

An Animal to the Memory

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IN THE RAILWAY PLATFORM in Vienna, my mother and aunt forbade my cousin and me from saying goodbye to our grandparents. Through the window of the compartment we watched as they disembarked from the train and followed an Israeli agent onto a waiting bus. The bus was bound for the airport, where an El Al plane was waiting. We were bound for somewhere else. Where exactly we didn't know—Australia, America, Canada—but someplace that was not Israel. As my mother, aunt, cousin, and I wept, my father and uncle kept an eye out for Israeli agents. These agents were known to inspect compartments. Any indication that we had close relatives on the buses would bring questions: Why were we separating the family? Why were we rejecting our Israeli visas? Why were we so ungrateful to the State of Israel, which had, after all, provided us with the means to escape the Soviet Union?

The answer to these questions, for my father and uncle, was 150 million angry Arabs.

For my grandfather, a lifelong Zionist, this was no answer. Back in Riga, packing our bags, he had decided that he would not go chasing us around the globe. At least in Israel he knew there would be a roof over his head. And at least in Israel, surrounded by 150 million angry Arabs, he would have no trouble identifying the enemy.

In the days leading up to our departure, a common argument went:

Grandfather: There, I'll never have to hear dirty Jew.

Father/Uncle: So instead you'll hear dirty Russian.

Grandfather: Maybe. But where you're going you'll hear one and the other.

Though I never heard dirty Jew, dirty Russian tended to come up. Particularly at Hebrew school. Not very often, but often enough that I felt justified in using it as an excuse when I tried to convince my parents to let me transfer to a normal public school.

This was a campaign I started in earnest in the seventh grade. The year before, we had finally moved out of the apartment building and into a semidetached house. Geographically, the move was negligible—looking out my bedroom window, I could still see our old building—but we now had a backyard, a driveway, a garage for my bicycle, and a carpeted basement. We also now had a neighborhood. Across the street, my aunt and uncle bought a similar house. In other houses lived other Russians who had succeeded in accumulating down payments. Their children became my friends: Eugene, Boris, Alex, Big Vadim, Little Vadim. In the evenings and on the weekends, we roved the streets, played wall ball, road hockey, shoplifted from the Korean's convenience store, and abused Fat Larissa, the neighborhood slut.

My new friends were all Jewish, but after my mother framed my bar mitzvah portrait—in which I wore a white tuxedo—they took me outside, held me down, and pummeled my shoulders until my arms went numb.

My mother was categorically against me leaving Hebrew school. This was partly out of deference to my grandfather, but also because of a deep personal conviction. There were

reasons why we had left the Soviet Union. She believed that in Canada I should get what I could never have gotten in Larvia. As far as she was concerned, I wasn't leaving Hebrew school until I learned what it was to be a Jew.

My father, I knew, was more sympathetic. For years, because of special considerations made for the poor Russian Jews, the Hebrew school had subsidized my tuition, but after we bought the house, the subsidy was revoked. And even though my mother had secured a better job and my father's business had improved, I saw the irritation on his face every time I started complaining about the school.

—He knows the language. He can read all the prayers. If he wants to leave maybe we should let him leave already?

—Take the money from my salary.

—I didn't say it was the money.

—Take the money from my salary.

—You want to redo the kitchen. That's also from your salary.

—If that's my choice, I can live without the kitchen.

My mother was resolute. Nothing I said helped my case. So that April, just after Passover, I put Jerry Ackerman in the hospital.

Most days, on his way to the office, my father would drop me off at school in his red 1970 Volvo. On a Friday, after gym, Jerry Ackerman said something about Solly Birnbaum's small hairless penis and Solly started to cry. Solly was fat, had webbed toes, and was reduced to tears at the end of every gym class. I had never defended him before but I seized my chance.

—Ackerman, if I had your tweezers-dick I wouldn't talk.

—Why are you looking at my dick, faggot?

—Ackerman thought he had a pubic hair until he pissed out of it.

—Fuck you, Berman, and that red shitbox your father drives.

In Rabbi Gurvich's office, Dr. Ackerman said that I had banged Jerry's head so hard against the wall that I had given him a concussion. Dr. Ackerman said that Jerry had vomited three times that night and that they'd had to drive him to the hospital at two in the morning. Dr. Ackerman asked, What kind of sick person, what kind of animal would do this? When I refused to answer, my mother apologized to Dr. and Mrs. Ackerman and also to Jerry.

This wasn't the first time my mother and I had been called into Gurvich's office. After our move into the new neighborhood I had begun to affect a hoodlum persona. At school, I kept to myself, glowered in the hallways, and, with the right kind of provocation, punched people in the face. Less than a month before I gave Jerry Ackerman his concussion, I'd gotten into a fight with two eighth graders. Because of dietary laws, the school prohibited bringing meat for lunch. Other students brought peanut butter or tuna fish, but I—and most of the other Russians—would invariably arrive at school with smoked Hungarian salami, Polish bologna, roast turkey. Our mothers couldn't comprehend why anyone would choose to eat peanuts in a country that didn't know what it meant to have a shortage of smoked meat. And so, I was already sensitive about my lunch when the two eighth graders stopped by my table and asked me how I liked my pork sandwich.

