THE ROADS TO GRAYEVO

Some research in Poland reveals the persistence of memory, the unquenchable nature of hope.

By Michael H. Levin

THIS is a story of the making of a novel. It begins with my marriage 21 years ago. I thought I was acquiring a spouse, not a family; my father-in-law's past was beside the point. I took him for what he seemed: a short, bald hydrant of a man, big-eared and broad-handed, fluent in six languages but equally quick to listen, possessed of fierce loyalties, an explosive temper, and the ironclad opinions of the self-educated, who loved food and order, despised socialists and stupidity, and appeared mainly concerned with defending his daughter's virtue. ("Don't you think it's late enough?" he shouted into the street from an upper window when I returned her after one date; we were 22 years old at the time.) Of course, I knew he'd grown up in Russian Poland, prospered in Leipzig in the Twenties, fled Germany for Palestine in 1936, reaching America two years later. But these were mere details; misled by his humor and generosity, I missed the significance of the smugglers' knots he tied about gift packages, the ice in those steady gray eyes.

Yet, as children arrived and I prospered in turn, hints of a story began to accumulate, over Passover dinners, at grade-school graduations, during walks in the woods: smuggling and starvation, the bad black times of Tsar and revolution, dazzling gambles and hair's-breadth escapes, Nazi chauffeurs, vanished treasures, five successful careers in four countries before he was 40—a tale of menace and splendor, in which choices became floods that swept characters and countries away.

He knew exactly who he was and reveled in his life, immensely satisfied with its ending. As he approached 80 and reached out for witnesses, we began taping those recollections, finding (when we checked) that he had never forgotten or exaggerated a fact. In 1982, we went back together to Leipzig, discovering that bombs had not altered Bach's city or erased former footprints from that capital of the mind.

Slowly, a narrative took shape, based on that life but freely invented: not a Holocaust story, though the event shadowed its horizon, but one whose theme was more resonant. Who were those people who had everything to lose but saw what was coming, who swallowed that risk and got out? What special histories let them see the truth whole and act on it, instead of rationalizing danger away?

So as the story solidified, it reached farther into the past. First to 1914, which toppled three dynasties and made Bolshevism, Zionism, Nazism—in fact, all the isms of the twentieth century—possible. Then to the source: Grayevo, 1900, town of his birth, Polish border village on the Prussian frontier, half Jewish and the rest mostly Polish peasants, in Holy Russia but not of it, last stop on the Imperial Railway, straggling across its horseshoe-shaped ridge like a crayfish, beached on the shoals of the Pale.

From maps and tales, I knew it: Bath Street, Synagogue Street, the clean spire of the Polish church on Market Square, the bulbous turrets of the Russian church behind, a swampy lake at its center, cemeteries and barracks beyond. I filled those streets with its denizens: soldiers, thugs and peasants, border police and Tsarist bureaucrats, tanners, traders, petty bankers, smugglers of goods and people, men and women who lived by their wits or their hands, who saw God or sought to bargain

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with Him. I found those lives were like lamps on the deck of a liner, *Imperial Russia*, vivid in themselves but incomprehensible without context, without the politics; for in that place, every act was political—the rules had to be broken for men to survive.

As draft followed draft and more pages were kept than discarded, up sprang a subplot, through which walked those with longer views—Peter Stolypin, the great Romanov Prime Minister; Aleksandr Sveshnikoff, commander of the Imperial Fortress at Ossovietz; the Tsar himself. Meanwhile, that liner continued its casual, retrievable, self-hypnotized slide toward disaster. Yet, the focus remained Grayevo (in Polish, *Grajewo*), through which flowed the currents of the century, over which the Eastern Front would roll.

Two months before my father-in-law's death, we sat planning our trip there, his thick thumb tracing the vanished Prussian border. For the hundredth time, he laughingly corrected my pronunciation—"No, no: Schuchin, not Szczuczyn"—pointing out the Masurian Lakes, the encircling forests filled with elk, the rail line from Bialystok by which we might arrive. But his cancer returned faster than our tickets, and that arrival never occurred. He swore when he was only 18 years old that he would never die in Poland; our voyage would have broken that vow.

Yet, the trip had to be taken, and not merely as legacy. I'd been writing about pre-War Grayevo for nearly six years now. I had my maps, my photo files, my volumes of oral history. Few living persons knew this place in northeast Poland better. But there was only one way to be sure. How close was imagining to that reality? What difference would the gaps make; what unexpected transformations flow from walking its streets? At a distance of 70 years, with my hundred words of Polish and instinct rather than memory to lead me, could I even tell? I had lost my guide and companion, the Virgil to direct me through that underworld. Still, there was one consolation: even if I went solo, I would not be traveling alone.

