and their property did not end. He knew that many of the ‘loyal’ nationalist citizens who were recently released from the burden of occupation continued the Nazi path – and no one stopped them either.

“I,” Kazik continued, “knew Moses. I respected him, listened to his lessons, and followed his path. I did not try to contact the ultraorthodox community. I was also angry at the rabbis and disappointed at their leadership. I knew faith did not help my parents and me in the ghetto or in Treblinka, even though we were all part of ‘the chosen people’ there.

“I know,” Kazik emphasized, “that my conclusions are extreme, and perhaps cynical too, but I felt that way then and feel this way today. I logically know no religion, faith, or spiritual power could have saved any of us from the material Nazi power, but the disappointment and resentment I bear for the dissipation of the illusion that was planted in us has not worn off.

“My only friend then, the strong and tough Ignac, led me after him and protected me in our escape from the camp. A Christian Polish doctor, a stranger, risked his life and cared for my injured leg, and Gentile Russian soldiers rescued me from the snow and brought me to a field hospital. I owe my life to them and to myself, and not to any other ‘someone’ or ‘something.’”

Excitement was back in Kazik’s face and voice. Bitterness raged within him, and it was not his alone.

I am well aware of the fact that I survived thanks to and with the help of humans. My brother and I were fortunate that our parents did not despair and did not give in to the Germans’ promises like Kazik’s parents. They found food for us and were wise enough to hide us before Actions. My brother Alex and I were fortunate enough to have survived thanks to the human hand our parents held out to us, and we children did not know or cherish the price it cost them.

During one of the Actions at the ghetto, when they could not hide me in time, the German selectors on the street put me and Mother in the line intended for transport. Father appeared out of nowhere

and courageously addressed the German officers and managed to convince them to let us go. I have no idea how he was able to do so.

How much can a child's memory retain and understand?

I try and cannot remind myself – where was my brother during that Action? I cannot remember. Was he shaking with us then in the line for transport? Was he hidden somewhere else? And I cannot ask my brother any more.

Another long Action is etched deeply in my mind, the Action where “the chosen were bestowed” with badges with “life numbers.” The numbers were given to very few who were chosen to continue being productive for the Nazi machine and stay in the dwindling ghetto in the meantime.

My parents stowed my brother and me in a distant hideout in an attic. My father and my uncle Mietek received life numbers – they were young and healthy and were still capable of “contributing to the German war effort.”

Life numbers were worn on the left lapel of the outfit. My mother did not receive a life number, but she did not surrender and give up. In her wisdom and tenacity, she improvised a “broken” right arm in a sling made of a headscarf, which hid the lack of a number. She dared sneak into the line of life number holders and was spared.

Father came to the hideout at night and took me out of there. He

fastened Uncle Mietek's number to me, but we were stopped at the first German checkpoint. They would not believe a child was given a life number. What could he contribute? We were pushed against the nearest house wall to wait until they rounded up more hunted destined for extermination.

As far as I can remember, Father dared address the Germans with his hands up. In his fluent German and authoritative voice, he managed to convince the officer in charge to release us.

Maybe the Germans had trouble believing a Jew spoke their language, the language of the "upper race," so well. Maybe they were surprised by the Jew's speech being fluent, authoritative, and clear. Maybe it was one of those rare events when a small crack split in the mental armor of the German officer charged with the checkpoint.

Several seconds after we left the wall and walked away from it, we heard a burst of gunshots and the dull thud of bodies falling.

"Miracles" do not happen twice, Father decided, and put me back in that cramped hideout for another day. He hid somewhere else himself.

The next night we tried to pass again, and this time we were able to reach our room.

At the light of the tiny lamp in the room my mother seemed – for the first and only time in her life – crazy. Her face looked as

though it had wrinkled at once and aged many years, her mouth was wide open, and her hair was wild and unkempt. Her clothes were loose and wrinkled and looked more worn and disheveled than was usual those days, and her thin, sinewy hands held her sheet-white face tightly.

In the previous night, Father and I did not return, and Mother, who heard the gunfire, assumed the worst.

After a few moments of complete and terrifying silence, Mother lunged at us. She held us to her breast with great and unexpected force, and for the first time, I saw her whimpering and kneeling on the floor.

I was a boy, and could not understand everything then, but from Mother's appearance at that meeting, I was more upset than I was standing the night before by the wall of death.

My brother Alex also had a part in our survival. I memorialized his contribution in the name of my memoir, *The Silent Scream* – the book that was just published and already bore fruit – the family photos in it brought about the identification of my lost cousin Kazik.

Kazik, who listened closely, bent his head toward me, ready to hear Alex's part in our survival. With moist eyes, I told him that one night, in our small room in the ghetto, my brother heard our parents whispering. From what they said he understood they were planning to seal all the windows and openings in the room

and open the gas valves. Indeed, my parents, like Kazik's parents, reached a moment of crisis. They hoped the gas would save all of us from continuing what they believed was a lost battle for our lives. Fortunately, my parents did not think of trying their luck in the east, but preferred the end to reach us together, using our household gas, and my brother, who heard them, understood what they meant and cried:

“I want to live!”

Our parents recovered from my brother's cry and did not open the valves but continued their long struggle.

Today, I assume that if the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch would have seen, as I did, my mother's face when we returned from the Numbers Action, and if he had heard, as I did, my brother's cry – his famous painting *The Scream* would be more shocking and “louder.”

To my surprise, I clearly heard Karl sighing with relief, and he explained, “When you told us about Sammy, I was worried he was one of my cousins – Bobus or Olek (Alex). Sammy the boy's age did not match the two of you, because you were both younger than me, but only now I understand how you survived.”

Kazik and I were not there together, and not living under the same conditions, but we both learned from our experiences in the most painful way that God was not with us in the Holocaust – not with us and not with the others of his chosen people. Maybe, as the

Zohar says, God went to the Diaspora with his people, but in the Holocaust, he “covered his face,” was silent, and left us exposed and fighting on our own.

We learned on our own that whoever survived then survived mainly because of a human hand that was held out to them, or because of their own strength and wisdom, or because of the hand and brave spirit of the few Righteous among the Nations, or because of chance, or possibly because of the unlikely coincidence of all these factors coming together, and God the Almighty was not among them.

Now that I have grown and studied, my logic convinces me that if God himself wanted to help his chosen people and couldn't, then he is not an Almighty God, or he does not exist. If God could have rescued his people then but did not, or was able to prevent the destruction or stop its progress and did not, then he is not our God – the supposed Almighty God of morality.

If a higher power was in action in the ghettos, camps, and valleys of death, it is more likely it was the power of the devil and not the power of God. The devil, who is “an expert in doing evil,” in the form of Hitler, successfully “surpassed” the God who is expected to do “only good.” The God who was supposed to impose justice, morality, and mercy on our world was not there for us.

