I

THE RITUALS: possibly the whole of one's Jewishness, except for God, could be squeezed, as from a vast sponge made of all time and space, into a few concentrated drops of liquid as ritual. Would these drops be honey or acid? For the memorialist in one's nature, they are, naturally, honey or amber, resinous substances that encase and preserve events until they have the dull finish of a minor detail in a painting by an Old Master. Yet for one like myself, who never fully came into belief, who has always felt in matters of religion both exposed and transgressive, the rituals are acid, each drop, as from a cosmic sponge, etching away the small certainties of personal history, corroding portions of the unsheltered self, that self which does not acknowledge God but which God might see, to burn like an open wound in air.

Such equivocal and painful feelings must have come early to me, probably as a result of an awareness of my mother's skepticism concerning matters of religion. For often, the ritual forms and objects of my childhood, familiar as they were, comprised so many hand- and footholds for traversing the self's etched-out landscape, a *terra incognita* of hope and fear, of risk and parental admonition. As a child in the early nineteen forties, six or seven years old in Miami Beach, even as I sat, sunk deep in the velvet plush seats of Temple Emanuel on Washington Avenue, feeling the rapture of the ritual occasions, I sensed I was climbing a cliff face, the very physiognomy of otherness, the pathways of memory by which I skirted the fragile edging of the present. For me, then, the calendar of the Holy Days has always been a matter of nostalgia mixed with a deep, electric panic.

The rituals must occur in time and space—the duration of the Passover supper, for instance, with its stately movement of symbolic substances and courses, the bitter herbs, the matzos, the placing, with one's finger, of the red dots of wine onto the gleaming porcelain of the dinner plate. The child was thrilled: wine, plagues, blood, a transubstantial progression. In the America of the Forties, in my childhood, surrounded by the terrible hearsay of the Holocaust, the tale of Moses' deliverance, the marching out of Egypt (I saw it in my mind much as a Cecil B. DeMille would frame it: a winding, dusty band of Jews in loose flowing robes stretching from horizon to horizon), was a heroics, a portion of collective memory infused with hope.

As I recall, at this same time, as the century touched a near-bottomless void of evil and unspeakable cruelty, I was obsessed with the story of Gideon depicted in one of those Classic Comics of the Bible. The frames of the comic strip presented the story as a series of stirring visual drumbeats: Gideon builds, with his father's goods, with his father's bullocks and stands of trees, the altar to God, stealthily, at night. Gideon throws down his father's altar to Ba'al. And it is Gideon who, with the righteousness of youth, rebukes the Lord's angel: "O my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" Gideon's faith wavers; he demands of the Lord a sign. And again, an angel comes and with a touch of his staff, sets fire to the offering that Gideon has made. Now Gideon hears the voice of the Lord telling him that he, Gideon, shall be the instrument by which the Israelites will be set free. In the clear unambiguous cartoons of the comic book, in the edited speech forms of the dialogue balloons, there was a paradigm of revolutionary fantasy, one which all young people might entertain: to receive a divine call and to take from the corrupted elders and build a new, righteous, less oppressive world. The biblical cadence of Gideon's words as rendered in the King James Bible, which the comic book reproduced, his upbraiding of authority with its repeats of "Lord" and "us," astonished and disturbed me. It hinted at anguish but also justification. It even suggested some new pattern of relationship to my parents, who were, of course, Authority, thus implying to me the possibility of reason or of going beyond the blind willful reactions of childhood.

This story played in my mind against what I could intuit from my overhearings concerning the events in Europe. It entered into me physically, as though recoding the networks of my nerves. I was fascinated by the simple drawings in the comic book of the swords of Gideon and his band. The hilts of these swords, in the comic book artist's renderings, resembled those of well-made, functional butcher knives. Their simplicity was a strange lure to me, and over and over, sometimes consciously, though often unconsciously, I would doodle pencil drawings of the hilts in my notebook or on school paper. There were little ripples for finger grips on one side of these hilts, and as I drew, I could feel my hands closing around them. The sensation was so strong and vivid that I felt an immense empowering every time I was conscious of making such a drawing. The closest I had ever come to such a similar rush of energy occurred when I ran in the school playground, leaping up, half believing I would take off and fly like Superman.

While I was often curious about events in the Bible and asked questions of my Sunday School teachers, I felt absolute clarity on the story of Gideon and played his war games by myself in the nearby yards and parks. Under no circumstances was I going to discuss Gideon with adults, not with stern Rabbi Lehrman or ever-smiling Cantor Berkowitz whose Russian face was all knobby pink-blushed apples—those benevolent dictators of the Temple who, in their roles as our spiritual attendants, bred both affection and ambivalence. For the Law and the Book were in endless strife with the greensward of Flamingo Park and the horseplay of comrades. Gideon was my tale against the officious nature of spiritual duties; it was a tale against the Tale, which I could harbor as my secret and my plan. So it was that an older time could tell against the present if invoked as ritualized story.

