

# CHAPTER 1



June 1993

It had taken less than an hour to make the trip from Kiev to Chernobyl, driving north past crisp fields of wheat, flax, and potatoes under a bleached June sky. After forty-five minutes, the collective farms abruptly gave way to a tangle of scrub, thistles, and pale sunflowers. Soon, we pulled up to a glossy white booth with a pneumatic bar gate. This was the security check at the thirty-kilometer perimeter that enclosed the area known as the Zone of Alienation. Twenty kilometers farther, at a second checkpoint, we were required to park our van and enter a squat concrete building sheathed in blue aluminum siding.

My companions were all scientists: three Americans, and two Ukrainians who knew Chernobyl better than they wished. They led the rest of us inside, where a terse, tight-faced woman in loose navy work pants and a black sweater instructed us to leave our clothes and jewelry in a row of lockers. In paper slippers and undershorts, we shuffled down a long white cinder-block corridor to a sealed steel doorway. A uniformed guard, also female, unclanked the bolts and passed us through.

On the other side awaited an identical bank of lockers, containing long-sleeved plaid shirts of coarse cotton, hooded stiff polyester coveralls, heavy leather ankle boots, breathing filters, and surgical caps to mask our hair from specks of wind-borne

plutonium. Moments before, I had also slipped on an extra pair of jockey shorts—a pretty pathetic buffer, I supposed, between plutonium dust and whatever offspring I might somehow yet conceive. Over the previous few months I had been shaken by a series of personal losses, among them a soured two-year courtship. I now found myself in my mid-forties, single and alone. With my hopes for fatherhood dwindling, an extra layer of gonad protection at this point seemed hardly worth the effort.

But coming into direct contact with plutonium particles was no small concern, and reassurances from Chernobyl officials that the heavy clothing they'd issued us was an adequate shield somehow did not convince. Once we reached the ruined reactor, background radiation would be several hundred times normal. As I adjusted the elastic strap on my white air filter, it occurred to me to wonder why I was doing this—a question that had become rather familiar in recent years. My stock answer was that if no one bore witness to the consequences of the greedy, heedless, stupid, often downright heinous risks people take with the world we live in, they would blithely continue taking them. The article I'd come to write would conclude that not only could the earth not afford another Chernobyl, but we couldn't afford the first one, either: Mere money could not contain what had been unleashed here. But as I boarded a bus so contaminated it could never leave this restricted zone and rode to the huge steel and concrete sarcophagus that encased the hot remains of Chernobyl's Number 4 reactor, I again recalled the other reason I had come.

This was Ukraine, where my father was born. This was the land where he had watched his own father die, victim to yet another atrocity on this soil. Ukraine, the place where my father vowed he'd never again set foot. And now he, too, was dead. The previous fall, we'd laid him to rest wearing his *tallis* and World War II dog tags, in an Orthodox Jewish ceremony at a military cemetery, to the accompaniment of taps and rifle salutes and *Kaddish*.

Then, unexpectedly, just seven weeks later my sister and I

buried our mother beside him. Half a year had now passed, but I was still stunned by this double bereavement. Over the intervening months, kind editors had sent me to write about benign places like Spain and Trinidad instead of the somber stories I usually covered. Then, this assignment was proposed to me—a report about how, in the aftermath of Chernobyl's terrible explosion, thousands were trying to cope with survival in an indefinitely poisoned landscape. Grim a prospect as this was, its setting was in Ukraine, and I leapt at this chance to return to my family's source.

And maybe, time permitting, to solve a mystery.

Chernobyl's blocky gray sarcophagus, nearly five stories high and sixty feet thick in places, had been patched so often that its sides resembled the tarred, caulked hull of a derelict ship. Coils of concertina wire, cyclone fencing, and floodlights surrounded the area—as if anyone would try to break in. In the seven years since the accident, hundreds of men who built this vault had died from radiation poisoning. Despite their labor and sacrifice, it kept corroding: One reason why our Geiger counters were screaming was that more than a thousand square meters' worth of leaks had sprung in the sarcophagus's roof and walls.

A French firm contracted to erect another tomb around the first one warned that it could not be completely sealed while the melted core was still hot, which essentially meant never, since plutonium has a half-life of 24,000 years. Nor could radioactive runoff from Chernobyl's cooling ponds, impounded by dikes hastily constructed along the nearby Pripyat River, be kept from seeping into the watershed. Once there, it flowed directly to the Dnieper River, Ukraine's Mississippi, the source of drinking and irrigation water to thirty-five million people. Chernobyl had blown a hole in reality that no human effort could ever close.