Kazik listened to me sadly, nodded his head in agreement, and added, “As a young boy in the ghetto, I did not think about a higher power at all. In Treblinka and during my escape, in

my most difficult moments, I anticipated help, hoped for assistance, expected the support of some higher power, but I was disappointed. When help did not come, I pulled myself together and acted the only way I had left: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?'

"When I came to America I was already mature and had vast and painful life experiences – I knew I was alone, and I had to take care of my existence on my own.

"I expected," Kazik went on to confess, "that when I had a son I would make sure he would learn Judaism, go to synagogue, and make up his own mind about his faith without my past affecting him, but I was not blessed with a son.

"I do not go to synagogue. On holidays or when I am faced with difficult news, I say my prayers personally, in my own words. My prayers are in my head and in my heart, and I will never know if they penetrate and reach their target, and if I have a listener.

"I prayed for more children. I hoped our last name would remain, at least in memory of my parents. I was patient during the long wait, but neither the doctors nor a higher power helped us – I am the last Shparok."

Unlike Kazik, I did, if only partially, what he avoided doing. Every year I joined my father at the synagogue for the Kol Nidrey prayer.

I upheld the promise I made my father when we were riding on the train from Poland to France, where we avoided eating, for the first time of our own choice and not by force.

I joined my father every Yom Kippur Eve because I made a promise, and because he wanted it. He was proud and happy of my attendance. I continued with Kol Nidrey as long as my father was alive. For my conscience and my own sense of decency, I also fasted on that day. Only once did I break the fast: when the sirens blared, and the Yom Kippur War broke out. I ate, got in my car, and presented myself at work, in the security industry.

After Father's death, I annulled my own vow. In contrast, I could not release myself from the prohibition of a Kohen marrying a divorced woman. When Adina and I decided to marry, we were forced to travel abroad, and my disappointment with the teachings of the Almighty and their interpretations grew.

Guta heard and smiled at us. In her marriage in America, no one cared about her ethnicity, her religion, or the religion of her spouse. Over there, the state cannot interfere in its citizens' free choice.

Kazik, who already told me he closely followed what was written and said about Israel in America, seemed upset and angry again. He brought up the great natural disaster in East Asia in 2004 when a huge wave, the tsunami, dragged to death over a quarter of a million people and left hundreds of thousands more without a roof over their heads or a livelihood. The American

media commended the Israeli humanitarian aid that was sent for the survivors then. The media especially commended the great professional and human effort the Israeli team put in to identify and bring to burial the Israeli victims.

Along with the commendations, the American media did not ignore strange rumors that had reached it.

Kazik sighed and said that there were reports of statements made by different rabbis who may have implied that anyone who does not believe in the God of Israel, study his Torah, and keep his decrees, is not entitled to live. The readers could understand from those statements that God only created the world for his people – Israel.

Reporters, writers, and senders of letters to the editors pointed out, carefully but with obvious cynicism, the glaring contradictions between those rumors and the 6 million Holocaust victims which proved that following the decrees of Judaism and studying the Torah did not help the Jews and even the religious – like the converts – went up in smoke.

“I tried,” Karl sighed again, “to clarify to my friends that the source of these deranged statements – if, in fact, they were said – was only in extreme, fringe religious factions and that the general Israeli public maintains free and democratic views. Unfortunately, I did not feel I was able to convince them.”

Kazik could not convince most of his American acquaintances,

and like him, my father was not able to convince the Polish peasants in “our” village, Przyszowa, about Jews.

In the few months my father stayed with us in the village, he too was presented as Polish and as “Mr. Engineer.” He was soon seen as the educated one in the village. He read letters for the peasants and even wrote for them, read bits from newspapers to them, taught lessons in Christian theology to the youngsters, and was seen as a respected arbitrator and adjudicator in the village.

When the Russians took over the area and before Father left, he called to him the village elders and leaders. With a pride and a somewhat cynical smile, he surprised them all by stating that he was a Jew and that the little boy – me – was also a Jew. The village elders were surprised and stunned but said nothing. They did not expect at all to witness a human and intelligent Jew. To see, with their own eyes, a Jew without the “hump” they imagined they should see – it was astounding.

To meet a Jew with a regular nose, like their own, and not like they were used to seeing in illustrations and caricatures – it was unthinkable to them.

A Jew who spoke and wrote fluent Polish.

A Jew who was honest and decent to Poles.

They heard very surprising things for the first time from my father; this was not what they learned at their mothers’ breast.

This was not what they were taught to believe. And even they, I believe, did not change their minds.

We left Przyszowa, and with us, the family of Roza, our angel. Their standing in the village was undermined now that they were known as protectors of Jews, and the new situation was too dangerous for them, and so, they were forced to flee as well.

The Booklet

We continued sitting across from each other with glasses of cognac in our hands. We both smiled slightly and meant to drink another glass to end the long meeting. But this was not what happened. Kazik was very excited by my mention of a higher power and its missing contribution. His thoughts returned to the faraway days in Treblinka, to his father's appearance when he still mumbled to himself as though praying, and his pale face stood out in the dark.

Kazik recalled the brief moments when he too mumbled the words of the first Kadish he said for his father in the march to the forced labor. He recalled later times, when he refused the offer of the ultraorthodox of Brooklyn to become part of their community. His head now moved left and right definitively, his lips remained tight, and his voice was not heard. Only his Adam's apple rose and fell in nervous speed.

I understood what was going through his mind, and I too recalled once again the booklet I had been trying to get out of my mind for years and convince myself it was written by anti-Semites and not by Jews.

I went down to the locked drawers in my painting studio, and then returned with a booklet and a thin envelope. When I came up, I realized the two women joined us and sat around the large table.

With an angry wave, I pulled the white tablecloth off the table and spread out the pages of the booklet in its stead.

I received this booklet from a religious man about 25 years ago, when I was hospitalized after a surgery. Then, still in bed and in pain, I first read the booklet and felt my physical pain was worsening.

The booklet² was devoted to “the day of general Kadish to the martyrs of the Holocaust” and had the pretense of discussing the question “Where was God during the Holocaust?” – the basic question many like Kazik and I never stopped asking, and many, I believe, will continue deliberating in future generations. The question the “shower people” in Auschwitz and the other camps asked themselves, and were not answered, even when they were hit by the streams of murderous gas.

I did not dare translate the booklet in its entirety to Kazik and Guta. I spared their feelings. I only translated a few lines, the lines I underlined for myself in bright red after I was released from the hospital.

In a voice as calm as I managed to make it to mask my emotions, I read to them brief excerpts from the printing in the booklet:

“God himself managed the events here (in the Holocaust), because only God can...”

2 Published by the union of Sephardic synagogues in Bat Yam.

And the booklet also stated, “God ‘in person’ acted in Auschwitz and Treblinka; he himself managed the final solution of... his chosen people...”

The booklet also dares to declare:

“God sent Hitler.”

I saw Kazik bristle in his seat, white as a sheet.

“God sent Hitler” is the most devious sentence I read! I read this sentence to myself dozens of times and have not gotten over it yet. Countless times, I, the secular one, read this horrible “statement” and I cannot accept what it implies.