Yet even as a child I associated narration with closure, with the last words of the small book a parent held, with its bright pictures and indulgent rhymes, the end of speaking and speaker, synonymous with the end of the child's day which was like death to me, when my mother left off reading me stories as I fell asleep. Here was such confused maelstrom of emotion: to come with heart beating to the story's end and yet to know it as *the* end. When I was very young, this hearing of my mother's voice seemed to produce a little orgasm, a flurry of deep hopes and sadnesses, which this stroking of the tympanum with sound and word had led to. The whole world crammed with a child's fantasies and distortions had been led in through the gate of the ear, that most feminine of organs. And even when I strained against fatigue, it seemed that my hearing was trying to reach out and clasp around this maker of sounds, this speaker who was my mother.

ZALMAN HELLER, my grandfather, Brooklyn, 1944. A rabbi in both Bialystok and New York City, he was given to declaiming the Jewish rituals in, to use Osip Mandelstam's phrase, "railroad prose."

The ritual story, the utterance from the Book of Books, transmitted from before the past had even begun, *in illo tempore*, as the anthropologists put it, was another matter. Such a story, timeless and eternal, had to be divine. Mantled in the sacred, it was meant to be heard and reheard, and, above all, to be pondered. Revelation was, by definition, didactic. As with *my* Gideon, it was meant to be rehearsed in private, in the crypts and fissures of personality where it had uses undreamt of by others. I was a well-behaved child as children go, at least that is how my parents so observed me; but secreted away in me where no one could look was all the black fury of generational difference, a blind will to grow which came together with parent, history, the wars and nights of terror in Europe. Story was its catalyst.

⁂

I return to the ritual supper, a sensorium of people and objects made blurry by sweetish wine. I remember now before me as in a dream the ceremonial lace of the table cloth, the crude, childish illustrations of the *Haggadah*, heavy brass of candlesticks, the brown and white stipples of the matzo. Tastes and sights. And yet these, strong as they are in memory, are not as powerful as the sounds I heard. More than anything else, I remember intonings: my grandfather's dronelike mumbling through prayers and instructions; later, my father's more clearly enunciated sounds.

For my grandfather, a rabbi and teacher, the whole ceremony, all ceremonies, were woven into one continuous chant, a swift, impelled, if muffled, music. A kind of absolute ease that alternately filled me with awe and fright. Safely sheltered by faith, his words could be uttered without impediment, without resistance to their very physicality, the puffs of accented breath, the glottals and dentals of their makeup. Even more, their semantic auras held no sway, it seemed, in my grandfather's consciousness as he recited them. This was very clear in the way he droned the passages, omitting all emphasis of meaning. To use the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's phrase, my grandfather declaimed in "railroad prose," in the art of the sentence coupler. I had the impression that my grandfather felt his responsibility to these passages was *pro forma*, an unquestioning recital of God's command and that portion of God's mind which applied to the ritual supper.

My father's beliefs were less hard and fixed than his father's; he took more seriously each word, tried to feel its exactness, like a solid object held in his mouth, going in fear of the god he was far less comfortable with than was my grandfather. I, who am godless, took much from my father, including this legacy: to seek for the precise word, the secular word, which would deliver.

As a young boy, I had the childhood ambition to be good, to be godly, which meant I identified godliness with the speaking of the male line, the father and grandfather. But I also had a slight speech defect, a kind of *logos interruptus*, which shamed me, not only before the God I imagined then, but also before my mother, a teacher of speech, and so made me unworthy in my own eyes. In my tenth year, my mother, with perfect tact and gentleness, made light of this minor complication in my speech habits, sending me in a casual fashion to see the school speech teacher who effected some correction in my pronunciation. Yet like all children I lived with invented omens and invented codes, fears that transmuted to divine or parental law, and which in my mind separated me out from the rest. To this day I mangle certain words, transpose consonantals, suffer a kind of oral dyslexia, all of which mark me as of the tribe of the fallen. For years I felt reduced to silence whenever I came to a passage marked "In Unison" in the synagogue prayerbooks.

⁂

Stories and poems, not as entities, little narrative eggs, but as layers of sound on paper. In time, the reader goes from one closed loop of narration to another, hearing consonances and dissonances, resolving these or living in their irresolution. There are painful works yet to be written, not about how voices air their tales, but about how the books sit, adjacent to each other, about their cancellations and silences in the mind of a solitary reader.

Always, as I ruminated on my family and its past, I was listening to sounds, to rituals and voices, but I was hearing as well the faint music of closures, of one page laid over another, of a story that had to die so that later another might be voiced. What deadly quiet.

Walter Benjamin, that near-tragic wanderer in the German-Jewish diaspora who in a sense is the patron saint of this writing, wanted to "rub history against the grain." My own task here is rather similar, to rub story against story, to rub a life against the story's flow, to force time to jump the track of its well-grooved channel. Out of the dissonances in the stories comes the ambiguous conflict of allegiances, the deadened roots of decidedly imperfect Jewish and personal history, that text-game of time and religion, which beckons again and so wars with a cleansing present, that sleep of old reasons and memories obscured in the letterless sensate of now. How to reawaken?