I thought I would detest Poland. I knew too much, I believed. Knew it was devout and dirt-poor and face-down in the dust, the average annual income under $1,100, street-sweepers paid more than doctors, a public demoralized by martial law. Knew that history of hatred—anti-Jewish boycotts, Easter massacres, the denunciations of Jews as traitors, the recurrent bans on their travel, education, professions, the pogroms against survivors returned from the death camps. Had read the ukases creating a Pale of Settlement—a binding, deliberately undeveloped residence zone—to protect Russia from Jewish contamination. Could recite the Imperial circulars authorizing expulsions, the taking of Jewish hostages, different-size signs each week for Jewish shops. Was aware that America abrogated its commercial treaties in 1911 when Imperial Russia refused to receive United States diplomats bearing "Israelite" names. Had discovered an anti-Semitism so virulent it made Jim Crow seem like *eau de toilette*, allowed pillars of society to make sober parliamentary speeches urging that "Jews must be placed under such conditions they will gradually die out. . . . They are as dangerous to the life of mankind as wolves, scorpions, poisonous spiders, and similar creatures, which are destroyed because they are deadly for human beings."

And to top this all off, I had just seen *Shoah* ("Annihilation"), Claude Lanzmann's 10-hour epic on Poland and the Holocaust, in which grinning peasants explained how they got their nice houses while Jews being deported "prayed to Jesus and Mary for relief."

My father-in-law and I planned a trip to Grayevo, but he swore he would never die in Poland, and his cancer returned faster than our tickets.

Perhaps I would have detested Poland, if I'd gone there straight from the States. But I arrived after 10 days in Russia, where the dead hand of the past ruled and people had nothing, were thoroughly cowed. "We've seen two springs and three winters," they said, excited by *glasnost* but skeptical of its chances, fearful their names would appear on some list. "Khrushchev at least had Zhukhov behind him," they added. And they told the joke of four men with only one olive for their vodka, who pass the dish and sniff it before each round. Until a fifth arrives and pops the olive in his mouth. "Oh," they say disdainfully, corking the bottle. "*He* came to eat."

In Moscow, there was no fruit, though it was summer; in Leningrad, little meat in the stores. Racks of shoes in the vestibules of middle-class apartments were patched and torn with decades of wear. There were splendors in Russia, but they were mostly pre-Revolutionary.

Yet, the Government poured billions of rubles into restoring those splendors, for the same reason they'd been built: to show the world Russia was civilized, a power of international rank. While the people went without—without decent clothes, boots, housing, or medicine, without information or services except those dispensed by capricious lines, without electricity, heat, or hot water for several weeks, regular as clockwork each year. Without, mostly, mobility or hope. The U.S.S.R. could only be understood as a less-developed country with a huge defense superstructure and inferiority complex—"Upper Volta with rockets," someone called it. It was the old, old story, Tsarism with a different face: a class system whose religion was privilege and *making connections*, where individuals did not matter except as part of some larger cause. An ordinary Russian was more discriminated against than a black before civil rights—could not travel in his own country or enter an international hotel or shop at hard-currency stores that actually had goods, much less make his views known. He might have money, but unless he was someone or knew someone or happened to be lucky, summer melons, a lamb chop, tickets to the Bolshoi, a side-mirror to replace the one stolen from his car remained unavailable.

"Tch," someone warned, blocking our camera from a long line of Muscovites that formed out of nowhere for Ecuadorian bananas sold from cartons on the streets. One never knew when the rules would change, in whose hands a photograph might turn up. Gorbachev's attempt to restructure that society—a restructuring based on openness and merit—would amount to a second Russian Revolution if it prevailed.

But in Socialist Poland, many farms were private, not collective; Warsaw vendors sold kilos of mushrooms to all comers, from corner stalls bursting with fruit. Any Pole with a dollar could spend it freely; locals packed the currency shops in a dozen dusty towns to buy Marlboros, Western clothing, books. No churches were shuttered, and Solidarity—officially banned in 1980—seemed resurgent in informal networks, constant talk. Faith and union remained potent forces, far more than social institutions, funnels through which public opinion spoke back. And the Poles we met were wonderful—open, honest, defiant, romantic, brave.

So while the sample was limited, I wound up—not exactly falling in love with Poland, but impressed with its fluid energy, looking forward to the next date. That was the first surprise. The second was: while I'd imagined Grayevo almost perfectly, the transformations from being there took place nonetheless. "Prostrate" Poland was exporting potatoes to Russia; there was a powerful symbolism in that.