Our Ukrainian hosts were two nuclear physicists: Andriy Demydenko, who was now Ukraine's deputy minister of the environment, and Volodya Tikhii, who had helped track Chernobyl's spreading radioactive stain in the immediate aftermath

of the disaster. The three American scientists were from the University of Oregon. In collaboration with colleagues at Moscow State University, the Oregonians had designed a computerized tool to help thousands of former Soviet citizens living in contaminated areas minimize their daily exposure to radiation from eating locally grown foods. Their program, which ran on portable computers, combined topographic details with field-by-field fallout measurements and data on how different crops absorb radionuclides from the soil. A farmer who knew, for instance, that wheat and barley tend to concentrate radioactive isotopes in non-edible parts like their stalks, could reduce his family's lethal intake by sowing grains to suck radiation from the surface before planting lettuce or cabbage, which store radioactivity in their leaves.

This still left the problem of what to do with the tainted chaff after the wheat was harvested, since burning or burying toxic organic wastes would return the radioactivity to the ecosystem. But this was the best anybody could do, the scientists told me. There was simply no way to stuff the damage back in the vessel it came from. Their efforts represented science's best attempt in the face of a bleak, inescapable fact: Much of the best farmland in the former Soviet Union would be hot for nearly two centuries to come, until the cesium-137 and strontium-90 deposited by Chernobyl sufficiently decayed.

During the previous week, I had visited Russian villages hundreds of kilometers from Chernobyl, so radioactive that they had to be evacuated. But no one realized that until three years after the accident, when researchers like my hosts had discovered a dreadful secret: For days following the explosion, the Soviet government seeded clouds headed east so that contaminated rain would not fall on Moscow. Instead, it had drenched the country's richest breadbasket.

With a trembling, nail-bitten forefinger, Andriy Demydenko indicated a peeling sign above a clump of rusting, radioactive machinery that exalted the V. I. Lenin Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station as a "Victory for Communism." Like many former Soviet

scientists, the tall, bearded Demydenko had been catapulted from the uproar born of that cataclysm into the unexpected role of bureaucrat. At forty, under the strain of trying to help organize a shaky new country following the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, his sandy hair was already graying to match the sallow void of his skin.

"Those Party bastards," he spat into my tape recorder, "knew all along that citizens were plowing radioactive dirt, eating radioactive vegetables, and feeding radioactive hay to their cows. Cesium-137 is a chemical analog to calcium. It concentrates in cows' milk, the source of eighty percent of a rural Soviet child's protein."

Just after the accident, as radioactive ash settled over Kiev while the reactor still burned seventy miles to the north, Andriy Demydenko learned that his wife was carrying their first child. He immediately raced her away from the capital. Happily, their daughter showed no signs of thyroid disease or lymphoblastic leukemia, the form of leukemia filling children's cancer wards in Kiev that had also surged after Hiroshima. They were all holding their breath, Demydenko told me—literally: "The first thing we had to teach her," he said, "was to close her eyes and not breathe whenever she sees blowing dust. And to never, ever smell flowers."

Chernobyl had vented a hundred times more radiation than the A-bombs that fell on Japan. In Ukraine and Belarus, some human immune systems were so depressed that forgotten diseases like diphtheria were reappearing. Forests of red pines near the reactor died within weeks of the explosion, while surviving trees sprouted distorted branches and needles of different lengths and colors. But before we left the accident site, Kit Larsen, a systems analyst on the Oregon team, handed me his binoculars. I looked where he was pointing. Several families of barn swallows were nesting in debris surrounding the sarcophagus that was still flecked with plutonium and bits of uranium fuel. "Strange," he said. "This would be their sixth generation since the explosion."

Apart from occasional white flecks in their blue and orange coats, they seemed normal. Later, at a bridge railing over the

now-deadly Pripyat River two miles downstream from the devastated reactor, we watched marsh hawks cruise over the willows lining banks that flattened into a floodplain covered with meadow grass, daisies, and purple lupine. To his bird list Larsen added three species of raptors, a black tern, wagtails, stilts, mallards, hooded crows, magpies, and a European goldfinch we heard singing in a stand of maples.

"It's the best birding I've done in the ex-Soviet Union," he said, baffled.

Driving through Chernobyl's silent streets, branches of unpruned chestnut trees grazed the radioactive sides of our bus. It seemed that both Chernobyl and neighboring Pripyat, from which fifty thousand stricken workers and their families had to flee, were being reclaimed by nature. Once-trimmed hedges now ran wild, their foliage so dense that many houses were nearly covered. As we arrived at St. Ilya's, the old Ukrainian Orthodox church in the town of Chernobyl, I asked Volodya Tikhii, who now worked for Greenpeace, how to explain this apparent proliferation of life in a sickened land.