I cannot understand how the hand of a religious Jew (not an anti-Semitic Gentile) could have written such hateful words – how was that hand not paralyzed?

How could the hand that crowned Hitler the messenger of the higher power and not that of the devil not wither?

Kazik listened to what I was saying and sat still, and only his head moved left and right in turmoil.

The booklet further “determined”:

“Hitler, the poor and empty man, was only the executing messenger for the God of Israel.”

Kazik listened to this, lowered his eyes, and commented that many of the prisoners in Treblinka continued to pray to God on holidays, even in their most difficult moments. Some would rise from their cots in the dark, before the kapo would wake them, put on Tefillin, and pray. They begged for relief again and again, expected help and salvation, hoped that “heaven would save them,” but their prayers were unanswered.

We both, and I assume there are many more like us, knew that those destroyed in the Holocaust did not die as martyrs for God³ either – they were not given the option our ancestors were given in the days of the Maccabis during the Roman commands, the crusades, and even the deportation from Spain – the option to choose between their Judaism and their life.

Even if the victims of the Holocaust would have agreed to convert, they would not have been spared. Their destiny was decided by their birth, and they were not given the choice.

The inefficacy of God and his inability to prevent the horror and death were revealed in full. “The chosen people” were exterminated only because they were part of the Jewish race, which was defined as lowly by the Nazis who decided its fate.

Elie Wiesel, the author, philosopher, and Nobel laureate, and above all, a Holocaust relic who had a religious upbringing,

3 Hans Jonas, *Gedanken über Gott*.

writes,⁴ “God allowed all this to occur.” Elie Wiesel does not avoid stating that “Nothing justifies Auschwitz,” and adds, “Even if God himself would offer me justification (of his actions), I believe I would reject him and never forgive.” Elie Wiesel testifies further⁵ that standing in Auschwitz, in front of the hanged on the gallows, whose blue tongues hung from their mouths, he believed that “Here he is – hanging here – God.”

And why, according to the writers of the booklet, did the God of Jews do this to us?

Because “the Jews of Europe turned to enlightenment.” “Denied God.” “Listened to the ‘gospel of Darwin,’” and therefore, “must be exterminated” (“for our sins”).

“How can this be understood,” Kazik wondered, “after all, some of the annihilated were the great rabbis of Eastern Europe – did they also deny God and ‘need to be exterminated’?”

I felt sorry for the stunned Kazik and did not reveal to him what I know, that even today many orthodox rabbis⁶ in Israel and abroad continue to support the opinions expressed in this despicable booklet and its conclusions. Even the rabbi of Chabad, Rabbi Schneerson of Lubavitch from Brooklyn, supported these opinions in his writing. The Holocaust, he says, was “like

4 Elie Wiesel, *Et La Mer N'est Pas Remplie*.

5 Elie Wiesel, *Night*.

6 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*.

a surgery necessary to heal the patient” and meant to save many souls – at the expense of their bodies. Those who perished in the Holocaust, he says, were granted the mitzvah of dying as martyrs for God. It should be mentioned here that the rabbi himself was not “fortunate” enough to be granted this mitzvah, and escaped in time from occupied France.

According to the twisted explanation offered by the booklet, is it possible that I was spared because I was very young and did not have the opportunity to be educated and to become a heretic? If so, why were my cousins Bolek and Yanechka treated differently, along with another million-and-a-half children like us, who did not have the opportunity to become heretics according to the terms of the booklet’s writers?

The authors of the booklet do not bring up the many Jews, as Kazik mentioned, who continued believing in God and even fasted in the camp on Yom Kippur. They fasted with pure belief in the dark place where every day was a day of fasting and torment on its own.

“After Treblinka,” Kazik said sadly, “I stopped praying. I did not fast on Yom Kippur and stopped deluding myself. I realized there never was a supernatural power and that I had to take care of myself.”

The booklet continued to detail its unfounded assumptions, claiming that the Jews of Tunisia were not harmed by the Germans “because they did not defy God”; this implies that only the Jews of

Europe defied God, and that is why they were punished. The foul stench of this racist statement is still in the air today.

I could clearly see the look of shock and dismay on Kazik and Guta's pale faces, and I collected the pages of the booklet from the table.

My wife, who sometimes uses phrases like “God willing” and “thank God,” was quick to emphasize that she believes this booklet is a trivial fringe publication, which does not reflect the opinions of most believers and rabbis in Israel at all – I wish this were the truth!

I wondered to myself – are the writers of this booklet or the supporters of its ideas the source of the rumors regarding those who perished during the tsunami, the rumors Kazik mentioned earlier, which rightly incurred such angry reactions when they reached America?

The shaken Guta broke her long silence for the first time. She said that as part of her university studies, she chose to write a paper about the Nuremberg Trials — trials held after the war in which some of the founders of the Nazi ideology and several of its top implementers were tried for crimes against humanity.

To my surprise, Guta told us that the prosecution does not include a specific separate clause for the destruction of the 6 million Jews, who were considered “only” citizens of their countries.

Guta commented cynically that had she read “my” booklet then, she would have considered noting in her academic paper that the writers of the booklet could have served as witnesses for the defense at the Nuremberg Trials. After all, they could claim the defendants were only following orders from the Almighty: The order passed on to them through Hitler the messenger, and therefore, the Almighty is solely responsible for the execution of the final solution.

The angry Guta also mentioned the million-and-a-half children who were destroyed; did these small children suckle Darwin’s theory at their mothers’ breasts, she wondered in the same subdued cynical tone, or perhaps the souls of the adult sinners – as was also rumored – were trapped in the innocent souls of the young ones, and that is why they, the little ones, were born “guilty” and sentenced to death.

Kazik’s eyes were focused on mine, and our eyes did not move. We stared at each another for long seconds. Our eyes were moist, our eyebrows lifted slightly, our lips twisted, and we were as quiet as fish on land, their mouths gaping open.

We both knew – we could not understand.

My wife, who is Israeli-born, tried to cool down the tension, which she felt was becoming extreme, and served us all with a cool, sweet fruit ice cream. We ate, drank more of the fine cognac, but did not calm down.

Guta, who had studied in school both the Old Testament and the New Testament, surprised us again with her original comparisons. “Maybe,” she pondered aloud, “there is continuity between the fate of the 6 million and the fate of their ancestors, as is described in scripture. God,” she reminded all of us, “destroyed all the inhabitants of Sodom, who sinned against him, and so he was fed up with them. There is no detail of what was the Sodomites’ grave sin, which justified their destruction.”

Guta remembered that during her schooling, they were presented with the opinions of certain researchers,⁷ who believed that the Sodomites set groundbreaking rules regarding the rights of the residents. It was stated that all residents of the town are equal; they are all free and all have the right to live. The leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah also abolished the death penalty. “Did the people of Sodom and Gomorrah,” Guta thought aloud, “set the principles of modern democracy for the first time?”