For my fight with Jerry Ackerman, I received a two-day suspension. Sparing words, Gurvich made it clear that this was never to happen again. The next time he saw me in his office would be the last. To hit someone's head against a wall—

did I ever think what that could do? If I got so much as within ten feet of Ackerman he didn't want to say what would happen. He asked me if I understood. My mother said I understood. He asked me if I had anything to say. I knew that what I had to say was not what he wanted to hear.

On the drive home my mother asked me what I was trying to do, and when my father got home he came as close as he ever had to hitting me.

—Don't think you're so smart. What do you think happens if you get expelled? You want to repeat the grade? We already paid for the entire year.

On the street, I told Boris, Alex, and Eugene, but they weren't impressed.

—Congratulations, you're the toughest kid in Hebrew school.

I returned to school the week of Holocaust Remembrance Day—which we called Holocaust Day for short. It was one of a series of occasions that punctuated the school year beginning with Rosh Hashanah in September and ending with Israeli Independence Day in May. For Chanukah, the school provided jelly donuts and art class was spent making swords and shields out of papier-mâché; for Purim, everyone dressed up in costume and a pageant was organized during which we all cheered the hanging of evil Haman and his ten evil sons; for Passover, every class held a preparatory seder and took a field trip to the matzoh bakery; for Israeli Independence Day, we dressed in blue and white and marched around the school yard waving flags and singing the *Hatikvah*, our national anthem.

Holocaust Day was different. Preparations were made days

in advance. The long basement hallway, from the gymnasium to the pool, was converted into a Holocaust museum. Out of storage came the pictures pasted on bristol board. There were photocopies of Jewish passports, there were archival photos of Jews in cattle cars, starving Jews in ghettos, naked Ukrainian Jews waiting at the edge of an open trench, Jews with their hands on barbed wire waiting to be liberated, ovens, schematic drawings of the gas chambers, pictures of empty cans of Zyklon B. Other bristol boards had Yiddish songs written in the ghettos, in the camps. We had crayon drawings done by children in Theresienstadt. We had a big map of Europe with multicolored pins and accurate statistics. Someone's grandfather donated his striped Auschwitz pajamas, someone else's grandmother contributed a jacket with a yellow star on it. There were also sculptures. A woman kneeling with a baby in her arms in bronze. A tin reproduction of the gates of Birkenau with the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Sculptures of Flaming Stars of David, sculptures of piles of shoes, sculptures of sad bearded Polish rabbis. In the center of the hallway was a large menorah, and all along the walls were smaller memorial candles—one candle for each European country. On Holocaust Day, the fluorescents were extinguished and we moved through the basement by dim candlelight.

Holocaust Day was also the one day that Rabbi Gurvich supervised personally. Gurvich's father was a Holocaust survivor and had, that year, published his memoirs. We were all encouraged to buy the book. When the copies arrived, Gurvich led his father from class to class so that the old man could sign them. Whereas Gurvich was imposing—dark, unsmiling, possessing a gruff seismic voice—his father was frail and mild. In our class, the old man perched himself behind the teacher's

desk and smiled benignly as he inked each copy with the double imperative: *Yizkor; al tishkach!* Remember; don't forget!

Even though I had spent the two days of my suspension fantasizing about killing Gurvich and Ackerman, I returned to school and avoided them both. Gurvich was easy to avoid. With the exception of Holocaust Day, his primary role was that of disciplinarian and—unless you were called into his office—he was rarely seen. Ackerman was different. The only class we shared was gym, but in the mornings I saw him grinning as I got my books from my locker; at lunch I sat across the cafeteria as he conspired against me; and at recess, if he was playing, then I abstained from tennis-ball soccer.

For Holocaust Day we were called down into the basement by grades. The hallway was long and, arranged in orderly columns, an entire grade could fit into the basement at one time. After Gurvich made the announcement over the intercom, we followed our teachers down. We were quiet on the way and silent once we got there. Some people started crying before we entered the basement; others started to cry when we reached the dimness and saw the photos on the walls. As we filed in, Gurvich stood waiting for us beside the menorah. When everyone was in the basement, the double doors were closed behind us and we waited for Gurvich to begin. Because the hallway was extremely reverberant, Gurvich's deliberate pause was filled with the echo of stifled sobs, and because there were no windows and the pool was so close, the basement was stuffy and reeked of chlorine.

Gurvich began the service by telling us about the six million, about the vicious Nazis, about our history of oppression.

His heavy voice occupied the entire space, and when he intoned the *El Maleh Rachamim*, I felt his voice reach into me, down into that place where my mother said I was supposed to have the thing called my "Jewish soul." Gurvich sang: O God, full of compassion, who dwells on high, grant true rest upon the wings of the Divine Presence. And when he sang this, his harsh baritone filled with grief so that his voice seemed no longer his own; his voice belonged to the six million. Every syllable that came out of his mouth was important. The sounds he made were dictated by centuries of ancestral mourning. I couldn't understand how it was possible for Gurvich not to cry when his voice sounded the way it did.