Tikhii, a gaunt man in his early forties with sparse blond hair and thick, owlsh glasses, spoke deliberate, thoughtful English, gleaned from scientific texts at Moscow State, then humanized through increasing contact with international environmentalists. Chernobyl's birds, he replied, absent when he was hoisting lethal water samples from the Pripyat River in 1986, began returning a year later. With few humans or predators to bother them and with no more agricultural pesticides, they seemed to be flourishing. For that matter, a growing population of radioactive roe deer and wild boar now thrived in the surrounding forests, proliferating so rapidly that there was now talk of allowing hunting, lest they spread across northern Ukraine, bringing their radionuclides with them. "Plant growth is sometimes stimulated by radiation," Tikhii said with shrug. "Some researchers think that other organisms may also be."

"Maybe nature appears healthy here," Andriy Demydenko interjected. He stood in the thick churchyard grass, long gone to

seed, his head tilted toward a pair of skylarks perched on St. Ilya's eaves. "But who knows what the life expectancy of these birds will be? Or what chromosomal deviations will erupt in future generations? Animals can't understand the risk they take here." The skylarks took flight; he paused to listen to their pleasing warble. "Humans understand risks. But even we often fail to calculate those we can't see. Appearances deceive."

Demydenko ascended St. Ilya's short flight of front steps, which in sunnier times had been alternately painted red and green. The wooden door was padlocked. He leaned against it and sighed. "I wanted to show you something. But I'll tell you about it instead. A little coincidence from the Bible."

He described a passage from the Book of Revelations, verses 8:2-11, which recounts breaking the seventh and final seal on the book at God's right hand, to release the angels who herald the beginning of the Apocalypse. The first angel's trumpet summons a hailstorm, followed by a mixture of blood and fire that scorches the earth, incinerating trees and grass. The second causes a fiery mountain to slide into the sea.

*And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers and upon the fountains of waters;*

*And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.*

"Do you know the Ukrainian word for wormwood?" Demydenko asked me.

I didn't know any Ukrainian, but I knew that wormwood, an extremely bitter herb, was used to purge intestinal worms and parasites.

"It's *chornobyl*." That was also the correct name of this abandoned town, whose spelling had been corrupted in Russian. "But

the village wasn't named for the plant," Demydenko added. "It's actually named for the falling star." He indicated a sagging sign commemorating Chernobyl's 800th anniversary, which showed a meteor dropping behind the spire of the church where we stood.

In my notebook, I jotted: "Revelations, again."

As we filed back to our bus, Demydenko asked if I would like to visit a Jewish cemetery before we left Chernobyl. "There are two. One for the old believers, and a newer one. There were Jews here for at least four centuries, you know."

By "old believers," I understood him to mean Hasidim: Chernobyl had once been a vigorous center of the fundamentalist Hasidic movement, born during the eighteenth century in Podolia, the neighboring region to the west. Toward the end of the Czarist regime, that center began to crack under pressure from anti-Semitic massacres that swept Ukraine, home at that time to the world's greatest concentration of Jews. During four years of anarchy following the Bolsheviks' 1917 October Revolution, Jews became the helpless prey of free-booting bands of plunderers who roamed the Ukrainian countryside, igniting pogroms of astonishing depravity.

One of the most infamous had occurred not far from where the wreckage of Reactor Number 4 now stood. For a week during April 1919, a gang of renegade peasants led by a twenty-three-year-old warlord brigand, the Ataman Struk, commandeered steamships coming up the Dnieper from Kiev, throwing overboard every Jew they found. Then they marched a thousand Chernobyl Jews at gunpoint into the Pripyat River—the Dnieper tributary where an hour earlier we'd been birdwatching. Anyone who swam ashore was shot. The rest drowned.

The newer Jewish cemetery, I suspected correctly, held the few hundred who survived until occupying Nazis finished them off in 1944, just as they wiped out two thousand other Ukrainian Jewish communities. Well before Chernobyl blew, its Jews were already dead. "Thanks. We don't have to," I told Demydenko. I had

seen enough of cemeteries lately. The worst nuclear tragedy in history was enough sorrow for one day.

In the van back to Kiev, Volodya Tikhii sat beside me. "I'm sorry about your parents."

"Thanks."

My father had died on his eightieth birthday. Though his end was an excruciating, slow-motion ordeal, it was expected—even a relief, especially for my mother, who had nursed him through a long decline. The big shock, I told Volodya, came when she suddenly followed him.

"Very terrible," Tikhii murmured. Yet the anguish in which I'd wallowed during the previous months felt self-indulgent compared to what he had endured. Seven years earlier, Tikhii's father had perished in the Gulag (his crime, for which he was jailed repeatedly, was teaching the Ukrainian language). Volodya hadn't seen his father for the last six years of his life. Just recently, Oleksa Tikhii's remains had been exhumed in Russia and carried back to Kiev, where he was re-interred in a massive public funeral as a martyred hero.