“These laws of freedom, it seemed, directly opposed the commandments of God. Were the new laws and rules in Sodom seen as subversive against God and his complete control over man, and that is why he decided to impose his full wrath on them?”

“In his wrath, God burned Sodom with all its inhabitants — the old and young, the men and women, the sick and the healthy. Only one resident, Lot, was found to be upholding the laws of

7 Leszek Kołakowski, *Rozmowy Z Diabłem*.

God, and so he and his family were extricated from the town before its annihilation.

“The cynics – and maybe the anti-Semites as well – ” Guta commented with a bitter smile, “would say that at least the Nazis killed their victims by gunshot or suffocation before they burned their bodies in the ovens or giant pits, while the people of Sodom were burned alive.”

The only survivors – Lot and his family – were instructed, according to those commentators Guta mentioned, not to dwell on the past, not to remember the laws of equality and freedom that were in place in Sodom, and not to uphold them any longer. Lot’s wife did not keep to this basic strict prohibition. She brooded over the past and tried to remember and maintain it, and was therefore punished by being turned into a pillar of salt.

Their daughters, on the other hand, who did not obey the ban on incest, were not punished. They slept with their father Lot and became pregnant by him!

Were Lot’s daughters kept alive to have the next generation of “God’s loyalists” and observers of his edicts?

Guta remembered from her schooling the theological explanation that states that God created the world for his fame and glory.⁸ When God inspected the results of his creation, he regretted his

8 Ibid (see note 7).

recklessness in creation and decided to wipe out all those created in his image which did not “come out well.”

“God only found one righteous man deserving of survival. God did not give up and wanted to continue human existence, and so he kept Noah and his closest family members alive (God did not keep Noah’s brothers alive). In his decision, God presented Noah with a cruel and difficult personal dilemma. Noah had to decide whether to drown with his brothers and all his other relatives, acquaintances, and friends, or betray them and save himself.

“In saving his own life, Noah accepted the responsibility of preserving the next generation as God wanted. Had Noah chosen otherwise and drowned with his brother, he may have brought the end of that world, and maybe even the creation of a better humanity.

“Noah,” Guta sighed, “chose his own good. He chose to live. He and his family passed the ‘Selection’ of the deluge to the short line – the line of survivors.

“The short line of Noah survivors also included pairs of animals for their continued existence. Scripture does not include,” Guta emphasized, “any explanation for the sins of the other animals and why they too were destroyed.

“Noah spared himself and did not look back at those sinking in the flood.

“The teacher and educator Dr. Janusz Korczak of Warsaw did not follow in Noah’s footsteps. He accompanied his orphans – even though he was given – like Noah – the option to save himself. He stayed close to his protégés even in the cattle cars and the gas showers.

“Noah did not try, or could not succeed, in convincing his Maker to add his brothers and other relations to bear the burden of continuing humanity with him; even compared to Dr. Kestner’s train of survivors in Hungary, Noah failed.

“Some extreme theologians,” Guta continued going through her memory, “claim that Noah’s conscience bothered him, and so he decided to take revenge on his Creator who forced him to betray his brothers. Therefore, he educated his offspring so that only a few generations later sins and sinners returned, and in greater force, and angered the Creator even more than their predecessors.

“Is this what happened?”

“Are the 6 million, like the drowned of the deluge and the burned of Sodom, victims of the Creator’s destructive wrath?”

An upset Guta stopped her flow of speech for a moment and looked at us. Her father nodded his head as though approving, as did I. But Adina, my wife, looked at three of us with surprise and wonder.

Adina was brought up in a traditional Jerusalem home. Her

family broke away from exile and its atmosphere several generations ago. Now she was witness to a way of thinking she was not aware of in the Jerusalem alleys and religious schools. Her traditional background objected to the apparent material and cruel interpretation Guta voiced.

Adina was already accustomed to the strong reactions created in me by the booklet, and she made peace with some of them, but she was agitated by the accusation of the God of genocide as early as the days of the deluge, and from the claim regarding the reasons for the punishment of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“No,” Adina’s mouth emitted – “there has to be another explanation...”

Then she added, “Maybe we cannot understand all of the Creator’s ways. Maybe it is we who cannot fully comprehend his thinking and actions.”

A look of surprise remained on Adina’s face, and she shook her head left and right, and looked at Kazik and me with compassion, as though saying – everyone has their own interpretations; everyone has their own beliefs.

She smiled lightly, understanding that the deep scars Kazik and I carry in our souls also affect our interpretations on matters of faith.

Our home is close to the city of Bnei-Brak. At the border between

the two cities, one secular and the other ultraorthodox, is the esteemed Ashkenazi Ponevez Yeshiva, which is also mentioned in that deranged booklet.

The booklet quotes Torah verses which, according to the claims and understanding of its writers, clearly suggest in advance the coming Holocaust. In Europe – before and after the German occupation – the Jewish public – secular, traditional, and even ultraorthodox, could not understand that warning that is supposedly concealed in those verses. And maybe the public did not even know they existed.

Only a select few great rabbis – they claim – could comprehend the apparent implications of these verses and understand them in time. Only they, the select few, saved — themselves.

They abandoned Europe, not without first making sure they built the holy Ponevez Yeshiva in Israel. They claim (or justify their actions) their intention was aimed at the most important thing: ensuring Torah study will not cease despite the coming destruction in Europe.

Despite their “foresight,” those “select few” did not warn us, the people of Israel, in time. They were content with worrying about their own body, founding the Yeshiva and Torah study, and they neglected the edict: “Anyone who saves a single soul...”

The astounded Kazik doubted the religious authority of the writers of the booklet.

Indeed, I too shared those doubts back in the day. I photocopied the booklet 120 times and sent them, with a letter, to the members of the Eleventh Knesset, Israeli parliament, which was in session in 1986 – I sent it to each and every member of Knesset, both secular and religious. I expected the people’s representatives to publicly condemn the contents of the booklet. I was sorely disappointed. Many of the Knesset members did not bother to respond at all. Others chose to ignore its contents and to pass the issue on to other, “concerned parties.” Only several expressed understanding of the injury to my feelings as a remnant of the Holocaust. Only a few expressed shock and abhorrence for what is written. The responses by those few I keep for myself, I said, and pointed at the thin envelope resting on the table.

Among those few who dared respond was only one religious Knesset member, a senior member of his party, who wrote in his own handwriting. He expressed his disgust with the contents of the booklet and its implications, and expressed real empathy for my strong reaction. Indeed, one righteous person was found in “Sodom” of today.

The members of the Knesset of Israel, who are supposed to also represent us, who were there and survived and still bear the load, ignored the outright offense hurled at all our families and the many others who did not survive, with the unfounded claim that this terrible punishment was due to them allegedly being heretics.

I will never know or understand whether those Knesset members ignored my letter because of a fear of awakening the wrath of the

ultraorthodox and their political parties and themselves as well, or whether the matter was not close enough to their hearts.