In my mid-twenties, and with a sudden consciousness of beginnings, as though a new strange plant had begun to grow in my chest, in the throes of a psychic homelessness, that perpetual psychology of youth *cum* exile, I had attempted, when I first decided to be a writer, to build a house from the ashes of others, to find personhood, not in religion (my mother's atheistic leanings had forever sheared me off from belief) but in some lost ethnicity, ethnicity being to writers what patriotism is to the scoundrel.

In this endeavor, I am remembering that I was aided by my father, a fact which now strikes so curiously, since of all the members of the Heller family, it was he who in his youth had made the sharpest break with home, with religion and with his rabbi-father's heavy-handed authority. My father had invoked his own private diaspora, running away to sea at the age of fifteen, a Jewish Ishmael leaving my grandfather, a stern Ahab of a parent, on the shores of New York City.

⁂

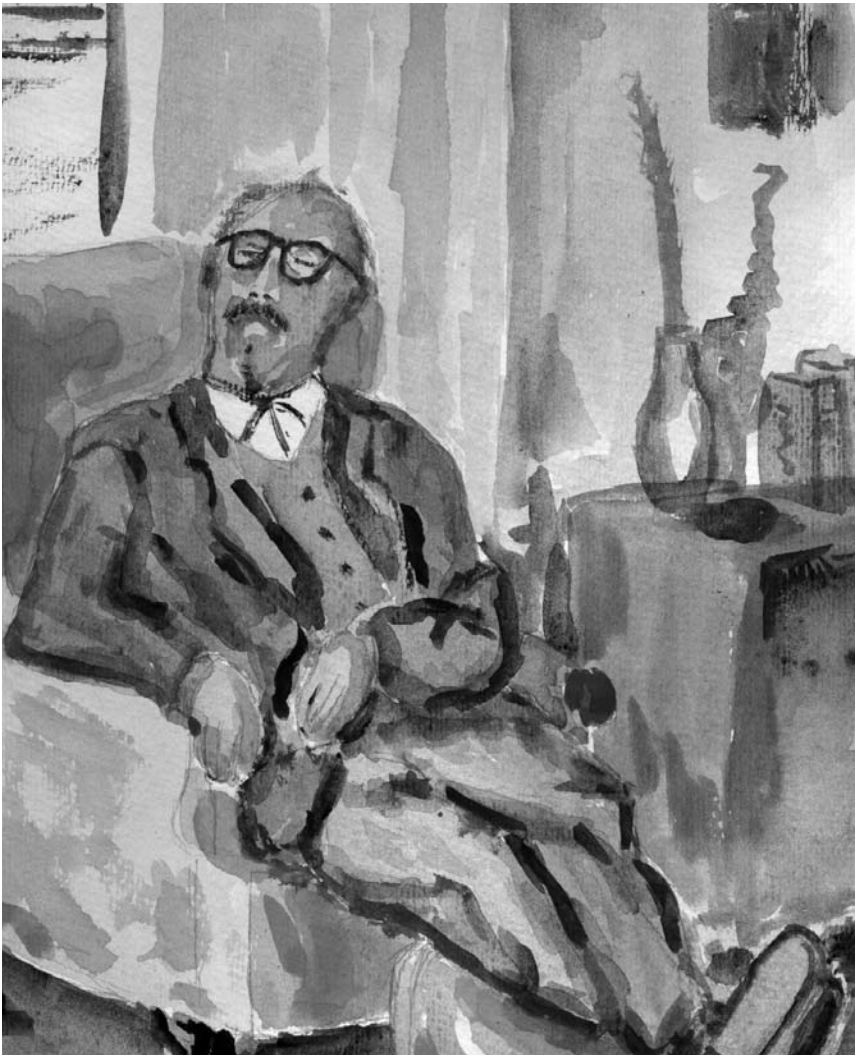
I'm recalling now that it was in the early nineteen sixties on one of my periodic visits to Florida where my parents had moved that I first mentioned my literary intentions to my by then ailing father, run down and debilitated by the early stages of Parkinson's disease. True, I had been living and working in New York for some time, and I was twenty-six years old. But I still felt, almost as a tic or habit, a son's deference toward his father. My father had been no patriarch in the usual sense of that word. He had neither dominated at the dinner table nor sought to impose his will. His few temper tantrums, while memorable, mostly betrayed the frustration and desperation he'd bottled up over my mother's bad heart and his own downsliding fortunes. In my youth, when the family was moving piecemeal to Florida because of my mother's illness, there had been long periods of time when he was not present, having to remain in New York settling his business affairs.

So this faint desire to genuflect toward my father's presence had about it the quality of worshipping at an abandoned shrine, of *dovening* as if by rote over a dead book or false idol. That inherent falsity meant only that in wanting his blessing or judgment (either would have been extremely important to me then), I had agreed to conspire in mutual bad faith with the fictional roles of child and parent we had rarely inhabited. More than conspire, for the deep unending loneliness I felt as a child welled up whenever those roles threatened to dissolve, and I glimpsed through veils and curtains the blank emptiness of adulthood with its formless and open—and terrifying—spaces.

