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Chapter 1

WARSAW-TEL AVIV-WARSAW

Two Bundists in Tel Aviv. Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish. Back to Warsaw. The Medem Sanatorium, a world unto itself. The child as Insider and Outsider.

I came into the world on November 7, 1926, at the Hadassah Hospital in Tel Aviv. There was nothing peculiar about it, except that my parents were dedicated Bundists – members of the Jewish socialist party in Poland – and Tel Aviv was not exactly the place where Bundists raised their offspring but rather the destination and nesting place for dedicated (anti-Bundist) Zionists.

How my parents came to set foot in Palestine is one of those bizarre stories typical of twentieth-century European Jews, many of whom would often find themselves where they had least expected to be. Had my father had his choice, he would probably have continued to stay in Vilna or in the near-by small *shtetl* (town) of Świenciany, where a good part of his family resided. He might have gone on teaching in the local Yiddish *gimnazjum* (academic high school), and then departed in due course for Warsaw, with its large Bundist organization and plenty of opportunities for young energetic party members.

But this was not to be. In the early 1920s, Poland was swept by strikes and outbreaks of violence to which the police responded with massive arrests that made no distinctions between *bona fide* strikers and hooligans, let alone between socialists and communists.

For my father, active in a left-wing student organization that included both socialists and communists, the ground began to shake under his feet. On the advice of fellow Bundists, he went underground and then decided to flee abroad.

To this day I rue my failure to ask him about the details of his escape, which apparently had its share of exciting features, including donning a false beard, obtaining a false passport, departing for Danzig (Gdansk) under his new name (and new guise) and then boarding a train to Berlin. In the German capital, the local social democratic comrades provided him with money to enable him to proceed, though exactly where to was not clear.

How my father got to Trieste I don't know, but I vaguely remember him telling me once that he took an instantaneous liking to this vibrant city, electing to stay a while and then go on *vu di oygn veln mikh trogn* – where his eyes would lead him. As it turned out, the only country prepared to give him a visa was British Palestine, and so he boarded a Greek boat, landing ten days later in Haifa. Once there, he wired his young bride to join him. Which she did, two months later. In due course, I arrived on the scene.

My parents rented a small apartment a short walk from the Tel Aviv beach. The apartment, which I do not remember but which was described to me by my parents, was small, but had all the basic amenities of houses built during the first decades of the century, when Tel Aviv was expanding rapidly. The apartments generally contained one or two bedrooms (ours had one), a dining area, running (cold) water, a primitive kitchen and a bathroom. There were food stores close by, so my mother did not have to walk too far with a small child to get the necessary supplies. The beach was inviting and my mother would spend many hours on it, looking after me and then coming home and preparing dinner for when my father came back from work. I have a photograph of one of those blissful days, with my mother smiling languidly and myself, curled at her feet, laughing into the camera. They had very little money, but she later recalled this period as the happiest time in her life. And no doubt it was. Politically, Palestine was enjoying relative tranquility. My father worked hard, digging ditches, hauling stones in the rising Tel Aviv harbor, distributing Yiddish books, and he earned a bit extra for the odd article he wrote for the Warsaw Bund newspaper, *di naye folkstsaytung*. But my parents were young, the neighbors, many of them the same age, were friendly, I was healthy and apparently good-humored, the sun shone almost every day, and there were no Polish winters (or policemen) to worry about.

My father, who like nearly all Jewish boys of his generation had attended a *kheyder* (religious school), boasted more than a smattering of Hebrew, but my mother had none, and had to take a course designed for non-Hebrew-speaking adults, a forerunner of the

later *ulpan* designed to assimilate refugees into Israeli society. They spoke Yiddish to each other, but Hebrew to me, since Yiddish was frowned upon by the leaders of the nascent Jewish state. (Most of them had grown up in that language – Ben Gurion’s first job upon arriving in Palestine in 1906 was to edit a Yiddish newspaper for his fellow settlers – but regarded it as part of a distasteful Diaspora legacy to be supplanted by Hebrew, the language of their ancient forebears and of the Jewish future.) My parents had no sympathy for the political ideas of Zionism nor for the zealous efforts to create a new Hebrew culture, but for the time being they concluded, sensibly, that I should be raised in the same language as all other children around us. My mother even learned a few children’s songs, which she would sing to me at bedtime. One of them, “The Beautiful Bird” (*tsipor yafa*), I remember to this day, since it remained a favorite of hers long after we had left Palestine and Hebrew behind us.

A brief digression: More than seven million Jews lived in the Russian Empire before the Revolution, and the countries later carved out of it – Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Ninety percent of them, according to the census of 1898, claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue. In the census taken in independent Poland in 1931, 79 percent of all Jews also claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue.