I am wary of the possibility that the Holocaust will also be exposed to or, perish the thought, fall victim to internal and global politics. The Holocaust must be etched in all our memories as a single, unique event (there never was another one like it, and I would like to believe there never will be), which must be cherished and whose lessons must be implemented. It would be the disgrace of the 6 million who perished if we dare commit the sin of comparing the Holocaust to an “event,” be it political, cultural, social, or any other event.

There is no other event like the Holocaust, and we hope there never will be another one in our world.

Kazik smiled at me and declared with pride that he believes American public opinion as well as the media would not overlook the publication of such an extremist and offensive booklet. Following the public, Congress too, he believes, would not shirk its duty to its voters and would respond. Kazik believed that both in the Congress and the Senate, honest elected officials who were offended, like I was, by the vitriolic booklet and its baseless claims, would stand out and initiate a strong act of condemnation and even punitive action against its writers and publishers.

Kazik’s American national pride soon subsided, however, and his face darkened again. I revealed to him that, for me, the booklet was the final straw in forming my religious beliefs. That is how

I became an atheist. Too much blood has been shed under the guise of the many various religions, and for their sake, and I do not wish to belong to any of them!

Kazik nodded his agreement and commented that he encountered his “last straw” a long time before I did.

“The fire and stench that came from the pits of Treblinka burned my faith. I joined the many who despaired of faith after the prayers did not even shorten their suffering.

“I too,” Kazik continued, “read Eliezer Wiesel’s book,⁹ and was impressed with his confession, despite his religious upbringing, that standing in front of the hanged at the gallows of Auschwitz, he saw the face of God. And ‘little old me’ identifies with him, but also respects those who believe that God works in mysterious ways,” he concluded.

The Israeli Knesset set the twenty-seventh of the month of Nissan as the national Memorial Day for the Holocaust. Entertainment establishments are forbidden to open, and national memorial ceremonies are scheduled. However, this day of remembrance was not set as a day of fasting as the religious and historical fasts in our tradition.

The day set to remember the 6 million did not receive the same status as Yom Kippur or the Ninth of Av, and even not the status

⁹ In his book, *Night*.

of Taanith Esther, or the Fast of Gedaliah, or the tenth of Tevet, or the seventeenth of Tamuz, and the other many days of fasting and mourning. Holocaust Memorial Day remains a workday like all others, but employees are entitled to view it as an elective day in which they can decide whether they will work or not, like Lag BaOmer or May 1st.

In the last year of my employment in academia, Holocaust Memorial Day was on a day I was scheduled to lecture for 6 hours. The choice was difficult. It was hard for me to treat that day as any other, both mentally and physically. Had I decided not to teach, the administration would not have objected, but I taught.

I felt I was strong enough to fulfill my academic obligation as well as contain my emotions without offending others, and my students did not sense my embarrassment and my mood.

I was happy to see that Kazik and Guta's eyes expressed agreement and empathy with my decision.

The Memory

I looked at Kazik. He seemed restless and shaken. He seemed immersed in uncertainty, but eventually he overcame it and began speaking.

He recounted the difficult moments he experienced in front of the television broadcasts in the summer of 2005, with the Israeli vacating settlements in Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip. He did not support the unilateral extrication. He thought the extrication should have happened, but only as part of an agreement between both parties and with suitable returns for Israel.

“I live in America, and I do not have the right to intervene or influence what happens in Israel, but the way the retreat was carried out pained me greatly,” he admitted. “When I was watching the prayers for ‘salvation’ by the evacuated, I was reminded of those praying, ever so softly, in Treblinka, to that same one God. Those praying there begged to continue living, but their prayers were unanswered.

“I will never forget the image of the children of Gush Katif, with a bright orange badge fixed to their clothes like a foreign object. I was furious when I saw those children marching, awkward, with their hands in the air. I remembered the original march from the ghetto in Warsaw.

“Over there, in the ghetto, the children who wore the yellow badge marched under supervision of Nazi soldiers to their certain death, to the cattle cars, and from there to Treblinka. In comparison, the children in the Katif settlements were marching to buses leading them to their alternate housing. I will never forget or forgive this provoking comparison displayed by the evacuated.”

I understood Kazik and empathized with him. The image of the boy from the ghetto led to his death with his hands raised is also prominent in my collage, a photograph of which I chose for the cover of my memoir – this is the collage hanging in the entrance to my house.

Kazik was silent for a moment, probably “remembering” another child, and then he turned his face to me and asked in a hesitating whisper, “Tell me more about Olek.”

In our close family we did call my brother Olek, based on his name – Alexander. Like me, he was already given a Jewish name on his Polish birth certificate. His name was Yoav, but we did not use that name even when we came to Israel, because the name Alexander – Alex – was common in Israel too.

After our father finished his studies at the University of Vienna, he was a pioneer in Palestine, but the swamps were unkind to him, and he returned to Poland until he was cured of his malaria and could return.

Father was cured, married Mother, and my parents gave the two

children they had Hebrew names, as we were all “coming back any day.” But the war broke out and the return to Palestine was postponed.

I could, possibly, have been born as a “Sabra” in Israel. Grow up like all children and be, literally, “saved” from the Holocaust, as only someone who was not there then was saved from experiencing its horrors. We, who were there, were not saved; we are survivors. We were not able to return in time, and the Holocaust did not pass over us children either.

I was a little surprised by Kazik’s request for more information about Olek, but understood from his request that when I brought up my brother before, Kazik apparently did not understand my brother Alex was also his cousin Olek. Before, when we were standing in front of the memorial for my mother in the Forest of Martyrs and I detailed the name and fate of my brother Alexander, Kazik’s mind was probably still mostly immersed in his parents’ memorial plaque, with his name inscribed on it as well.

We were both in my study now, and I pointed to the wall across from my desk with a framed photograph next to a relief in memory of the town of Yunbday in Peru – a town that was destroyed along with its inhabitants in an earthquake. The framed photograph adorned the cover of the military magazine *Bamachane* many years ago, and it shows a wide, muscular sailor, smiling in a backdrop of ruins. Kazik and Guta recognized the face of the sailor – after all, they already saw a photo of my older brother among the photos in my memoir. My brother Alex’s face

looked at us from the photo, expressing satisfaction and pride. The photograph was taken while Alex was a soldier and was part of an Israeli rescue mission to help the people of Greece after an earthquake struck their country.

I took a small album of photos I prepared after my brother's modest funeral out of the cabinet. We leafed through the album, and Kazik was reminded of the face of his cousin Olek, the boy from before the ghetto years. Kazik did not know the few photos from later periods.

Alex, who was very talented and intelligent, was overtaken by a severe crisis when he was 16. At the age I started studying he abandoned school and started sinking. Still, and despite not being able to complete high school, he was able to complete his military service with many difficulties and gritted teeth.

Even though he got married and had a son, he withdrew from all of us and shut himself in a small, secluded rooftop apartment, surrounded by piles of books, paintings of screaming faces, notebooks, and many notes.