As we speed north on the two-lane highway from Warsaw, darting down the left shoulder past rubber-tired wagons filled with logs and giggling peasant girls, we are surrounded by the green and gently rolling Polish countryside—a combination of Amish terrain, Maine light, and the vales of Provence, with flocks of geese amid alfalfa and strawberries, rows of alders guarding the side roads, fields dotted by hayricks out of Van Gogh. Palominos graze on slanted hills beneath piled white clouds in a high steel sky. It is a scene whose proper sounds are the creak of wheels on cobblestones, the soft clop of hooves at night.

You would not think this earth was fertilized with blood, that it seethes with death and remembrance. But each person we meet knows when the Crusader castle on his hilltop was broken into, what hours the S.S. or political commissars appeared. That collective memory embraces invading waves of Swedes and Tatars, Teutonic Knights slaughtering villages for amber, Imperial Hussars shooting their way through Warsaw, the thickets of "martyrdom sites" and places of public execution in hundreds of forest towns where Nazis shot, burned, garroted, or hanged half the inhabitants the day they arrived.

This is a land without natural defenses, caught between killing machines that rolled back and forth over people seen as little more than lice. "Oh," remarked the wife of a former Nazi colonist, asked on *Shoah* how Jews and Poles differed. "The Poles were not exterminated." Yet.

We knew these layers and sought to avoid them; our period was the First War. But avoidance proved impossible. Over downtown Warsaw loomed a 40-story Palace of Culture, thrust like a trident through the heart of the city, a "gift" from Stalin to remind the Poles who was in charge. Our guide the first morning still limped from wading through sewers as a child-courier into the Warsaw ghetto, and averted his head, unable to speak, when asked how much family he lost. An acquaintance that afternoon explained things were much better than when Solidarity was crushed "because then there was no food at all. They poured milk in the Wisla and burned chocolates in the forest, because after a few months of this, people become quiet. . . . And it was our Army that did it," she added fiercely. "Because Russia said, 'If not, we will help you.'"

In this car, bucketing along Highway E12, besides my wife Jean, are our driver, Ryszard, an orphan of 1944, when partisans tried to liberate Warsaw and the Wehrmacht leveled the city. And our translator, Aleksandra, herself half-Jewish. Whose parents vanished in Dachau and Majdanek. Who was sent as an Aryan breeder to Braunschweig "because I had the blond hair, the blue eyes." Who grew up in British D.P. camps but chose return rather than England "because I am Polish forever." And refused special rations under martial law, telling her husband: "If other Poles are starving, we can starve, too. We must not accept this food!"

We begin at the end because that's the way the road runs: at the death camp of Treblinka, where most of the Jews of Grayevo disappeared. Piling out of the car, we're met by Wincenty Trebicki, director of province history, a tall, 35-year-old Pole with a lean, handsome face. At once, we're immersed in *Shoah*, taking the paths those cameras tracked, engaged in an act of social archaeology, sifting deposited layers for context, for truth. We walk along the Road of Death, see the unloading dock, the sites of gas chambers and burning pits. The place is quiet as a cathedral. No one comes here but schoolchildren, Wincenty complains; Treblinka is off the tourist route.

Remnants of bones rise to the surface of the soil in bits and flakes of percolated white. We raise that dust, returning. Wincenty recites figures; he knows the number of transports, the precise hours they started, is sure 1.5 million rather than 800,000 died here. His eyes gleam, his steel tooth flashes in the sunlight. He is obsessed with the subject, which has devoured him. The numbers pour out, a kind of exorcism. "And you may not like this," he concludes: "But I am convinced Germany's postwar prosperity is based on the gold from these camps. . . . Two hundred forty boxcars of gold and jewels from that dock to the Reich in one week of 1943. Three weeks later, one hundred seventy cars. . . ." The trees sway. His voice trails off in the silence.

Going out, we pass a tall, dark-haired woman entering hand-in-hand with a little blond girl in pinafore and pigtails. She shouts something over her shoulder. "This is my wife," apologizes Kasiemierz, our local guide. "She was in Ravensbruck. She says, 'Tell them it's all true!'"

Only when we reach our car do we discover one of our party missing. It is Aleksandra, the tough tour manager who's guided a thousand trips. She has stopped

MICHAEL H. LEVIN

THEN AND NOW

The main street of Grayevo as it looks today—and as it appeared on this old post card.

by the marker at the entrance. She remains there, tracing its incisings with her finger, mouthing those words as though engraving them on her brain.

We roll into Grayevo as the sun drops westward, down a long curved jumble of gray stucco houses, none more than two stories high. It is July 15—two years to the day since my father-in-law's death, and the 577th anniversary of the first Battle of Tannenberg, when a band of Lithuanians and local peasants defeated the Teutonic Knights 10 miles from here to establish the Kingdom of Poland. The next Battle of Tannenberg opened World War I and the collapse of the Russian Empire.