On the particular day in the mid-nineteen sixties that I am thinking about, bright and rounded with the Floridian spring sun, I had come armed from the North with a personal resolve bolstered by my winning a small but distinguished prize in poetry, and by the certain knowledge that I was quitting my job to go live in Europe for a year. It was just after midday, and my father was, as usual, half-asleep in the gloomy living room of our old apartment on Euclid Avenue in the south part of Miami Beach. The shades were pulled against the light, a comfort for him against the brightness, against the pain, it seemed to me, of living in a world circumscribed by his illness. I found him sunk in his beaten yellow easy chair, a tattered and frayed object which had become his personal redoubt. He was wearing one of his rumpled dark suits and a tie, and under the jacket an old stained cardigan buckled like a washboard at the buttons.

Such a scene, that chair especially, are emblematized in my memory. On another one of my visits, I was to paint him seated there, his hands resting on his thighs, his cocked head aslant the curved back that encircled him. A pencil moustache and a trim Van Dyke beard gave him an air of inscrutability. This watercolor hangs now in my study, my father's sleep-lidded eyes gazing down from the grainy paper over my desk where I write. Later, in the mid-seventies, in a moment of parental pride gone vaguely surreal, my mother traced out the design pattern that I had created for the cover of my first book of poems. From the design, she then cut pieces of avocado green terrycloth into a slipcover for my father's easy chair. Like a pop art or avant-garde monstrosity, my book jacket design was destined to balloon and bulge under my father's recumbent form. In the last months of his life, my father napped blissfully unawares like the statue of a crusader on a moss-covered tomb.

But to go back. On the day that I am thinking of, in the late spring of 1964, the time when I first presented myself as a writer to my father, he had, in his life, already embraced a placid illness-borne inertia, a complete and benign frame of reference that overlay or nudged to the periphery any waves of discomfort or irritation.



WATERCOLOR PORTRAIT by me of my father in his Miami Beach living room, 1978. "A pencil moustache and a trim Van Dyke beard gave him an air of inscrutability."

Speaking to him, I knew I would be awakening him from his semiconscious stupor, from a mild but total numbness that had become his daily state. There would, of course, be no confrontation with him, of this I was sure, and I regretted deeply that I was not to experience one of those primal scenes which are an essential part of the substance and lore of the child's rebellion against the parent. Instead, I expected my father to take my words as he did so many other things at that time, with an almost ignoring tenderness, a mild haziness or befuddlement that seemed to wrap itself like a garment around every incident. I had watched him often as he beamed with a childish happiness at anyone who stood before him. I had watched as he gave up on "reading" people, on discerning their mood or intentions. Little by little, the tone of his personality was becoming more passive and withdrawn.

And yet still, perhaps in moments unawares even to himself, my father's facial features rippled with anger and loss. Such expressions were faint relics, mere hieroglyphs of rebellion, the body speaking beyond consciousness in a sign language that registered a protest against its own fate. Nostalgia, for instance, truly roused him. Recited memories or old songs from the past quickly brought tears to his eyes. Fear as well, when it broke through the shield of his placidity, suddenly electrified his being. It was in his eyes when he stared off into the depths of the room as into a future where only further waste and death loomed. And when his muscles no longer worked properly, when, for instance, he had to cross a busy street, terror suffused him and charged his motions. Suddenly, he no longer halted in his walk but resembled an antic ballet dancer, all tiptoes and odd high steppings, his legs moving in wild disjunctive arcs that made his progress even slower than his usual impeded gait.

So as I talked with him on that day, I was looking for signs, for something that would mark or commemorate the moment. And when I told him what I was going to do, to be a writer, to go away to Spain, I did detect a momentary flick of fright, but also a strange rolling back of his eyes, almost languid, as though under those drooping lids he could access other presences, other weighted phantoms necessary to his life. Then he nodded but said nothing. That moment, though I couldn't then formulate it, was bleak—harsh and generational in the sense that it was as marked and violent as the severing of the umbilical cord. There was a bit of hatred in it, the impersonal kind the dying can have for those who it appears will go on living. As well, I wasn't sure whether I had dashed unawares some specific plans my father had had for me which now left him bereft. Or had there been a kind of true transmission, one deeply tinged with his mortality and *his* unrealized hopes.

For my father, too, had had a writing "career," as he once abashedly denominated it to me. In his youth, in the many poems he composed and in little essays he wrote for the newspapers that he worked for, he had pitched his own language toward a sort of American romance, something he meant to be a poetic adornment upon the life of the young adventurer he had become at that time: runaway, soldier, railroad detective, movie director, lover. It was in his nature to favor clichés; they rang true, the way they so often do with young men of action. His faith in florid and pre-formulated bits of language, compounded in a grammar of effusive sentimentality, testified to his belief in the simplified essence of his words. They obviously had come easy to him, so that to say or write was to represent himself unambiguously, the hero of his own dime-store novel. And like his clumsiness with household repairs and machinery, they marked him as a nineteenth-century idler and dreamer, which in great part he was.