My brother's spirit, which was shocked and badly hurt during the war, could not rest. He divorced quickly, sank further into his seclusion, and concentrated only on his paintings, writings, images, and addictions.

My brother could not reveal himself even to his beloved son. Only Mother, with her love, calm voice, and unending and limitless

support, was able to postpone his downfall for about 35 years. After my mother's death, my wife and I were able to support him for another 5 years, until he gave in completely and took himself out of his misery. I found him lying in his bed, cold, and surrounded by only his writings and paintings.

My brother Alex was born in a difficult and dangerous birth. Mother's first pregnancy was discovered as an ectopic pregnancy at a very late stage. The doctors were able to save her, but forbade her from becoming pregnant a second time. After my mother risked her life, despite the prohibition, and had my brother, the doctors warned our parents again against another pregnancy, but Mother did not relent. She convinced Father with the fundamental argument – "You cannot send a child into life alone" – and had me too.

While I was helping Mother when she was still alive, and in the 5 years after her death while I was doing everything I could for my brother and helping him through his suffering, I realized the validity of the smart and altruistic principle that guided my mother to risk her life and not have only one child.

Was my assistance to my brother enough to repay him, if only partially, for his adamant cry which saved us all from the gas in the ghetto? Who can answer my question?

Again, I wondered if my brother's fate stirred in Kazik thoughts about his wife Sarah's suffering. I did not ask him about it, and he told me nothing.

Kazik sank in the chair at my desk and seemed deep in thought. Long seconds passed before he “came back to us” and muttered with pain,

“Father too.”

This time Guta did not understand what he meant and looked at him with concern and puzzlement. Kazik turned to me and with a soft, apologetic voice said, “I have not told you yet either,” and continued.

“In the last instances when I saw my father in Treblinka, he did not recognize me anymore. When I came close to him, he ignored me, and did not even grab the slice of bread I offered him. Father already looked like a skeleton sleepwalking between the cabins and his eyes had darkened. His worn clothes looked in part as though they were just hanging off his bones, and in part stuck to his skin. He no longer shoved in line for food and did not react to the kapo’s lashings. Father walked and mumbled to himself, maybe praying, and could not join his work detail. I could not help him. We did not sleep in the same cabin and did not belong to the same work detail; he was already a Muselmann who gave up on life.

“I was greatly weakened then, physically and mentally, so much that it seemed that even my feelings for Father faded. I knew I was losing my father, and I did not have the power, energy, or urge to do the impossible for him.”

“My conscience is bothering me!”

“Logically, I know for a fact that I could not help Father then, and certainly could not have saved him, but at night, in my dreams, to this day, I hear him and see him looking at me as if expecting my help.

“I saw many others in his condition in the camp and knew what would happen to him. I prayed for him. Indeed, I then still prayed in my own words then and even in tears. I, who did not cry in the ghetto, did not cry during my escape and my injury – only the look of Father succumbing to his fate made me cry. Ever since then, my tear ducts have been sealed and have not reopened, even for my wife, Sarah’s, funeral.

“I did not see my mother coming out of the chimney, but in my dreams she joins my dying father. She is crying and apologizing to him for being convinced to leave the ghetto ‘for work in the east.’ When our daughter was born, I gave her my mother’s name. I wanted to hear and see our daughter laughing and happy along my mother’s screaming in my dreams.”

When I heard Kazik, I understood that, compared to him, I was fortunate. In all my years after the war, I dreamed, but happily. I did not dream, even once, about the events I experienced there. Even when I dreamed about falling, about being lost, or about soldiers, I was not there, and the dream had a happy ending. In all my years in Israel, I did not wake up from a nightmare or from fears, as is the case with many of my survivor acquaintances. I do not know what the reason is for this kindness, but I welcome it.

“I envy you this,” Kazik said with a smile, but with no malice, and continued. “In all our years in America, I kept my distance from other survivors. I did not join the associations or memorial committees, I did not see documentaries about the Holocaust, and I did not go to Germany or visit the remains of the extermination camps. I wanted to disengage, to break free and run away from the memories of the past, but was only partially successful. The painful dreams still come at night, and the internal strain has not stopped.

“Only during my current visit to Israel, after our conversation, I feel a need – and desire – to return to past events in my mind. To ‘see’ them again, without fear, in my experience, adult eyes, and to release at least some of the strain, and hope my dreams calm down slightly.”

I was not surprised by what Kazik said. I too behaved in a similar manner, and in my many travels around the world, always passed over Germany. In my “roots” journey in Poland, I stayed in the hotel as my wife and friends visited the remains of the Auschwitz camp. I was glad I did not go with them. When she returned from the visit, my wife told me there was a strong smell of burned meat – the smell given off by the sausages roasting in the packed cafeteria in the entrance!

For many years I did not go to German-speaking films. The language of the murderers repulsed me, even though my father saved us from the wall of death in the ghetto with that language.

After the Six-Day War, when I was asked to visit Germany on work matters, I did so, but with one condition. I asked to only meet with young people, about my age. My request was granted, and I only held work discussions with the people I knew had clean hands. On the weekend, though, when I was invited to spend time with them, I made sure to flee Germany to France.

I did not join the reparations program from Germany in time either. The shame and pride kept me from it when it was possible to receive large monetary compensation. I joined the organization of people disabled by the Nazi persecution only after I retired from the security organization and was recognized as having “rights.”

I recorded my childhood memories for the Yad Vashem archives and put them down in writing in my book, *The Silent Scream* – for memory and testimony only at the age of 70.

The memories Kazik and I brought up kept flowing. They flowed as though wishing to break through, to be released of us and free us from the lengthy burden of suppression. We both did not tend to reveal ourselves to acquaintances who were not there, and spared members of our family and protected them from the weight of the load.

The possibility of sharing the difficult memories with someone who could understand them because he shared your fate by sole virtue of his life experiences eases the confession. It draws topics that were denied or hidden from you, topics you did not

understand or remember fully yourself.

After a brief break, and with a sense of comfort of a shared fate, we were in the living room again. We steadied ourselves at the sturdy table, drank another glass of cognac, and tried to pull ourselves back together. We continued speaking to each other about what was forced on us there in the seemingly limitless period and whose shadow continues to accompany us to this day.

I was not imprisoned in a concentration camp, and my parents were with me during most of the period of horror and protected me. Kazik's tale in Treblinka and in his escape illustrated to me the relativity of suffering. Compared to Kazik's hardships, my stay in Przyszowa disguised as a Polish boy, suffering from the freezing cold, lack of food, and hard work now seems almost like living at a "resort."

I lived under the guise of a Christian boy in the Polish village Przyszowa, where I was sent, protected by Roza from both her violent husband and the hostile peasants. The face, speech, and behavior of the one I have always called "our angel" stand before my eyes as though it were only yesterday.

To my great shame, I do not know how my parents knew her or why she agreed to risk herself for us. For years, I believed Roza was our governess in Warsaw before the war, but my aunt Minka refuted this assumption before her death.