We head for the spire of the Polish Church, which towers above Market Square exactly as it's supposed to. But the square is strange, both smaller and more leafy than collected memories, planted with alders and ornamental benches now. We can spot no other landmarks; the mental map seems upside down. Where is the iron fountain in this square before us, the "best pump" from which Grayevers drew water for their tea? Where are Bath and Bogusze Streets, those lanes of blacksmiths' and butchers' shops, haunts of hereditary enemies whose rivalry shaped the town? Most important, where is the synagogue?

We've driven down what has to be Shulgasse (Synagogue Street), but nothing we've passed resembles the imposing structure of pink-and-white marble with Romanesque columns that dominates the sketches and photographs. We know the synagogue exists—that it was not destroyed during the Nazi occupation but successively became a jail, a union hall, a meat-packing plant. If we can find it, we can find everything—the bath-house behind it, the street to which that structure gave its name, the central lake and meadow with the Green Hill shielding the village from the cemetery and its dead.

"Ask the old men; the old women won't know anything," Aleksandra commands, waving us away from a group of *babushkas* before the church. We advance through the square like bloodhounds, a tight little phalanx with a blond, pug-nosed Pole at our head. But before we can speak to anyone, heritage tells. The square and its tributaries are asphalt; the side streets are dirt and cobbles, as they've been since the beginning. "Here's something!" cries Jean, charging down one of these. We plunge downhill after her, emerging on a lane of ancient Russian hovels fronting a broad expanse of savannah grass. Three hundred yards away, a low bluff rises, crowned by 10-story apartment blocks.

This could be the Meadow, but five times enlarged. If it is, where's the water? where are Kasheruvke Creek, which should gurgle immediately before us; the lake village youths fished in? The street sign is useless; it reads Ulitsa Dolna (Lower Street). It would be useless even in 1910, for the names by which we know these alleys were not the ones posted when Russia ruled this zone. We need human memory, a living signpost to the past.

Aleksandra begins collaring passersby, darting in and out of doorways, more excited than we at this proximity to buried existence. "Where's the oldest man on this street?" she confronts a man mooching past, hands in his pockets.

"*Prozshe—stary?*" he replies, startled. "He died last month." He has whiskey on his breath and a patch of dried blood on his neck from bad shaving. But he draws himself up with the dignity of an admiral.

"No!—the oldest one *living*!"

We advance through the main square of Grayevo like bloodhounds, a tight little phalanx with a blond, pug-nosed Pole at our head.

He indicates a toothless profile dozing at a window in the sun. Aleksandra raps on the glass, rousts its owner out. He comes to the door with a long iron key and a longer monologue, complaining that hooligans wrecked his garden, they never should have filled the lake. She waits for an opening, reels off the questions, hers and ours. He is 84 years old but came here in 1950; knows nothing of the past.

"But what is this street called?"

"Lower Street, of course."

"But what was it called before?"

"Why, Wishniewska—Wash Street."

We look at each other.

"And why Wash Street?"

"Oh, because all the people came to wash there." He points to a square white structure with diamond-shaped windows, three doors up the lane. It is the Jewish ritual bathhouse, and opposite it, edging down from the heights above, is the salmon-hued back of what must be the synagogue, improbably resurrected as the art-deco Kine Relax. We are standing in the middle of Unter-Bad-Gasse (Lower Bath Street); we might have walked its length not knowing where we were.

We dash up that gullied slope, confirming the second water pump, the black-and-white tiles that could only be for bathers, the remains of a little square where Bath and Synagogue Streets meet—*Der Platz*, where my father-in-law lived. A crowd gathers, volunteering data: we are the first postwar Americans to visit Grayevo, the first Jews since a lone Israeli came here in the Sixties.

In less than an hour, we have most of the pieces. The lake was filled to prevent malaria, after four failed attempts christened it "bottomless." Those apartment blocks stand on the Green Hill and former Jewish cemetery ("when the foundations were dug, they turned up bones"). Barracks still lie beyond them, occupied by "friendly Polish troops" now, in lieu of an Imperial border garrison, for the same reason there's a line of people outside the stationery store: "little shortages of toilet paper, margarine, pepper, to remind us martial law could come again." This big pink building is indeed the synagogue, remade several times but still Grayevo's most impressive structure, now the town's library, video arcade, and youth hall, as well as its cinema. Geography remains social structure—the best houses are on the high ground, where their slops and runoffs foul the less fortunate beneath.

It is scale that has thrown us; though the place still has about 10,000 inhabitants, it is far bigger than we'd thought, more solid and substantial. And something else throws us, too. Though no member of this crowd is 40, they know to the inch, to the minute, where the Jewish ghetto went up in 1941, which Russian slave laborers demolished the graveyard, how "the fascists made Jews jump from the top windows of the synagogue by telling them they'd be safe if they lived." They could not have seen these things; they must have been told them. Collective memory operates on their side, too.