"Losing my parents one right after the other was a double blow," I said. "But they were elderly. Your father was still vital. It's so unjust." He nodded, staring outside as the van slowed to thread through a herd of dairy cows. "You know," I added, "my father was also from Ukraine."

Surprised, Tikhii turned to me.

"He had to flee when he was a little boy," I explained, "after his own father was assassinated. He came with his mother and brothers to the United States when he was eleven."

"Do you know what town they were from?"

I did. I had heard the name many times, along with the story of my grandfather's murder, which my father repeated so often when I was growing up that I recalled it in his voice and could still picture him telling it, his big silhouetted frame weighing down the foot of my bed.

"A village called Mala Viska," I said.

Tikhii didn't know of it.

"It's supposedly about halfway between Kiev and Odessa," I said. "The nearest city, I think, was called Elizabethgrad. That was where my grandmother took him and his brothers after my grandfather was killed. They lived there three years before they could get to America."

Elizabethgrad also drew a blank. "Its name may have been changed to something else," Tikhii said. "The Soviets did a lot of that. I'll look it up when we get back."

That night in a Kiev restaurant we ate gefilte fish, sliced cucumbers, tomatoes, red cabbage, roasted chicken, rye bread with duck pâté and horseradish, red caviar, and prune compote, washed down with Crimean and Carpathian wines. My great-grandmother—my mother's grandmother, from Podolia, who left Ukraine in 1890—often made gefilte fish from the northern pike and carp we caught in lakes in Minnesota, where I was raised. That week, I had seen Dnieper River fishermen in shallow skiffs catching pike and carp to sell in the streets, a practice theoretically prohibited because the fish were now radioactive. "Where does the restaurant get this fish?" I asked Andriy Demydenko.

"Don't ask," he said, filling my tumbler with purple Crimean port.

Tikhii, seated next to me, drained his own glass. "By the way," he said. "It's Kirovograd."

"Sorry?"

"Yelisavetgrad. The city where your father lived. The Communists changed it to Kirovograd. I found Mala Viska, too."

I paused, a forkful of irradiated gefilte fish hovering between plate and mouth.

"Would you like to go there?"

"Is it far? How could I get there?" I had a solid week of interviews ahead, and my visa locked me into a departure the following Monday. "I just have Sunday free. Are there buses?"

"No. But I have a car. We can get there and back in a day. If you want."

I wanted. In that instant, I was sure that I was fated to go there, destiny having appeared in the form of Volodya Tikhii's car and his offer to be my guide and translator. Bringing the remains of his own father home had at last accorded his family some peace and closure—a consolation that, I gathered, he now kindly wished to extend in some way to me.

The following Sunday, we filled his aging blue VAZ sedan with black market gasoline and drove into the steppes of central Ukraine to find my father's village. What I hadn't told Volodya Tikhii was that this journey involved more than honoring my late father's memory. All my life my father had told me what had happened to him and to my grandfather back in Ukraine ("which," he always added, "was part of Russia"). I'd heard the story so often it had assumed mythological dimensions. I read it again in newspaper columns that eulogized him. But not long before his death—yet after strokes had so ravaged his memory that I could no longer challenge him—I'd heard a sharply different account of the same events. Now I was driving through a rolling landscape of collective farms, whose vast, pale fields of wheat and hops disappeared over the horizon toward Mala Viska, where I hoped someone could tell me the truth.



This is the story my father told me all my life:

My grandfather, Avraham Weisman, was born in a village between Kiev and Odessa. Because his father—my great-grandfather—administered a powerful man's lands, he survived the pogroms that either killed or banished many of his own relatives around the turn of the century. Although the law limited the right of Jews to own property, over the years my great-grandfather nevertheless managed to acquire substantial acreage in reward for his services.

In his early twenties, my grandfather Avraham traveled to Hungary, where for two years he worked in a mill, studying its

function and memorizing its construction. When he returned to his Ukrainian village, he built one on his family's land. By the time his first child—my father—was born in 1912, my grandfather had more than one hundred employees and lived in a large house overlooking a river. Milling wheat and pressing sunflower-seed oil had made him rich enough to marry a rabbi's daughter.

There is a sepia photograph taken in their yard, probably in 1918 or early 1919. My father, Simon Weisman—*Shimon Vaisman* in Yiddish; Simon Weisman after Ellis Island—is in knickers, mounted on a tricycle with large iron wheels. A younger brother sits on the lawn nearby. My father and uncles were attended by a governess. My grandmother, Rebecca Weisman, née Gellerman, did not have to work, although she often sewed clothes from fine fabric with my great-grandmother Frieda, the rabbi's widow, who lived with them.