Later, toward the end of his life, this adornment in words, this emotional linguistic spillage was to flatten into a broad and stagnant delta of verbiage, muddied by the vocabularies and syntactical strategies of my father's public relations business and other assorted prosaic hucksterisms.

Looked at in its entirety, the descending path of my father's writing "career" reached its pitiable apotheosis, I suppose, in the last days of his working life. In the mid-nineteen seventies, while I was trying to become a writer, my father, despite his declining abilities, was, with my mother's encouragement, still trying to work. His senility, or was it Alzheimer's, had made it impossible for him to service or keep his clients.

It was then that my mother suddenly adopted my father's lifelong habits of fictionalizing. Fearing for his own loss of self-esteem or playing into the propensity for illusion making that had marked his adult life, she kept the offices of his public relations firm, Peter F. Heller Associates, open. She even retained, on a part-time basis, my father's aging secretary, Sara. Here, daily, my father napped in a big leather office chair for hours at a time, much as he did at home. Whenever he woke, Sara gave him a sheaf of freshly typed pages. These he would seem to scan, then nod approvingly. They contained lists from old address books, names of people who had died or moved away. While Sara and my mother looked on, my father haltingly enunciated each name on the list. Together, the two women had conspired to present these as fresh work to him and were now reaping a harvest of garbled sound.

My mother, almost always restrained, nearly wept as she told me of these sessions in the office. And when I visited the premises, everywhere I saw these piles of useless addresses, typed and retyped in long neat columns onto good bond paper. My father's language had reached its near-entropic end in this roll-call of the invisible, the out-of-town and the recently dead.

Still later, when he was in the nursing home and no longer recognized me as I entered the room, he'd often call me by someone else's name, possibly a name from those very lists. This was the beginning of the last phase of his having language, when, in the nursing home, he could no longer make phrases nor sometimes even words. The sounds that came from his mouth merely joined in some horrible synchronicity with all the other noise of the universe unmarked by human intelligence or will.

The pain of witnessing my father's utter helplessness filled me with anguish. That he no longer could communicate betokened an even more terrible kind of reversal: a fundamental reversion or degradation of spiritual material, of what constituted his being human, slowly transmuting itself into the inertness of matter. For language and utterance have a certain expectative quality, a strange momentum and impellance that both animates and lies along the plane of one's intentions and even destinies, something we know from our own readings and listenings. That endless entwining which bound us together and which had been spun out by my father's words and by our conversations, was now snapped.

My father wanted to be a writer. In the sixties, in the early stages of his illness—possibly in that very moment when I was telling him of my hopes and desires—I imagine that my father sensed not only his soon-to-be-blunted past but the possibility of his son's completing certain unfinished flights of language which he had already begun.

⁂

After I told my father of my writer's hopes, he tentatively urged me on, as though any success I might have as a writer were stirred into the soupy gall of his own disappointments. He advised me to secure a bilingual Yiddish-English history of Bialystok (the small city in Poland from which my family fled) that had been compiled and written by a friend of his, David Sohn, also a Bialystoker. Bialystok, my father continually reminded me with some pride, was where *we* had come from. In those last difficult years of his life, when memory waned and a tide of confusions broke over him, the name of his birthplace, as a definitive marker in his utterance, dragged like an anchor in sand. And that I might come to be a chronicler of Bialystok may also have made more bearable to him my desires to be a writer. There would be a strained pleasure if I were to be led by his suggestions and enthusiasms, much the way a teacher may take rueful pride in a student who, in following the dictates of his own education, surpasses the professor's original scholarly pursuits.

Sohn's book, *Bialystok: Photo Album of a Renowned City and Its Jews the World Over*, replete with many drawings and historical photographs as well as text, was indeed a gold mine of material. To my vague and unformed end of becoming a writer, I secured a copy of this book, this "official" chronicle of Bialystok, from the New York Bialystok Center on Manhattan's Lower East Side. This was in early 1963, and the crumbling pavements of Henry Street and East Broadway could be likened to an urbanized airport lounge. The old Jews were embarking, moving or dying out of the soot-blackened tenements that lined the streets, while the recently disembarked Hispanics and the Asian overflows of Chinatown were marching slowly up the blocks to take their places. It was an urban enclave of manifest tensions, one which exhibited a vocabulary of push and shove in every voice and gesture. I had driven to the Center in my new Volkswagen, and no sooner had I parked on East Broadway, than a group of youths wearing *yarmulkes*, black pants and white shirts, surrounded my car and started beating on the roof with their fists, shouting "Nazi Gas Wagon!" After a few minutes, while I huddled in my seat, banging back at them on the windows in a mood close to hysteria, they left off and wandered down the street. The thumping of those hands on metal? There was no more power there than in that of the little breeze a page makes when it is turned over. One turns pages back, one pores over history, but the writing remains fixed as on a tombstone. Wasn't that hatred, twenty, thirty years displaced, the ink of this century?

