

Home

The ground that Mother trod offered no certainty, would indeed never offer her certainty even if it were hallowed and sanctified by whatever private deity she listed towards. The ground was obdurately solid asphalt, grey and condensed; it rang with arrogant hardness even under her reluctant heels; and not a blade of the most fastidious weed could struggle through. And yet, treading the alien streets of Northcote, of Melbourne, she reeled and careered, as if pitching still on the vaulting waves of the Bight she had left behind when she disembarked, more sullen than curious, upon the massive planks of Princes Pier.

Myself a boy avidly laying an ear to the new terra firma of Terra Australis, I came to learn that home was where the feet ran most freely; home, for Mother, object now of hopeless and hungry hankering, was where *she* had been at her fleetest. Along the skewed banks of the sun-splintering Vistula where ripples and foam licked at the lichened steel of colliers transporting Silesian coal; along the clattering cobbled streets shadowed by huddled spawns of scar-faced tenements; around the squared perimeter of those inner turbulent courtyards redolent with fungussed cheeses, marinated herring and warm slaughtered fowl and the onion-and-garlicked breaths of garrulous tradesmen and cunning shop-keepers, of scholars gesturing in disputation, and breathlessly-bustling ear-locked students and of ragged emaciated mendicants who subsisted wanly on air.

All that had been rubbed into history. The war, *the War*, had put paid to a six-hundred-year civilisation receding through time and suffering generations to Great King Casimir's welcome to the Jews into his Poland. It had levelled Mother's birthplace of Warsaw and had cynically silenced all contending ideologies – socialism, Zionism, chassidism, Bundism, secularism – proving all equally right, all equally false, but had not succeeded, could never succeed, in annihilating memory which proffered securer anchorage than the firmest foothold to be had on the Australian shore. Home, when Mother spoke of home, was not our wide-windowed red-bricked house in Christmas Street which looked out passively upon pat greenness and week-day silence or upon old hunch-backed Mr. King clipping his hedge on a Saturday afternoon to the background blare of horseraces and football or upon the Walters next door leaving en famille for church on Sundays. Nor was home the stretch of suburban crimson-capped boxes mutely divorced from each other by driveways and narrow paths and by the wooden fences upon which, child that I was, I climbed collecting splinters, but which enhanced to the pitch of pain that severance, isolation and estrangement that made Mother complain more than once, and with the barest provocation, about the barren wilderness into which, after Warsaw, after Tashkent, after Paris, she had been tossed. And wilderness to her was any place where not a Yiddish word was spoken, where Sholom Aleichem and Leibush Peretz were not heard of, where one, so to speak, clung to the shadows lest a gentile finger be pointed or a sneer thrown or allusion be made, however subtly, to one's Jewishness. Jewishness, after what had happened, was not a matter for pride. How could it be? It was a birthmark, sometimes – if one were unlucky – borne in a prominent place, at other times mercifully hidden beneath the surface wraps. Nor, the coin turned over, was it wholly a matter for shame. A defect, to be sure, it was still not as mortifyingly eye-attracting as a hare-lip or clubfoot which could never be concealed. Jewishness was merely a thing to be observed, when observed at all, behind closed doors, behind

approximated curtains and with muted voice, among one's own. The lighting of a memorial candle, the reading of a Yiddish newspaper, the humming of a Yiddish tune, the exchange of memories of times and places past – these were the *form* and *content* of our Jewishness on this remote shore. Sometimes, on a Yom Kippur eve, Father might have driven to the synagogue three, four miles away to add his praises and petitions to the general drone, but by the time he left the house, darkness had deepened by many shades, the neighbours were soundly sequestered indoors and the murmur of his Vanguard would not betray his destination. Jewishness – no, not that – the fact of being Jewish was a shadow that clung, contracted, at one's feet, and one prayed under the alien Northcote sky that the sun might not shine too keenly lest the shadow cast be too stark in the eyes of the gentile.

'Home' was Mother's word for Warsaw, more precisely for Praga which lay beyond the right reach of the Poniatowski Bridge that dizzily straddled the shimmering Vistula beneath. It was sufficient for her to say *in der heym* for the listener who knew to evoke for himself the cluttered confluence of old and new, the graded decline from the magnificent collusion of Classic, Baroque, Gothic and Rococo of the Marszałowska in the south through a succession of tumbings over the middle-stretch conformity of Sliska and Leszno to the wild and perilous putrid slums of Stawki to the north. *In der heym* also meant the tumble-down flaking mothballed *shtibl* where her father delivered himself, quivering heir of the generations, to his God, the eternal giver of life and certitude; the cramped third-floor, three-roomed apartment where her six brothers and sisters had bickered, teased, debated, bustled and laughed; and the dank coldly-bone-penetrating workshop where kvass was bubbled into tinkling bottles and taken away on listing horse-drawn carts clattering over the paving stones. It was also the terrain where Mother, as a spirited adolescent, drifting from her father's God, had been avid for a world of justice with equality and freedom for all; where with head in the air, eyes to the future and bright brilliant banners in her arms, she

had marched on May Day parades and sung the 'Internationale'; and where she had believed that through hard work and resolute will, she – no, they, her generation – could bring closer the age of the Messiah who would lead the people, all people, towards the Zion faced by her father in prayer, towards that city of peace that stood as symbol eternal for harmony, perfection and brotherly love.