On the highway, we're back in modern Poland, racing through twilight at Ryszard's usual 120 kph toward the closest hotel, in Elk. Three minutes out, we cross the former Prussian border at Bogusze, where my father-in-law's teen-age smuggling team dropped their knapsacks of butter and meat, carting back aspirin, cigarettes, kerosene in return. The architecture changes dramatically, from wood to brick and stone, double Russian

windows to many-paned German ones, roofs of thatch or tin to steep red tiles flared like hat brims. Ladders are fixed to the roof trees, for dislodging the meters of snow that accumulate in this area's bitter winters. The land rises in sensual folds, darker, more prosperous. Swifts, purple martins cut the air.

And, wonder of wonders, there are storks everywhere, black-and-white storks by the hundreds, gliding from copses, patroling the fields for frogs, their orange bills gleaming. Each chimney, every barn supports great twiggy bowls, where chicks are being fed, parents landing. They do not come to Grayevo, which has little open water. But this slice of new Poland hosts more than the rest of Europe combined. Each spring, they arrive, flying thousands of miles from Egypt, to hatch their eggs and depart before fall. In all our interviews, no one mentioned these migratory visions with six-foot wingspans, symbols of faith and fecundity. "If a farmer has a nest, he repairs it each Easter," Aleksandra remarks. "For a voyager to return is the highest good luck."

We do not have much of that luck at the Hotel Mazovski in Elk, formerly Lyk, once the Prussian county seat. We carry our bags several flights to the best room in the joint—a triple (three cots) with a balcony overlooking a smokestack. There's no toilet paper or soap, but an ample stock of coal smoke and flies. Jean comes roaring up the stairs, convinced yellow clouds pouring from the basement mean the establishment's on fire. It is only the boiler, stoked by a manager who "lit the hotel" so we can have hot water. The light in the men's W.C. goes out when the door is shut. The light in the bathroom never goes on; when Jean and Aleksandra finally fix it, balancing on a chair and each others' shoulders in a scene from some Polish joke to reach the 20′ ceiling, they find the tub swimming in gray globs of sediment, as though someone has washed a goat there. We have bolsters, not pillows; blankets woven from lead. For two days, the beds stay unmade; we find one of them shored up by a tree branch. Dinner down the street means a gauntlet of drunks who throw happy arms about our shoulders, exclaiming they "am a musician" or "was been in Cleveland." The front door is locked against disreputables; Aleksandra talks us in.

In this part of the country, Jewish food is really Polish food, it develops: the same chopped fish, pickles, rye bread, borscht. But the main attraction is music, which blares from the next room in an overamplified version of Polish pops. The room fills up with fox-trotting middle-aged couples in shirtsleeves and spaghetti-strap dresses, swigging vodka like water. A bottle crashes to the floor. It is Tuesday, nearly midnight. How can they wake for work tomorrow? "This is the shame of Poland," says Aleksandra, sadly. "That in a city of 30,000, they can find nothing else to do."

Nor is there much luck the next morning, which begins with what Poles call Viennese eggs—half-raw and served in a warm glass with a dash of butter and pepper, the original emetic so far as I'm concerned. Things brighten with the arrival of our local guide, Tadeusz, a historian whose field happens to be the Imperial

GRAYEVO, 1900

An excerpt from 'Swallow the Wind'

MICHAEL H. LEVIN

Spears of fir *in a dense Polish forest near Grayevo.*

Avoiding his wife's gaze, Ruben Kolski pinned back the sheet about her bed and stamped morosely to the little window, which was packed with rags to hold back the chill. It looked out on the wide spot called *Platz*, the Place, down the half-cobbled main street with its low, irregular skirmish of buildings, toward the pink-brick synagogue and Market Square. A full moon floated above patched, scudding clouds torn by winds from the Marshes. Wet shingles and paving stones glinted; thatched roofs were ebony pools. There was a faint ring about that disk riding the sky, a breath in the atmosphere, pewter and violet. Far in the distance, past the shallow ridge down which the town straggled, he could just make out the line of Raygrod Forest, spears of fir black in the moonlight.

Civie pressed wet thighs against the thick, absorbent clout between her legs, stanching the flow. She did not have milk yet, just a clear thin liquid, crystallized in the corner of the baby's open mouth. When the milk came, her flow would stop. After so many children, she did not need to be told that.

No, or other things, she thought. Lives were unknowable. You could never fully grasp them. They forever surprised you, like Ruben. They would always grow strange to you, as her daughters were growing. As her son Beryl had grown, that wild boy unstoppable as a flood stream, whose very name was wiped from the Kolski litany. You scratched and hoped and loved and fought, not knowing whether the center was touched, if the center was sound. Where was he now? she wondered. With every birth his face floated back to her. Both faces, the placid newborn and the electric, furious youth with smoldering eyes, whose shock of black hair curled off in all directions from the heat in his brain. Icons of hope and dread, ambiguous terror of beginnings. Her throat closed up at them. One never knew where it would end. Or worse: what might come before the ending.