Bialystok. It was my naive intention to write a historical novel. And the book I acquired, fully illustrated and with its pages half in Yiddish and half in English, was to be my way in, a catwalk bridging cultural and semantic universes, a walkway over the spaces of time, from which, as I mentally sounded out the text and pictures, odd dissonances were heard as though a stiff and antique notepaper were being crumpled. In those barely muffled disputations of sound or image, my postadolescent desires to have an identity and yet to be released from the shackles of any tradition I did not elect for myself were somehow joined. The novel never did materialize, but Sohn's book gave me many satisfactions and ultimately led me to poetry. I think of it now, and for part of what I am writing here, using it again, only this time as a template to lay over a clean piece of paper so that in some sense I may compel memory and history to coincide.

In the book, as I look at it again, many of the older photographs, because of their poor quality, lend themselves all too well to my purposes. These show mostly street scenes or portraits and group photos of the town's eminent figures. Yet the close-in details of a face or of a building appear to have been blotted up by time or, at the least, by the heavy hand of the retoucher. To contemplate them is to slowly slip from actuality to fable, to dwell in the swabbed dreamy spaces of remembrance as though history itself were beckoning one to lean one's head into a fuzzed fantasy of events. Nostalgia, especially in its cheapest, most sentimental form, is inevitably colored sepia.

BIALYSTOK before World War II. "Nostalgia . . . inevitably colored sepia."

And yet—and herein lies my need—because of the peculiar fate of those born into twentieth-century European Jewish culture, such material is poised on a knife-edge in time, the meeting place of old memories, of rituals and traditions, and of catastrophe. The photographs, the records and accounts, are, at once, the stuff of nostalgia or terror depending on how one lets them become entangled in the webs of time. In this sense, any act of memory is cautionary, less about reconstructing a past than about construing a future.

I am remembering then, not for the sake of *what was*, but in a sense, in order *to be*. In this, the Bialystok book was less of an aid to memory than, as philosophers might say, a *res potentia*, an empowering, even occult, object. Opening its rather glossy pages or merely contemplating the rather awful cream and brown letterings (they were both in English and Yiddish) of its cover, put me in a heightened, strangely receptive state of mind. And what about the facts, the dates, the names?—the reader may righteously ask. They too took on a new importance, not as facts but as planetary bodies or constellations, having about them fixed or immutable, but necessarily nonhuman, laws of motion. Freud wrote of dreaming that "there is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unfathomable—a navel, as it were, that is part of its contact with the unknown." In the memoir, that scripted dream-time of a past, other lives, parents and relatives, one's enemies and friends, the cities and places we have lived in and experienced, these are the "navels" of waking life, things that cannot be made different or revised. They function, not as determinants, however, but as anchorages or ports of call, occasions from which spread an immense totality of facts and potentialities beyond any knowing or imagining, which, rather than define, await me in the future. The law of their organization, like the billions of computer calculations needed to determine the location of an atom in a thunderstorm, must remain a mathematical mystery, and thus, any order I impose on this totality is a function, not so much of truth or "identity," but of artfulness. Nothing in the calculus of possibility is, strictly speaking, recollected or forgotten under the sign of cause or necessity. Even as we would want to see ourselves as voluntary figures, living finally beyond history or mastering it, what we discover as soon as we reflect is that our past is innovation.

⁂

I remember, as I have said, in order *to be*: My family had come from that thriving whirlpool of Middle European-Jewish activity centered in

Russian-Polish Bialystok. How long they had lived there or from whence they had come before that time, I have no idea. When the Jewish community in Bialystok was destroyed in World War II, not only did a way of life vanish but an entire written history flamed into smoke and ash.

From what I have been able to learn, my great-grandfather David, from whom I acquired my middle name, was an important rabbi of the city, much loved by the populace for opening his house to the poor and to lost strangers coming through town. He was revered and spoken of in the family in hushed tones. His son, my grandfather, Zalman Heller, a rabbi, teacher, and sometimes writer, fleeing the pogroms and poverty of Central Europe, arrived in New York in 1911. By 1913, the entire family, his wife Rose, his sons, among them my father Pete (then called Philip), his brother Nat, and the daughters, Mildred (who was always called Jen), Ina, and Bea, were all living in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. A photograph of Zalman Heller in the Bialystok volume (published in 1951) has this caption: *Zalman Heller: Hebrew-Yiddish writer and educator. Of the first members of the Hebrew-Language Society in Bialystok. He is now Principal in a Brooklyn, N.Y. Yeshivah.* Beyond these bare outlines of arrival and emplacement, what has come to me is mainly folklore and oral history.