For most Zionists around the turn of the century, Yiddish held few attractions. Many were linguistically assimilated (Herzl himself, the founder of the world Zionist movement, did not know a word of Yiddish), and many of those who knew it scorned Yiddish as a *zhargon*, a debased dialect of German rather than a *bona fide* language. A few Labor Zionist organizations, while insisting that Hebrew be enshrined as the language of the Jewish Homeland, nevertheless acknowledged the importance of Yiddish in the diaspora, and used it in their political and educational work. One of these organizations, the Left Poale Zion, an offshoot of the far larger middle-of-the-road Poale Zion Party, embraced a militant Marxism and a sycophantic attitude towards the Soviet Union, and called for an Arab-Jewish state with Yiddish as one the country’s official languages, Arabic the other. (This bizarre amalgam was finally abjured in 1950, when the Left Poale Zion party was merged into the left-wing but more conventional Zionist Mapam.)

The Bund, however, gravitated towards the use of Yiddish in all its activities. The vast majority of workers spoke Yiddish, and the Bund would address them in their language. This, said its leaders, was essential if they were to reach their constituents, and also persuade them of the *khshives* (dignity) of their language and of their Jewish identity in general.

In time this largely pragmatic approach turned into outright championship of Yiddish and the expanding Yiddish secular culture. The Bund set about building Yiddish schools, libraries, summer camps, and other institutions. All these endeavors were subsumed under the theory of *doikayt* (loosely, “here-ness”) and “national cultural autonomy”, advocated by the Bund in conditions of semi-legality in Tsarist Russia, and also after it metamorphosed into an open political party in independent Poland.

The Bund became the major champion of *Yiddishkayt* in Poland. Many Yiddish writers and poets found in the Bund a source of grateful readers and a support system: the Bund was ready to send them on lecture tours all over the country. A number of them joined the party, while others preferred to be known as “sympathizers,” technically unaffiliated but active participants in Bund programs. Many sympathizers lent their support to the Bund at times of the party’s greatest trials, voted for the Bund in elections to Jewish and general administrative bodies (such as city councils), and some wrote verse which, set to music (also by Bund sympathizers), was incorporated into the repertoires of choral groups, Yiddish schools, and the Bund’s children and youth organizations, SKIF (Socialist Children’s Association) and *Tsukunft* (Future).

It is this distinctive world that my parents left in the early 1920s, and to this world they decided to return in late 1929. Why return? To begin with, as I noted earlier, they had come to Palestine not as fervent Zionists, and not (like so many others) because life in Poland was gradually getting grimmer, especially for Jews, so they had no ideological commitment to remain. Their life in Palestine, whatever the lure of the Mediterranean beaches, was not exactly easy, especially for my father. But the most compelling reason was an invitation from the Bund to take over as administrator of a new children’s institution established a few years earlier in a wooded village some ten miles from Warsaw: the Medem Sanatorium, named for Vladimir Medem, a revered leader of the Bund. My mother, who held a diploma in nursing, was told that for her, too, a place would be found in the new institution. Anyway, lying on the sand and hauling stones did not represent the sort of life my parents were eager to pursue for years without end – especially if the ultimate reward, a Jewish state, was neither very likely nor very alluring in the first place. The idea of running an institution dedicated both to improving the physical health of impoverished children and to instilling them with socialist and secular Jewish values was clearly a more attractive proposition.

Besides, the atmosphere in Palestine had deteriorated. The nationalism of a people whom thirty years earlier the founders of Zionism had casually dismissed (“a land without people for a people without a land,” in one of Zionism’s catchiest slogans) was

growing, though most Zionist leaders disregarded it. Thus the heads of the Jewish workers' organizations maintained that the Arabs had the Jews to thank for their rising standard of living, and ignored the disparity between it and the far more dramatic rise in the Jewish workers' standard of living. In addition, the Zionist leaders did not win Arab friends when they refused to incorporate Arabs into the Histadrut (Zionist trade union organization), thus in fact forcing the Arabs to accept far lower wages than those paid to Jewish workers.

The tensions between the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, and the Arabs escalated, finally erupting in the late 1920s in a series of Arab riots which caused the deaths of 133 Jews and 87 Arabs, and many wounded. This may have proved the last straw for my parents; it certainly seemed to validate the Bund's argument that Jews, however many of them settled in Palestine, would be exposed to a greater threat from a fiercely hostile population of 200 million Arabs than from anti-Semitism in Poland. So my parents decided: they – we – would go home.