'Home', too, was a city that had not yet been walled, a city that bustled and hummed and, in its mazed interstices, dreamt of many different futures, but not of the future that was to befall it with the black torpor and terror of nightmare. The War teething across its frail perimeter with menacing canines, 'home' became familiarity abandoned, a father's parting blessing and a mother's tears, and family warmth, contentment and order forsaken for the frosts and gelid exiles of Siberia. It became from then on an image portable and elusive, engraved into memory but inaccessible to touch, and in time an image transformed through information and rumour into a monstrous spectre of emptiness, decimation, rubble and orphanhood. It became a rubble graveyard, desecrated and bereft, where mutilated bodies, lives and hopes lay interred in eternal oblivion and silence, along with Mother's one-time strivings for harmony, perfection and freedom and the bones of her father's God and the soul of the perished Messiah.

What she brought then to Australia, descending the gangplank warily at Princes Pier, was a near-empty package – little of matter, less of spirit, nothing of faith. Behind her, beyond the rolling, tossing, sickening green oceans lay Warsaw, Siberia, Tashkent, Ziegenhain and Paris, places abandoned to abandoned time; before her, past the afternoon haze that smudged the nearby warehouses, pylons, cottages and lanes sprawled greyly the mute unknown, secretive, concealed, inert, promising nothing, neither particular welcome, nor expectation, nor hope. From the beginning then, Mother and the new alien lukewarm country offered nothing willing to each other; or, where they offered, and gave, the exchange was coldly equal – the country providing Mother with work in a

drab airless factory in Flinders Lane, Mother in turn giving up her labour, eight, ten, twelve hours a day of her energy, without love, enthusiasm or cheerfulness. It was need, desperate urgency that drove her, for love, enthusiasm and cheerfulness were a part of the rubble left behind and a part too of that long Russian exile of which her translocation to Australia was a mere continuation. What remained to her, of all that was tangible and near was the day alone, the grey morning light to which she woke, the grey daytime light under which she pumped at a machine sewing buttons to sleeves, the grey evening light in which, leg-weary and numbed, she trudged home, to eat, to feed, to iron, to darn, to read the paper fitfully and to lapse into sleep before the next grey day confronted her once more.

That the sun shone over Australia, I knew, but that was *my* legacy, not hers. Hers was in the nature of an alimony, a toneless sunless bequest enravelling in pain, a levelling-out, I came to see, of moods, ambitions and inclinations, daring no more to look too high, lest at the summit there marched false hope, nor gaze too low, lest in the depths, she might founder in despair.

Under the feet, the ground was solid. It was grey and stark and obdurate, and rang (for her, too loudly) under Mother's step. They were the Northcote streets she trod, the Melbourne air she breathed, and, when she looked up, the Australian sky she saw. And they were the odours of High Street she smelled, and human voices she heard and the touch of fellow flesh she felt brushing against her as she shopped, nothing cheap too cheap, on her way from work. To me, because here my feet ran fleetest, this was home. But for Mother, home it could never be. Not for her the deadening suburban silence over orderly green gardens and spaced-out red-brick houses of Christmas Street, nor, on the other hand, the raucous pitch-and-bustle of fellow flesh crowding the fruit-shops, haberdasheries and delicatessens of High Street; nor for her the rancid smells of over-heated lard bubbling in the choked and steamy fish-and-chip shops or the greasy hamburger, the meat

pie or the roast; nor the temperamental sky changing moods capriciously through a daily anarchy of seasons; nor the affected courtesies, apologies and camaraderie of neighbours who, she felt – no, she knew, after Europe she *knew* – looked upon her, the foreigner, the Jew, with suspicion, malice, ill-intent. What to me was solid and real was to her conditional. What to me was certain was to her precarious, fraught with monstrous uncertainty, like a voyage at sea.

But if Australia, to Mother, could never be home, nor could Warsaw, where her tread had known its securest anchorage, any longer stake a claim. There was no returning to the tumbling of Baroque, Gothic, Classic and Rococo, to the shimmering sun-splintering Vistula lapping past her house, to the warmth of family and laughter, to the crucible in which contending ideologies and messianisms boiled and fermented and effervesced. It was all behind her in space; it was forever lost to time. Perhaps, absent-mindedly or in a reverie, Mother could reach out but her fingers would touch upon nothingness. The city of her childhood and youth lay now beyond touch, beyond grasp, an unrecognisable rebuilt city of concrete, glass and memorials from which her roots had been torn out, the soil upturned and the ground rendered forever hostile to her return. What it had been it could no longer be. And whatever the pleasure, whatever the pain, it was in memory alone that Mother could ever attain to 'home'.