She knew this warm, solid weight at her breast, though. He was her flesh, her own. She would nourish him, strengthen him, lavish on him her heat and ambition. He would not, she was sure, be ordinary, as perhaps, perhaps the others were. After all, the moon wore rings tonight, a star had fallen over the village. That had to mean something.

He was her own, her dearest. Until he too grew strange to her.

"Ruben," she said to that broad back, in a voice steady and unswerving as the current of a river. "This is the new century. This is our first child of it. We will call him Hersh-Laybl—Stag-Lion. Because he will need the swiftness of a deer and the heart of a lion, for the troubles of this world."

That was the way Hersh's mother told the story, elaborated and embroidered, redacted and reconstructed in a thousand tellings, on frigid nights, before peat fires, in her deep bed, beneath the goose quilt, during the father's endless trips buying horses in Great Russia.

As he later discovered, however, she omitted some important facts.

This material, from "Swallow the Wind," Michael Levin's novel-in-progress, is printed with permission. Copyright © 1987 by Michael H. Levin. The setting is Grayevo in 1900, the evening Hersh, the protagonist, is born.

Russian effort to control pre-War smugglers —who forgets his breakfast, realizing today will not be another tour of the lakes. "The headquarters was a bookshop in Suvalki!" he cries excitedly, scribbling out sources on smuggling. "There, they left border passes, to be used for new people. Each farmhouse charged separately, like your underground railroad. Sometimes, the victims were left naked in the road!"

But the day seems to plummet when, speeding back toward Grayevo, our windshield, struck by a stone, cracks like pond ice and begins dropping in shards on the dashboard. In Russia, a new windshield would take a month; in official Poland, a week. In either case, we'd be doomed, traveling alone. But Ryszard is a master fixer as well as an expert driver, with contacts across the country from his days as a member of the national motorcycle team. He will make the car good and meet us in Grayevo, with a little help from his friends. "And we," says Aleksandra in a burst of improvisation, looking at the rest of us, "we shall take the train!"

And so it happens that, purely by chance, we travel the six kilometers from Prostki to Grayevo by the same route my father-in-law followed on his smuggling runs to Koenigsburg, the path by which he smuggled himself over the border to start a new life in Germany the summer of 1919. I know each inch of that route, though I've never seen it. Yet, because we take it, everything about this day is subtly changed, too.

The double tracks run south-southeast, straight as arrows into the past. From the window of the train, Tadeusz notes the frontier, marked by hummocks that once were earthworks; an Orthodox cross where some Russian general fell that climactic first year of the war. We slide into Grayevo Station, past the embankment where Zelde, Queen of Contraband, lived, convenient to sacks hurled from mailcars. The station itself is a palace, a hundred yards of neoclassic grace with pilasters and fanlights and moldings where crystal chandeliers once hung above a vaulted restaurant, its ochre façades peeling now, a remnant of faded glory, confirming again the truth of told tales.

And then we walk—for five hours, out Station Street, past the Hepners' steam mill, by the Catholic cemetery, along the parade ground whose guardhouse still bears the proud shadow of a screaming double eagle on its wall. We find the main water pump, footpaths through the Meadow, the remaining *kuznia*—a dark hole of a smithy with coke smoldering on an iron table, nineteenth-century implements, and horses waiting to be shod. We locate the apartment over Abramsky's bakery on Market Square—still a bakery—where my father-in-law read and dreamed. We visit the Kine Relax, from which all traces of a synagogue have been obliterated but whose librarians race to pull monographs on Grayevo's history, kissing Aleksandra's hand.

We have all the places now, the size and layout of the town, its texture and look and smell. We expected shards, found whole blocks and buildings. Only the people are missing; though Zelde, Abramsky, Hayim the Thief walk in our heads, nothing here acknowledges their existence, no physical evidence confirms they've passed by. That colorful, multifarious community has been rooted out as though it never was.

Yet, even this is about to be remedied. We are trudging back toward Market Square along May 3 Constitution Street, which once had no name because it ran only to the Jewish Cemetery. Jean spots another old man, breaking twigs into a bucket behind an ancient wooden house in dense shrubbery. His jowls are unshaven, his hands are grimy; his pants zipper is broken, his cracked shoes crusted with dirt. Yet, he wears a gray suit jacket, with all three buttons buttoned.