After arriving in Poland, we first visited my father's relatives in Vilna. Once the proud capital of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, and still coveted by Lithuania as its ancient capital, Vilna was in those days a poor and provincial city, consisting mainly of wooden houses, with horse-drawn carriages (*droshky*) providing the only means of transportation. We spent much of the time around a big table with a large samovar at its center, sipping tea from glasses, and helping ourselves to large portions of *varenie* (jam, mostly strawberry). I fell in love with this wonderful custom and years later, in Warsaw, I kept imploring my parents to buy a samovar. (They never did.) Vilna felt very much a Russian city, despite the fact that Russians constituted only a minority of its multi-ethnic population: one could hear a lot of Russian on the streets, as well as Polish, Yiddish and Lithuanian. Two years later, on another trip to Vilna, I paid my first visit to a dentist, who operated his drill by stepping on a foot-pedal. All these years later, I shudder at this grim memory, but he thought that I behaved admirably, and told my waiting parents that they obviously had a *tayern bokher* – a dear lad. This pleased both of them, especially my mother. The first stay in Vilna ended after a week or so. We proceeded to Warsaw, or rather to Miedzeszyn, where we moved into a graceful villa abutting the Medem Sanatorium. Whether I should attend nursery school or kindergarten in Miedzeszyn, or whether we should take up residence in Warsaw, was waived for the time being: it was summertime, and there was time to decide.

I shed my first language, Hebrew, shortly after our arrival from Palestine, and switched smoothly to Yiddish. In the process I forgot my Hebrew – not unusual in young children – except for two words that remained firmly imbedded in my

vocabulary: *ima* (mother) and *aba* (father). I continued using these words as long as my parents lived, often with diminutive Yiddish endings: *ima-le* and *aba-le*. This oddity was also accepted by our closest relatives and friends, who would inquire, in deference to me, *vos makht di ima?* (how is mother?), or *vu iz der aba?* (where is father?). It never occurred to me, even in my adult years, that there was something unusual about the use of these terms, nor did it seem to occur to my parents. In the kindergarten, the so-called *frelóvka* (frelOOvka, named after Friedrich Froebel, the early 19th-century founder of the kindergarten) and later on, in the Yiddish elementary school, my parents were designated conventionally as *mame* and *tate*.

I spoke Yiddish, of course – but which Yiddish? This seemingly odd, even esoteric question mattered a great deal, because the various dialects of Yiddish had fascinating social implications, in my own case affecting my relations with school friends on the one hand, and with my parents and their friends on the other. In central Poland and in Warsaw the predominant dialect was the “Polish” one, while the northeastern (*litvak*, or Lithuanian) dialect prevailed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Northern Russia. (The “Galician” dialect, somewhat close to the Polish, was spoken in the Ukraine and southern Russia.) The differences consist mostly in the pronunciation of vowels and diphthongs, but also in the use of certain words incomprehensible to the speakers of one dialect or the other. Above all, a social connotation adhered to one and the other. Many of the intelligentsia, educated in Lithuania, regarded the Warsaw dialect as uncouth, spoken by the uneducated classes. This, of course, was a slur: the great novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer, for instance, spoke pure Warsaw Yiddish. *Litvak* Yiddish, however, was what might be called the Oxbridge version, almost identical with “classical” or “literary” Yiddish, as authenticated by the leading Yiddish linguists, most of whom, not surprisingly, hailed from Lithuania and Latvia.

Nonetheless, a slur is a powerful thing, and when I later attended public school in Warsaw, I dared not use the Litvak dialect, lest my school mates (a fairly rough bunch) mock me as a snob. On the other hand, once I stepped over the threshold of our home, I could speak only the Yiddish of my parents and most of their friends. I was altogether fluent in the Warsaw dialect, but my friends knew that I wasn’t really one of them, and taunted me repeatedly for my “Litvak airs.” My situation vis-à-vis my classmates resembled my position in the sanatorium as the deputy director’s son: on the one hand I wanted to belong to the majority, on the other I felt somewhat superior to it. The result was pain, resentment, envy, and a sense of persecution. When I walked home, a small band of juveniles always followed me, hollering derisive remarks (*litvak khazer* – Litvak pig - was one of the favorites). Nevertheless I loved the school with a passion and would

often regale my parents with stories of my scholastic achievements and various school events.

Then there was the matter of Polish, the state language, which all children were expected to know, and which was also used in the courses of Polish literature and Polish history in the Yiddish secular schools, where all other subjects, from geography to arithmetic to biology, were taught in Yiddish. My knowledge of Polish was flawed, since most of my friends spoke Yiddish and only a few of them came from assimilated homes where Polish predominated; furthermore, I had no gentile friends at all. This did not stop me from being a rather fervent Polish patriot: lack of contact with gentiles was due to the prevailing anti-Semitism, and that, my Bundist mentors taught me, was but a passing phase that would have no place in the future socialist society.