Even with my eyes closed, I can still see the houses of the village,

the fields, and the paths where I hobbled, barefoot and sore. I remember how, with time, the delicate skin on my feet hardened like the sole of a shoe, and I grew accustomed to it.

I remember Vladek, Roza's son, very well. He was my partner in daily life and in work. Together, we picked wheelbarrows full of mushrooms in the forest, and then cleaned and dried them. With him, I sawed logs into planks while the old village carpenter sat high above us, on the sawed tree trunk, cursing and yelling instructions, with the sawdust falling on us and getting into our eyes.

The old village's carpenter would fall asleep anywhere and at every opportunity, and the farmers would joke at his expense and say, "We shit on his head, and he did not feel it." And the carpenter would answer in his defense, "I heard the butt creak but could not wake up."

I can remember Vladek telling me, in a whisper and in secret, that I was going to have a brother as though it was tonight.

I was 8 years old then, and did not understand how I would have a brother and why.

Vladek was not told who we really were, but with his acute senses, he identified the connection between me and my father and mother, who came to the village after I did.

Under the guise my parents presented, they were both Polish,

and there was no connection between them and me, or between themselves. I did not misstep even once. Even when I was in pain, even when I was afraid, and when I was cold, or I was hungry and tired, I did not address my parents as “Mother” or “Father.”

And still, perhaps Vladek noticed some intimate connection between my parents, and between them and me, and concluded I would have a brother. Anyway, he promised not to reveal our secret to anyone.

Until that point, I knew and saw how children died, and I knew and saw how children were killed, but I did not know how children were born, and I did not have another brother.

I already described the village and my life in it in my memoir. I also told my family about the special events that occurred in it. In the memorials at the Forest of Martyrs, when I mentioned the village, I believed I remembered everything: the people, the scenes and the church, the animals and the menacing forest on its outskirts.

It seems I was mistaken, and memory fools us.

A few years ago, when people were allowed to visit former Communist countries, I traveled to Poland and found “my” remote village: There was a small sign with the clear name “Przyszowa.”

I stopped on the path leading to the village and did not enter. I could not understand how my memory could fool me. On the

left of the path leading to the village was a river, and I did not know of it or remember it at all. I did not remember that during the 2 long years I lived in the village I may have seen this river, touched it, or swam in it. If the sign with the name of the village was not placed at the entrance, and if a few farmers would not have confirmed that this was indeed Przyszowa, their village since the day they were born, I would not have believed I had returned to the same place.

The wooden houses I remembered were gone, and ugly, exposed white buildings stood in their place. And still, the stone-scattered paths, the dirt, and the animal droppings remained as they were then, and my feet did not forget the pain those paths caused them. Apparently, the body has its own memory.

I saw and heard once more those vocal “residents,” the animals, who even now, still spend nights in their owners’ homes. The lives of the farmers, it seemed to me, did not change or improve since then. It seemed as though they did not know there were major changes in the world and did not remember there was ever a war either.

Since we left the village, the intimidating black forest is burned in my memory as the embodiment of menace and anxiety. I remember well how afraid I was to pass through it myself, especially at night, to the sounds of whining of what I imagined to be wolves, or were they?

I still remember myself faltering through the snow and sinking

in it in my shabby wooden shoes and light, water-soaked clothes. I remember how the terrified dog clung to me, hoping I would protect him, and I, on the other hand, trusted him for protection. This forest will not budge from my memory.

On the way to the village, I planned to pass through the forest again, this time protected by my good, tall shoes, dressed in warm clothes, in daylight, and with my friend with me, but the forest was gone. I drove up the highest hill in the village in my car and looked at my surroundings but did not see a forest. This time it was not a trick of my memory — the forest was gone.

I checked with the farmers, and indeed, the forest had been cut down. “My” village and the villages and towns around it expanded and swallowed the entire forest, which may have only been large and intimidating in the eyes of a frightened little boy.

I remembered the village church too, but not its location. I found it at the entrance to the village, and it seemed smaller and shorter than I remembered and not at all frightening. It was more renovated and decorated inside, and foreign to me. The only part that remained as it was in my eyes was the confessional – the black cell I was so afraid of, in which I kneeled and confessed my imaginary “sins” to the priest, who sat across the screen, heard me or quietly dozed off, and assigned me penance I did not perform.

The young priest I met during my visit did not know the church as it was in the past, and said he knew nothing about the war that

was “many years ago.” He said he did not know anything about extermination of Jews. I think he did not believe I was a Jew, and that I lived in this village for 2 years, in the assumed identity of a Christian boy.

Indeed, some things did not change. Then, when the Nazis murdered and suffocated us, the church, with its millions of believers, and the Pope first among them, “did not hear,” “did not see” what was being done by Christian Germans, and did not even voice a protest. Even now, some of those believers still “do not know” or already “do not remember.” Are 6 million destroyed through no fault of their own not enough to at least improve the understanding and interactions between the believers of different religions?

Since we immigrated to Israel, I read and studied a great deal about life and death at the extermination camps, but I did not have conversations with someone who survived there themselves. The few details I heard from Kazik were the first testimony I heard that was from a reliable firsthand source.

It is strange, but even now, over 65 years later, and with a relative listening, Kazik had trouble taking off most of the shackles he put on his tongue. His speech was brief and unspecified. I felt that he was still passing over the most difficult events that he would prefer not to remember or mention.

Large portions of what was stored up inside him remained locked within him, and I doubt it would see the light of day before he passed away.

I am aware that past events affected me too: my studies, my work, the education of my children, and my attitude toward life. They shaped me as I am: less sentimental, but strong, decisive, and energetic.

I have no doubt many survivors act like I do. Many still keep the details of their story, and maybe even their secrets, to themselves, possibly forever.

Without reacting verbally, I knew Kazik was following my train of thought and mumbling to himself in agreement – I saw it in his eyes! And then I heard him ask, “Are we disabled?”

“No,” I answered with confidence, “we’re just scratched.” And probably not as much as other survivors.

I illustrated this by telling him about a painter I met 20 years ago while he was showing his first exhibit, all of its pictures dedicated to experiences from his life and tribulations in the extermination camp. When I confessed that I was “from there” too, he revealed that only when he started painting, about 5 years before the exhibit, only then did he first reveal to his wife and children his “secret” he had kept to himself – being a survivor of an extermination camp. Until then, he forced himself to keep from them the suffering of the past for fear of hurting them.

My colleague Yoram was affected and went even further.

I met Yoram in the security factory where we both worked. We

did not have working relations, but we would meet when his job required him to come to the department where I worked. The employees who knew him before me claimed he was very stubborn, uncompromising, and even cheap.

In the mornings, on my drives to work, Yoram would wait for me and join me almost every day. We did not speak much during the drive, let alone bring up our past. Yoram only told me he lived alone, not far from where I lived, and that he took care of his home and car meticulously.

Toward the end of the workday, even though I was often delayed, Yoram would wait to return with me. I did not understand why he preferred to accompany me instead of driving his new car or taking the factory-provided buses. Offhand, during one of our drives, he told me he once saw a young man try to steal the mirror from his car, and that he approached him quietly, grabbed his hand, and broke his fingers.