My father clearly remembered the day the soldiers came, he would tell me. They were not Czarist troops, but Bolsheviks. He recalled how they tramped into the house with muddy boots. When his grandmother barred their passage across the imported carpet, the revolutionary who led the ragged column drew a sword and slew her. Six-year-old Simon ran at her attacker and pounded him with his little fists. The soldier hit him with the butt of the sword that killed my great-grandmother. At this point in the story, my father would show me the scar on his forehead, next to his dark widow's peak.

They marched the family outside. My grandfather was summarily tried and convicted of being a capitalist collaborator for selling wheat to the imperial Czar's army. His mill and adjoining fields and forests were confiscated for the revolution. With his wife and children helplessly watching, Avraham Weisman's Communist captors stood him against the house and shot him.

My broad-shouldered grandfather had measured well over six feet. My father recalled struggling to help drag his body, enshrouded in one of my grandmother's sheets, to the grave they dug before they fled. Rebecca Weisman took her sons and what little

she could carry to the nearest city, Yelisavetgrad, sixty kilometers to the east. Her only skill was sewing; by night she made clothes to sell each day in the market.

"You kids don't know how lucky you've got it," my father told my sister and me. "When your grandmother sold something, we ate. It wasn't too damn often."

She wrote to relatives who had left years earlier for the United States. After months, a reply arrived from a sister, whose husband had found work in Minnesota as a kosher slaughterer. They knew someone lending money to help Jews escape the chaos and menace of the fledgling Soviet Union. Much of the cash they sent went to coax officials. Three years after my grandfather's execution, my grandmother Rebecca and her sons traveled to Moscow, for paperwork and more bribes that dragged on for months. My father's principal memory of those times was bald Vladimir Lenin parading like God through the streets. Then a train to Riga, on the Latvian coast. Then a boat to America.

They arrived in late autumn 1923. My father, eleven years old, sold newspapers in a language he couldn't read on freezing Minneapolis street corners. To her death, my grandmother remained what Yelisavetgrad had transformed her into: a dressmaker. Years later, along with my father's exploits in World War II, the legends of their poverty became my bedtime tales: Simon and his brother Harold rising for their predawn bakery route each day before high school; baby brother Herman, sent one morning to buy cracked eggs—all they could afford—and, upon finding none, asking if the grocer could crack him a dozen.

It was this brother, my Uncle Herman, who first cast doubt on my father's story. That happened on January 16, 1991, the night that war began in the Persian Gulf.



"We'd better wrap up if we don't want to be late for your uncle's," Cecilia informed me. "It's nearly six."

We were in a cubbyhole at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., in the fourth-floor Special Projects division. I was sitting on the floor, surrounded by legal pads bearing notes and lists. My partner, Cecilia Vaisman, swiveled in front of a computer terminal, scanning news wires for mention of Colombia, Argentina, Paraguay, or Nicaragua—the four countries where we'd worked together during the preceding six months. Following a morning of interviews across town, that afternoon we had been using NPR's phones to schedule appointments in the places we were headed next: the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Chile.

We had been in Washington for two days, questioning officers at the World Bank for a documentary about the longest dam in the world, which was then under construction along the Argentine-Paraguay border. During the 1980s, the Bank had loaned Argentina more than a billion dollars to build it, which the military government instead used to finance a war with Great Britain over the Falklands Islands. Upon learning that not a single bag of cement had been poured with all that money, the World Bank's response simply had been to loan the Argentine generals more.

With two other freelance journalists, Cecilia and I were under contract to produce a special series for National Public Radio. Set in a dozen Latin American countries, *Vanishing Homelands* would show how so-called progress and development were often literally ripping the ground from beneath traditional cultures—or, as in the case of this hydroelectric dam, drowning it. Upon completion, the homes of 50,000 people would be submerged by a stagnant, parasite-breeding tropical lake. It was the largest urban displacement in history by a development project, but somehow the funds designated for resettlement had also mysteriously evaporated.

"Everything's about Iraq," Cecilia said, shutting down the terminal. "C'mon."

"I need to call my parents first."

"*Bueno, pero rápido, ¿ok? Voy al baño.*"

When she left I called Scottsdale, Arizona. The phone answered on the third ring.

"Mom."

A pause, then, "Oh, honey, hi." I'd awakened her from a nap, I guessed. "Gee, we were hoping you'd call. Are you at Herman's?"

"Not yet. I'm at NPR. How did you know I was going there?"

"He called us this morning. He and Margaret are so excited to meet Cecilia. Wait a minute, let me put Dad on. Wait a minute, Alan."

"I'll wait. Don't worry."