After Gurvich finished the prayer, we slowly made our way through the memorial. I stopped by photos of the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising and then beside a portrait of Mordecai Anilewicz, the leader of the ghetto resistance. I noticed Ackerman behind me. He was with two friends and I turned my head to look.

—What are you looking at, assface?

I turned away. I concentrated on moving down the hallway but felt a shove from behind and lost my balance. I managed to catch myself along the wall. My hand landed safely on top of a child's crayon drawing, but my foot accidentally knocked over the Czech memorial candle. Everybody in the hallway froze at the sound of the breaking glass. I turned around and saw Ackerman snickering. Marthew Wise, Ackerman's friend, stood between me and Ackerman. Wise was bigger than Ackerman, and I was sure he was the one who had pushed me. Instinctively, I lunged at Wise and tackled him to the ground. I was on top and choking him when Gurvich grabbed the back of my shirt and tried to pull me off. Even as Gurvich pulled me away I held on to Wise's throat. And when Gurvich fi-

nally yanked me clear, I saw that Wise was still on the floor, trembling.

While the rest of my class finished going through the memorial, I waited upstairs in Gurvich's office. I waited, also, until the sixth grade went down to the memorial, before Gurvich returned.

I sat for half an hour, maybe longer. I imagined the horrible consequences. I foresaw my mother's reaction and, even worse, my father's reaction. I didn't regret what I had done, but the fear of squandering so much of my parents' money made me physically sick.

When Gurvich finally walked into his office, he didn't sit down. Without looking at me, he told me to get up out of my goddamn chair and go back downstairs. I was not to touch anything, I was not to move, I was to stay there until he came.

Back in the basement I waited for Gurvich by the menorah. I didn't know where else to stand. I didn't know where in the memorial my presence would be the least offensive to Gurvich. I stood in one place beside a picture of Jews looking out of their bunks, and somehow I felt that my standing there would anger Gurvich. I moved over to the sculptures and felt the same way. I wanted to strike some sort of anodyne pose, to make myself look like someone who didn't deserve to be expelled.

I was tracing the ironwork on the menorah when Gurvich pushed the double doors open and entered. Very deliberately, as if he didn't know what to say first, Gurvich walked over to where I stood. I took my hands off the menorah.

—How is it that all of this doesn't mean anything to you, Berman? Can you tell me that?

—It means something.

—It means something? It means something when you

jump on another Jew in this place, on Holocaust Day? This is how you demonstrate it means something?

He raised his voice.

—It means something when you act like an animal to the memory of everyone who died?

—What about Wise? He pushed me into the wall.

—Wise had to go home because of what you did, so don't ask me about Wise. Wise wasn't the one choking another Jew at a memorial for the Holocaust.

I didn't say anything. Gurvich tugged at his beard.

—Look around this, Berman, what do you see?

I looked.

—The Holocaust.

—And does this make you feel anything?

—Yes.

—Yes? It does?

—Yes.

—I don't believe you. I don't believe you feel anything.

He put his hand on my shoulder. He leaned in closer.

—Berman, a Nazi wouldn't do here what you did today.

Don't tell me about how you feel.

—I'm not a Nazi.

—No, you're not a Nazi? What are you?

—A Jew.

—What?

—A Jew.

—I can't hear you.

—I'm a Jew.

—Why so quiet, Berman? It's just us here. Don't be so ashamed to say it.

—I'm a Jew, I said into my shoes.

He turned me around by my shoulder. I may have consid-

ered myself a tough little bastard, but when Gurvich gripped me I understood that mine was a boy's shoulder and that his was a man's hand. He put his face very close to mine and made me look at him. I could smell the musky staleness of his beard. For the first time, I felt I was going to cry.

—So that my uncles hear you in Treblinka! he commanded.

He tightened his grip on my shoulder until he saw it hurt. I was convinced he was going to hit me. The last thing I wanted to do was start crying, so I started crying.

—I'm a Jew! I shouted into his face.

My voice rang off the walls, and off the sculptures and the pictures and the candles. I had screamed it in his face wishing to kill him, but he only nodded his head. He kept his hand on my shoulder and waited until I really started to sob. My shoulder shuddered under his hand and I heard the repulsive sound of my own whimpering. Finally, Gurvich removed his hand and backed away a half step. As soon as he did, I wanted him to put his hand back. I was standing in the middle of the hallway, shaking. I wanted to sit down on the floor, or lean against a wall, something. Anything but stand in the middle of that hallway while Gurvich nodded his rabbinical head at me. When he was done nodding, he turned away and opened the double doors leading up to the stairs. Halfway out, before closing the doors, Gurvich looked back to where I hadn't moved.

—Now, Berman, he said, now maybe you understand what it is to be a Jew.