In a similar tone, incidentally, he told me he once heard an intruder trying to enter his apartment through an open window. He was not afraid or overexcited, and when the burglar placed his hands on the windowsill, he hit him hard with the heels of his winter shoes. The burglar fell and hurt his back, and Yoram took his gun, went outside, and guarded the injured burglar until the police arrived.

When I was shocked by his cruelty, Yoram just smiled and said that if someone hurts him, they deserve a severe punishment and

that he knows how to punish and is not afraid of doing so.

One of the neighbors told me that Yoram was married once, but one night, when he came back from work, he found his apartment empty – his wife, infant son, and all the furniture and household objects were no longer there.

Since then, there is no one in Yoram's life. He lives alone, with no entertainment, no traveling, no luxuries, but he is very strict about the condition and cleanliness of his car and apartment, nurturing his bank account, and every bit of his possessions.

I mentally distanced myself from Yoram but continued driving him in my car out of courtesy.

One day Yoram called me, and our unexpected phone conversation lasted over 2 hours.

He stunned me by saying he was a Holocaust survivor. As a small boy, at the age of 3 or 4, he saw his parents – and many other Jews from their town – shot to death by the Germans. He, small and alone, managed to escape to the nearby forest.

He lived with the animals of the forest, which did not hurt him. The small, lonely boy learned how to survive from them. He ate with and like the animals, acted like them, and defended himself like them – “I was raised as an animal,” he said.

He said he was also able to save a little girl who escaped to the

forest. He protected her with only his teeth and nails from the animals and the German soldiers who were looking for her.

Yoram did not tell me more about what he experienced in the forest, but only added that he was taken to a hospital at the end of the war by a doctor who knew his parents. The doctor told Yoram his full name and estimated age. Yoram was moved from the hospital to an orphanage, to the youth immigration, and to Israel.

In Israel, he changed his name from Jurek to Yoram, chose a Hebrew last name, and tried to fashion a new identity for himself. But here too, even during his military service as an officer, Yoram lived in solitude – no family or friends who could understand him. Yoram studied numerous professional courses, worked in odd jobs, experienced a short and failed marriage, and came to work in the security industry, where we met.

For the whole length of that phone call, I was only able to slip in one short comment. I told him I was from there too, but the places and conditions where I stayed were different. To my surprise, Yoram said he knew this, and so solved the mystery as to why he bonded with me, of all people, and why he revealed to me the details of his past. I understood that Yoram needed someone to listen to him and support him. I also understood why he preferred to reveal himself to me in a phone conversation and not face to face.

Following our conversation, my attitude toward Yoram changed. I pitied him for his loneliness and understood the motives for that

strange and sometimes cruel behavior, as well as his special and different character.

In response, Yoram opened up to me slightly, and I listened and responded with sympathy. Yoram also told me about his hardships, his struggles, and the humiliations he suffered as a new immigrant alone in the country.

“Sometimes I slept on a bench at an avenue,” he would say, or “I walked into strangers’ weddings to eat...”

I learned that Yoram, the lonely little boy, was strong and clever enough to survive in the forest in Poland. He too, like us, was able to get better and overcome the physical damages to his body. He was also able to cope with being ignored, disrespected, neglected, and left alone, as he was in his first years in Israel, and was gifted and realistic enough to study, work hard to buy himself an apartment and a car, and to survive on his own, even though he was “scratched” deeper than either Kazik and I.

Like my brother Alex, I could identify in Yoram the toxic seeds of war that sprouted in him in Israel, except in Yoram, they grew extreme and cruel behavior revealed toward anyone who threatened to harm him or his property. I also understood the source of his stubbornness and his motive for what seemed like cheapness. As someone who was hungry and who had nothing once, I know very well that it is hard to let go of this. It is clear to me that Yoram’s experiences during those years continue to dictate, as a constant shadow, his behavior patterns.

Today, we are both retired; Yoram lives alone in his large apartment. His relationship with his adult son is weak, and he is not very fond of his daughter-in-law and granddaughters either. He feels they do not appreciate him appropriately. They do not help him or love him as he, the lone wolf, expects them to. Does Yoram really know what to expect? Does he really know what love or fondness are?

Yoram cannot understand that his daughter-in-law and granddaughters treat him only as a father-in-law and grandfather, without consideration for his background. They expect him to show them affection and love – which Yoram himself never received.

After some open-heart surgery he had to undergo, Yoram was given medication and some distress alert equipment for medical assistance, should he require it, but there is no “distress button” to treat his mental and family distress. When he is overcome by loneliness and pain, he calls me and blames his parents for bringing him into this world with his choking statement:

“I wish I were never born!”

Yoram’s painful statement is used as a reminder that for many of us, the Holocaust will only be over when we rest, like my brother Alex, under a tombstone.

Kazik and Guta listened to me in complete silence. They know, like I do, that in every one of us survivors is a certain measure of “Yoram’s” characteristics.

A Second Farewell

I slept fitfully. I vaguely felt half-awake and half-asleep, as though floating between the two. The dreams swept over me without stopping. I fell asleep and woke up alternately, and every time I woke up, I considered whether what I experienced truly happened in reality or I was only dreaming, and they were only the imagination and illusion that are natural to dreams, and dozed off.

Despite the deep silence, Kazik's emotions and satisfaction were evident. I am not the one to determine whether his joy was the result of discovering a relative, or perhaps also – and maybe mostly – because he unloaded, if only partially – memories and burdens he had retained and had been stored in him since.

Kazik and I embraced tightly. We were both quiet, and our moist eyes spoke for us. They invited us to stay with them in America, and reminded us of their interest in attending the next family memorial in the Forest of Martyrs.

I presented Kazik with my book, which contained the photos mostly responsible for our reconnection and reunion as a family. In the Polish-language dedication, I wrote to him:

– To my cousin who was torn from me in the Warsaw ghetto and

who, “for a moment,” was returned to me in Tel Aviv after over 65 years.

- To my cousin who was orphaned about 50 years before I was.
- To Kazik, the only son of my aunt Guta, and the father of his only daughter Guta.
- To Kazik, who confronted the devil’s emissaries and eluded them.
- To my cousin, who stared Death in the eyes and proved to him that he could not subdue everyone.
- To Kazik, who suffered and hurt but grew greater and stronger, and built a home and a new life on the ruins of previous ones.
- To my cousin who added himself to those who uphold the vow: “You will not beat us, no, no...”
- To Kazik, whose name will be removed from the memorial plaque in the Forest of Martyrs.
- To Kazik, who is party to the crowd of witnesses who demand “No more...”

Your Loving Cousin,
Bobus

To the book I attached an envelope with copies of the family photos from then as well as photos of the welcome new additions to the family during the long years.

Kazik and Guta were swallowed in the large airplane, and I could no longer see them. I was left with the question:

“Was this real or was I only dreaming?”