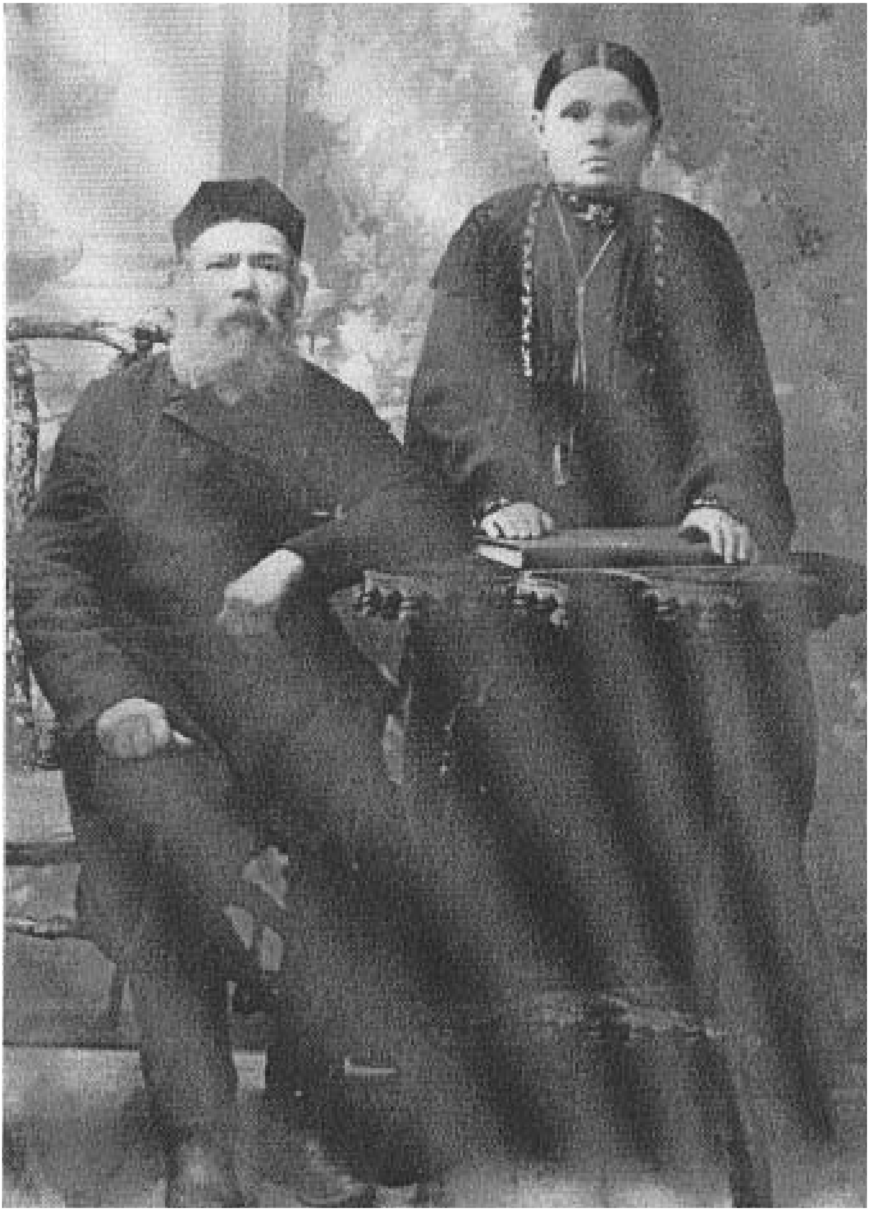
The house where the family lived in Bialystok, my Aunt Jen told me, was somewhat primitive. Cheap pine furniture, crude plumbing, muslin drapes, my aunt enumerated its humble inventory. At mealtimes, she remembered, food was ladled into hollowed out recesses chiselled into the wooden top of the dining table, as dishware was mainly for the wealthy. After a meal, boiling water was poured over the greasy concavities to cleanse and prepare them for the next meal. Details like this were not so much information but part of the jargon of remembrance, a mode of talk that bent itself romantically aslant of factuality. And now, such recited information seems even more highly colored and shaped by external influences, the costumed historical movie epics I saw as a child, history book illustrations, comics, and the like until the form of my family's life in Europe resembles a medieval tale.

From my early desires to be a writer, my own mind has surely flooded these near-mythological designs with dreamings and nostalgias. To ground these fantasies I first conjured up those sepia realities of the illustrated Bialystok history book. I recall having searched its pages in vain for a picture of my great-grandfather, either depicted singly or in the various groupings of Rabbinical Associations, Fire Departments, and Concerned

Educators. In the book, he remains bodiless and faceless, inscribed only in the words that describe his deeds and in the furnished scenery of his environment, nineteenth-century Bialystok's few newly paved streets and public monuments.

As a young person, I had been free to invent him physically, and so, because he had been likened to a saint, my earliest imaginings were of a tall figure in nondescript clothes with a white-bearded face. As I had read geography books and seen movies in which the forests and cultivated fields of Eastern Europe were described, I dressed the figure in peasant garb, loose fitting shirts, wide leather cinch belts, trousers tucked in boots, a cap of some sort. Such imaginings had more than physiognomic consequences. I created a vague psychology and set of behaviors for my great-grandfather, not that I thought in those adult, educated terms but that the clothes suggested a way of life, an actual place of habitation, a whole concatenation of inferences by which I built up an invented past. Nor does such an invention endstop with a vision of the past. Saintliness, peasants, labor, a rural world, these had not only their pastness but their presentness for the boy who conjured them. Certain modes of being, desires, valuations were projected out of the imagined goodness and way of life of David Heller onto the impressionable mind of the great-grandchild, Michael (middle name David), already propelling him toward a future which even as it was unknown, held as one of its principles the invisible structure of desire which this invented past contained.