She would be in a lightweight housecoat, uncurling creakily from the cushioned rattan recliner in the living room that nearly swallowed her, removing from her knees a green afghan she'd knitted and marking her place in the paperback that would have fallen in her lap. Setting aside her reading glasses, she would rise with a grunt to her slippered feet and shuffle down the short hall toward the den, until she could see my father's bulk filling his own black leather recliner, surrounded by walls encrusted with his diplomas and plaques and war medals. He, too, would appear to be reading, either the newspaper he'd fetched from the driveway that morning, or one of the golf magazines he still received. But this was only habit. For a while now, we'd realized that he scanned the same page for hours.

"Bobe." I could hear her voice trickling back, calling him by the pet name whose derivation not even she could recall. "Bobie, it's Alan."

"Who?" His bellow remained unchanged.

"Alan. Your son."

As he fumbled with the receiver of the desk phone she brought to him, I heard the background babble of an afternoon television host. The TV was permanently switched on; we suspected he only dimly registered what appeared on the screen. At some point, my mother had noticed that he never changed the channel.

"Hi, Dad. It's Alan."

After a beat, he remembered. "Oh, hi, son," he replied, his voice modulating from confusion to pleasure. "Are you coming over?"



"I'm out of town, Dad." It had been six months since I'd seen them.

"Oh, Si," my mother interjected, back on her own extension. "You know that Alan's been gone since July."

"He has?"

"Certainly! We just talked to him two days ago."

"For the life of me, Charlotte, I can't remember—"

"He can't remember *kasha* anymore, Alan. You wouldn't believe—"

"It's all right," I interrupted, before she had a chance to warm up. "I'm in Washington, Dad. I've been out of the country this year, working in South and Central America, and just came up here for some interviews. I have to go back down there in a couple of days."

"Well, that sounds real nice, Alan."

Interesting, perhaps. But not nice. "It is, Dad," I agreed. No use getting into that.

"Well, you be sure to come see us when you get back. You know your mother and I love to see you."

"Thanks, Dad. Me, too."

"Don't hang up, Alan," my mother said, as he clicked off. "Oh, Alan. I don't know how I'm going to take it. All day long he asks the same things, over and over."

"I know, Ma. I'm sorry I'm not there."

Seven years earlier, in 1984, a series of strokes had forced my father, then seventy-two, to retire from the distinguished law firm he'd founded in Minneapolis, something he swore he'd never do. When my mother announced that they were moving to Scottsdale on the eastern edge of suburban Phoenix, I was alarmed. Early on, I'd learned that my relationship with my parents improved in direct proportion to the distance between us. Nearly all my adult life, except when I was periodically based out of the country, my home had been a renovated cabin in the central Arizona mountains, just two hours northwest of where they would now reside. But two hours had turned out to be a manageable buffer, and we had actually grown closer. "Mom, you shouldn't say things like that in front of him, like how he can't remember."

She uttered a Yiddish obscenity. "Dad doesn't know from one minute to the next. Believe me, it goes in one ear and out the other."

"But he still has feelings." It fascinated my sister and me how, once he became the weaker one, our mother didn't miss a chance to finally get in her own licks.

"Where's Cecilia? We can't wait to meet her."

"She's in the bathroom."

"Didn't she want to talk to us?"

"I'm pretty sure she really needed to go to the bathroom. This was the only chance I had to call all day. We have to get going to Uncle Herman and Aunt Margaret's. They're expecting us for dinner."

"Well, you give Cecilia our love. Dad and I are real happy for you."

"I thought Dad doesn't know from one minute to the next."

"He knows what makes you happy."

Now that would be a first, I mused, as I said good-bye.

"Let's go," Cecilia said, returning. She had wrapped a knee-length navy blue coat over her bulky turtleneck and gray wool skirt, and added gold button earrings. Her brown hair with its natural flashes of gold had been trimmed in New York, where she'd spent Christmas with her mother, and hung prettily at her collar. Cecilia and I had met on this project six months earlier in the desert and immediately set out for the tropics. Until she picked me up on New Year's Eve in the Newark airport, I had never seen her dressed for winter. Her cheeks were two rosy blooms that made her wide-set hazel eyes even greener. She looked alive, wonderful, and something else I'd never previously beheld: relaxed.

I stood, reached for my jacket, then stopped. "Don't we have to call Costa Rica?"

"Ay, *Dios*. I almost forgot."

"The subway only takes twenty-five minutes. There's enough time."

We dialed our coproducers, Sandy Tolan and Nancy Postero, who lived in a cottage up the hill from us at our field base in La Piedad, Costa Rica, a coffee plantation twenty miles west of San

José. Nancy answered first, and a second later Sandy picked up the extension in the recording studio that we'd rigged in their extra bedroom. Over the previous months, while Cecilia and I were on our various travels, Sandy and Nancy had worked in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Panama. Between research jaunts that averaged three weeks, the four of us would reconvene in Costa Rica, compare notes, transcribe the forty-or-so hours of tape each team had gathered, and then head off again. "What's it like back in the States?" they asked simultaneously.