We ask the usual polite questions. How old is his house? How long has he lived there? Do any of these names mean anything? And, as usual, the last-minute queries are the most important. Yes, he says, the flats across the street were the cemetery. But they went up only in 1969, after the town's borders were extended. He was the first to protest that construction, eventually stopped until the bones were collected and given a decent burial.

Where's the burial site?

One of the foundations, he's no longer sure.

Is anything left?

He shakes his head, rubs his jaw.

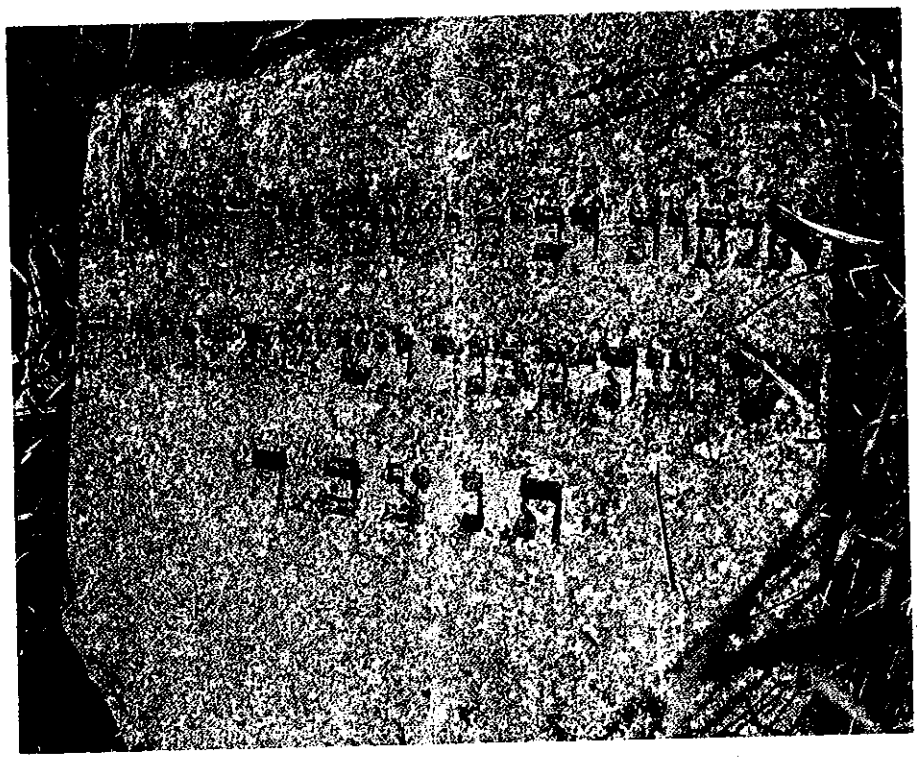
"Well, yes," he says slowly, "in my field." He leads us through the shrubs to what can only be a tombstone, face down against a retaining wall, far too heavy to move.

All five of us—Aleksandra, Ryszard, and Tadeusz, too—are frantic with frustration: that stone could be from my father-in-law's family, might belong to Jean's grandfather, who died here in 1940. We are certain of it.

"Is there anything else?"

"Well, yes," says Jan Ciolkiewicz, rubbing his jaw again. "Over there, up the slope."

Tadeusz bounds over the top, swept up in the search, finds and clears a second marker, face up this time, his hands scratched by brambles. It's caked with dirt and in Yiddish, illegible, unphotographable. We scrape it with fingernails, wipe it with Campho-phenique from our emergency kit—the only available liquid—to bring up the letters. The name, however, is not one we recognize.



NORA JEAN LEVIN

IN A POLISH FIELD

The visitors came upon this old tombstone inscribed in Yiddish and surrounded by grass.

And then, Jan drops his bombshell. He is a newcomer, arrived after the Second War. But his wife came here in 1920, has been "collecting things" ever since. She'd be happy to talk about old times tomorrow, when she returns.

So early the next afternoon, after forests and battlefields and considerable debate about whether this additional delay is really worth it, we return for a final hour in Grayevo. Maria Ciolkiewicz is waiting for us on her doorstep: a slim, fineboned woman with porcelain skin and piercing blue eyes and all her own teeth, speaking Polish like music, each syllable clear as crystal, the finest we've heard. She has a speech: she is sorry not to receive us in her house, but it is disordered, she's suffering from breast cancer, lives only for the children. She has pictures of the synagogue and Jewish community from 1915 but could not find them; will copy them later and send them on. Perhaps we should talk in the garden.