It was only when a few years ago my uncle Nat gave me a photograph of great-grandfather David, that certain illusions were both dispelled and, uncannily, confirmed. That is, this sole surviving photograph of David Heller and his wife Fanny only adds to the irresolvable nature of my past. In the picture, the couple are seated on a wicker bench in what appears to be a formal garden with marble vases and trellises behind them. Of course, the background with its camera-lens-induced flatness could simply be a painted screen, as was often the custom, in which case no conclusions could be drawn about the house in which they lived. They are well dressed, though David Heller is wearing something of the same costume with which my childhood fantasy clothed him: boots into which his trousers are tucked, a countenance framed by a dark well-trimmed beard on its way to becoming all white. The near-symmetry between the photograph and my fantasizing is curious and unaccountable, as though rather than a triumph over time, the photograph only confirmed the secretive powers we label



MY GREAT GRANDPARENTS, David and Fanny Heller, Bialystok, before 1900. The ambiguities of this photograph “only confirmed the secretive powers we label prophecy and forebodings.”

prophecy and foreboding; it is as though the genetic material of which I am composed held, if mildly mutated, the visual information which my grandfather Zalman and his son Peter, my father, must have pored over, possibly discussed together and been moved by.

Further, when examined closely, the photograph is somewhat at war with the idealizing vernacular of my own visual imagination. Fanny's hair stylishly pulled back, David's full beard neatly trimmed, these, along with the cleanliness of the clothes, imply urbanity and even sophistication, ways of being somewhat at odds with my childish preconceptions of the saintly. The hands of both are small as though given to delicate rather than manual labor. It is hard to associate the house described by my aunt, the cheap furniture and primitive kitchen, with those hands. Thus, the net effect of this photograph is to cast doubt on some of the information I have acquired about my grandfather from the minor historical musings of my family. If a picture is worth a thousand words, it is also quite capable of denying another thousand already spoken or imagined. The truly efficacious words or pictures are those that come as revelations or epiphanies and so overcome mere pictures and mere words.

Yes, epiphanies. The British writer, Neal Ascherson, in his account of modern-day Bialystok, reminding the reader of its near-total destruction in World War II, touches on the lugubrious sight of the old Jewish cemetery with no one alive left to tend it, a place where, he writes, "oblivion is infinitely deeper." Without Jewish mourners and rememberers, the cemetery in its ruination is an indescribably alien presence, a rock-strewn outcropping memorializing only indifference, horror, and moral failure. Here and there the old Polish antisemitism still flares up, its object virtually an absence. Bialystok, Ascherson tells us, was at the crossroads of any number of cultural-linguistic entities, Polish, Byelorussian, Jewish; among its more well-known inhabitants was Ludwik Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto. It was also the home of the Jewish hero Melmud who threw sulfuric acid at the face of an SS man during the final ghetto uprising. Absences and erasures.

Ascherson describes a Poland leached of its Jews by the Nazis, yet of Jews who still float, force-fields of epiphanies, through the nightmares of Polish villagers, of Jews who still dance on the glossy surfaces of old photographs.

⁂

For me, then, as I think about the history of my family, two intertwining teleologies are at work: one a poetics of memory constructed around a class of near-physical objects, photographs, letters, scraps of talk, images. The other is the principle of montage as Walter Benjamin tried to bring it over into historical analysis, "to detect," he writes, "the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple individual moment." Montage sunders the purposeful chains of chronicle, those stories that mandate "official" sense and "official" views. Thus, everywhere I look at or remember a past, chronicle is broken open into contradictions and ambiguities so that another logic is impelled, one that builds contrary to the flow of time. These shards or planes of broken time, each with its contributory weights and experiences, form the shaky house of cards of identity. The shifted meanings, in their re-occurrences, no longer build into a story, for they are no longer under the power of time. Instead, like a constellation of words, a poem, for instance, they re-form as some metonymic name or word, some David or Michael. To which I would add one more consideration, that for our words to so name, one must have a faith in intelligibility as though something of our own planular ghosts were not mere hauntings but ways of flying on words into others, embracing and dissolving together, an Esperanto of the spirit. On what else do we base the word *hope*?

⁂

David Heller's life, in such a faceted obduracy, even as it was praised by my aunts and uncles, troubled and puzzled them. There were aspects of that life to which they could not connect. Though they often mentioned his rabbinical piety and his good deeds, these references were short and fleetingly passed over as though dwelling too long on his charity would poison their own genteel acquisitiveness. In effect, as if to confirm his holiness, David Heller's life was a mystagogic presence among my relatives. It baffled them with its strange hints and flashes of the atemporal power of compassion. Like any deeply moral story, it affected the members of the Heller clan, confronting their sense of the appropriate unfolding and rationality of time, their investment in logic, in respectability and, as they might have put it, their need for a "decent" standard of living.

Only my Aunt Jen, my father's oldest sister, who had been a "Wobbly" and later died in a mental home, spoke at any length about David,