"Hard to tell. Everything's wrapped in yellow ribbons." War with Iraq was expected to break out any minute now, we added—unaware how literally accurate this was.

"You get right back down here where it's *safe*," ordered Nancy. This was our little joke: We had chosen Costa Rica for our base because it was central to the rest of Latin America. Until we lived there, however, we'd never fully grasped how the United States had turned this small Third World country into a billboard touting the rewards of democracy, counterposed against the grand display for Communism that the Soviets had erected in Cuba. Both sides had poured billions into these tropical alter egos. Upon arriving in San José, the capital, we had the sensation of having driven three thousand miles from Tucson, Arizona, only to reach a city that resembled suburban Phoenix. The cloying split-level architecture and Bermuda grass lawns, the large placid middle class, and the fleets of excursion buses ferrying binocular-packing Auduboners to well-marked rainforest trails suggested not so much Latin America as a Latin American theme park.

"The U.S. must be pretty scary," said Sandy. "We worry about you two up there."

He was kidding, too, but I sensed how isolated he felt from the sudden rush of world events. Only in his early thirties, Sandy Tolan's superb radio documentaries had already earned him some of journalism's highest honors. While crafting an award-winning series for NPR on the 1985 Sanctuary trials, in which the U.S. government prosecuted religious workers for running an underground railroad to smuggle Central American refugees into the

United States, he'd met Nancy, then one of the defense attorneys. He maintained his ethical distance while covering the trials, before asking her to dance at a post-verdict party. Within a year, they were married.

On our way to catch the subway for Silver Springs, where my Aunt Margaret and Uncle Herman lived in a retirement complex, we stopped by the second-floor set of NPR's nightly news program, *All Things Considered*, which was among the shows where Cecilia had been a producer before becoming a freelancer. The regular evening newscast had just ended; reporters were leaning against their gray cubicle partitions, sipping coffee, slipping into overcoats. Suddenly, every TV monitor in the room flared with the same live images from CNN.

Staffers on their way out poured back in, including a few senior producers who had just changed into shorts and sneakers for their Tuesday night basketball league. One of them, Michael Sullivan, leaped onto a table, barking directives, mobilizing the newsroom into a war room. Although war had been imminent for days, no one had expected it at quite this moment. Earlier that afternoon, Scott Simon, the host of NPR's Saturday morning *Weekend Edition*, whose programs Cecilia had often produced, had confided that as one of the journalists selected to accompany U.S. troops to battle, he'd be given twelve hours' secret advance warning of the hostilities to catch the official press plane. "If you're around and notice that I'm not," Simon had joshed, "you'll figure it out."

Unsmiling now, he was pushing through the clogged newsroom toward the door, wearing a leather flight jacket. Part of his dismay was realizing that he and several other correspondents had been duped, a military deception that set the pattern for press manipulation throughout the conflict. But mainly, Scott Simon's trademark sparkle had been doused by an age-old shock: He was really going to war. That knowledge now infused his handsome, fallen face, even though the TV monitors thus far showed nothing more than what resembled a bad display of fireworks occasionally sputtering over a darkened city.

I knew this feeling, how a journalist's reflexive thrill at the

prospect of witnessing the ancient rite of combat is quickly dissolved by the sickening reality of men willfully firing at each other. In the past year, I had accompanied Guatemalan insurgents clashing with army troops and found myself—and Cecilia—on a forced march with Colombian guerrillas in the Andes, a situation that nervously recalled an assignment two years earlier in that same country. That previous occasion had ended badly—a firefight in which most of my companions were killed, although it provided vivid reading in the *New York Times Magazine*. This time we had been luckier, but now she and I lingered in the NPR newsroom's doorway, wondering how our current material could ever compete for attention with Operation Desert Storm, with its instant replay and colorful ribbons for the home team. By contrast, our present commission to chronicle how entire cultures were becoming endangered species was exceptionally resistant to diversionary gloss.

During the previous six months, my partners and I had seen Ecuadoran Indians driven nearly to extinction by an oil rush in their Amazonian homeland; Colombia's richest farms turned to chemical swamps to raise flawless flowers for export; the forests of Guaraní hunter-gatherers in Argentina replaced by uniform rows of California pines for cardboard production; the last wild tribe in Bolivia tamed by missionaries; Nicaragua's Miskito Indians abandoned by their former CIA-backed contra allies to an invasion of foreigners snatching their lumber and lobsters; and peoples of the Panamanian jungles watching their culture disappear along a new highway. It was engrossing stuff, but no match for a patriotic American resource war against a swarthy villain in the Middle East, now unfolding on prime-time TV. For several minutes we blended into the great American audience, mesmerized by the newsroom's monitors. Finally, Cecilia drew on her gloves and pulled me away. "Now we're really late for your uncle's. *Vámonos*."