I dash ahead, thinking to arrange the chairs. But there are none; we sit in a circle on the grass in a glade in the sunlight, Maria in black turtleneck and slacks and incongruous yellow socks, Aleksandra beside her translating, Jan in the same broken trousers and buttoned jacket, hovering behind. Maria has another speech. She grew up with Jews and went to school with them, wants to stress—raising a finger—how much respect she had for them, their charity and ethics. Their strict morality changed her life, made her want to join a convent before deciding to help people. Starting with Jan, she adds, whom she rescued from vodka, helped get his degree from the University in Cracow. Now, she's a captain in the fight against alcohol, counsels Grayevo youth, reads them her poems. As a girl, she watched many Jewish funerals from the wall across the street, just as she saw the fascists shoot Jews there. Brought food under her skirts to those prisoners. And to the Russian slaves who carried away the tombstones to build shacks for German workers on her father's land. For that reason, she organized the protests against those apartment blocks, fought the Government in Lomza to give their remains a consecrated rest.

She has a theory, however. She believes sexual repression caused all the instability in Grayevo's Jewish populace. One girl growled like a dog, was fed with a long stick. A young man kept entering shops with a knife. . . .

Jean and I gape at each other across the circle. There's something here, but how to get at it? Is this crusading zeal or madness; admiration or envy? What is this monologue, which both praises virtue and calls it poison? It does not seem to have occurred to Maria that constant fear and starvation, the legislated inability to make a living, could have the same effect.

Maria pauses. We ask one question. Then the names start spilling out, and we know we've struck gold. Of course, she knew Hayim, he was a competitor of her father's, sold corn to the garrison, had a funny beard. Froyim took her photograph, Abramsky read novels; she'll show us their shops. Yes, there were *kuznias* on Bath Street—they're houses and barns now. Hepner was tall and elegant; she saw him killed with his mother, dunked in boiling tar. The main floor of the bathhouse was for everybody, only above for Jews; she knows because the top floor went unused after the war. There was a story about that. . . . There is a legend about this. . . .

The circle becomes a magic ring, peopled with phantoms. The hour stretches to three, lunch and our schedule forgotten. Tadeusz disappears, returns with a bag of *Pfeffernusse*, duly passed around. We take Maria in the car on a grand tour of Grayevo, verifying our guesses, finding Froyim's studio, the old Imperial post office, a dozen other sites. The phantoms come with us, joking and arguing behind. Like some vanished civilization, their whole world has remained present, just below the surface, waiting to be exhumed.

As a girl, Maria Ciolkiewicz saw fascists shoot Jews and watched many Jewish funerals. She also brought food under her skirt to the prisoners.

One moment in Warsaw brings these layers together. Waiting in line for a rare taxi after a four-star dinner our last night in Poland, Jean and I are approached by an overaged "student." He has been to the U.S. and G.B., he says in English. He knows Poland "is small country, far away, must help itself." He thinks Americans hate Ronald Reagan, but Reagan understands democracy is a minority, how the Russians don't care about people. So, no, he doesn't hate Germans; Russia's the problem. "And I will tell you the truth," he whispers hoarsely, leaning close: "Ask any Pole, he will agree. . . . It would be better to fight and die in a nuclear war than to go on living like this."

At that instant, a fat German couple bolts from the back of the queue and commandeers a cab which has just pulled up. It's an outrageous grab that insults our 20-minute wait. Jean launches herself at the door, grabs the man's arm, hurling curses through the window. He rolls it shut, smiling smugly as the vehicle pulls away. A chorus of jeers follows the departing taillights. "Pigs like this," our companion shrugs, "they are the same all under." But when a *milizia* car swings past, he averts his face. "Is not good to be seen here," he mutters.

Trudging to our hotel beneath a full moon, I realize I've misconstrued my book. I thought it was about resilience and survival, clenched lives exploding to an open future, a war that turned raffishness and respectability upside down. But it's also about a special kind of courage, the choice most Americans have never had to make: drawing the line around what's acceptable, between what one believes and what must be fought with every fiber. Maria sneaking food to prisoners on pain of instant death; Aleksandra's husband declaring he would not try Solidarity leaders as a career military judge because martial law was immoral; the [redacted] head of a Warsaw orphanage refusing to abandon his Jewish wards at the gates of Treblinka because "their needs are greater than mine"—here was a sanctity of individual choice only fiction could address. For fiction is more than getting to change the ending. It is the most democratic, and hence most subversive, art: it insists every life is not merely important but infinitely valuable, worth telling.

Of course there were ambiguities. We appeared to these Poles as nobility, clear-eyed, wealthy, unafraid. How would they have treated us if we were Polish, 50 years ago? Did Maria not ask us in because she preferred no Jews in her house? Why was Tadeusz so fascinated by Jewish smugglers? What point was he trying to prove?

But there was no way I could resolve these ambiguities, and in the end they did not matter. Only the sense of that courage mattered, the truth of those conclusions.

I reached those conclusions because of Poland.

I think my father-in-law would approve of them.

I think they're what he was trying to teach me all along. END