Before meeting her, I'd occasionally noted the similarity of our surnames when I would hear on NPR that ". . . we had production

help this week from Cecilia Vaisman." This was shorthand for Cecilia locating exactly the right musician in Cuba or the perfect mountain hamlet in El Salvador, or Cecilia staying up all night in the editing booth with a steaming gourd of *yerba maté* to confect seamless interviews from hours of inchoate tape, like a surgeon splicing precisely the right capillaries amid a glob of vascular spaghetti.

Weisman, Vaisman, Weissman, Weitzmann: The variant spellings, I assumed, depended on whichever shores successive waves of diaspora had deposited my ancestral clan, or whichever steamship clerk or immigration officer had transliterated the name from Yiddish (װײַסמאַן) or Cyrillic (Вайсман) to the Roman alphabet. In Latin America, where the letter *w* is rarely used, I became *Alán Vaisman* myself. But as far as Cecilia and I were concerned, another issue had become increasingly pertinent: How closely might we actually be related?

The previous summer, driving the length of Mexico and Central America, we'd had sufficient time to explore the business of our similar surnames, and beyond. The story she'd always heard was that her Jewish paternal grandfather, like my own, was born in rural Ukraine between Kiev and Odessa. Just after the turn of the century, *Moishe* Vaisman had escaped the pogroms by migrating to Brazil, where he married a woman he met on the boat from Europe. Within two years, they moved to Uruguay and then to Argentina, where he became Mauricio. Two generations later, Cecilia was born in Buenos Aires, the youngest of four children.

That was 1961, the same year that her father tired of the ruinous Argentine economy, whose currency various Perónists and generals had stretched one way and then the other, until it was the softest in the Americas. Mayer Vaisman had tried several businesses that he believed would have succeeded anywhere else. When his Catholic wife, Carmen, a gifted seamstress who partly supported them, became pregnant again, he finally decided to do something drastic.

"I think it was pretty amazing," Cecilia told me, her eyes widening. "At forty-three, he borrowed from his brothers to get to

New York. Then for a year he sold pots and pans door-to-door to earn enough to bring us to the States. My mother still tells about flying twenty-eight hours with airsick kids, changing planes in every airport in Latin America, all the while dragging everything we owned and taking care of a four-month-old—me.”

My mother’s grandfather, who came to America from the Russian Ukraine in 1891, had also begun as an itinerant peddler. It seemed odd that this still happened—yet, as the familiar Mexican landscape reminded me, why shouldn’t it? During the early 1980s I’d lived in Mexico, and later wrote a book describing how millions of *latinos* cross the border into the United States and do anything to earn passage for the families left behind. So why should the story of Cecilia’s father strike me as strange?

Because, I realized a bit uncomfortably, he wasn’t just a *latino*. He was also a Jew, like me. But why should that matter?

“Tell me about your family, Alan.”

When she made this request we were climbing into the Sierra Madre Occidental, almost exactly where another young woman had asked the same question a decade earlier. On that occasion, I had reached back to the story of our family’s flight from Ukraine that my father had told me all my life. In doing so, it had struck me then how much my identity was still wrapped in his, despite years of struggle to disengage and forge my own way. Nevertheless, that woman, a biologist, was deeply moved, and the following year became my wife.

Five years later, she wasn’t my wife anymore—a sorrow I attributed, among other things, to the fact that we were nearly ten years apart. Now, half a decade again later, at forty-three myself, I surely knew better than to get involved with, say, Cecilia Vaisman, fourteen years my junior. Nevertheless, I was about to her tell the same story, knowing—and, despite my better judgment, hoping—how powerful its impact could be.



A few years before the night I took Cecilia to meet my Uncle Herman, he had retired from a second career as a bureaucrat for various federal agencies in Washington, which paid better than being an English professor. It was work he regretted, but ever since my Aunt Margaret, the brilliant classmate he’d married, was stricken with multiple sclerosis, he couldn’t easily decline more money.

As an undergraduate, Herman had written plays that were staged at the University of Minnesota. His dreams of becoming a dramatist, however, succumbed to the Depression: “a starving writer,” I was frequently reminded by my parents. Since, as a boy, I displayed few active symptoms of becoming any kind of writer—I kept no diary and never wrote stories, although I did read a book a day—I was always mystified by these warnings. I was puzzled by something else, too: Around the time I was four years old, my father and Uncle Herman had stopped speaking. The pall that darkened my father’s features whenever his brother’s name was mentioned warned me not to inquire why. Once, I dimly recalled, my sister asked my mother. “You kids wouldn’t understand,” she snapped.

“You mean he and your father don’t talk?” Cecilia exclaimed. “You didn’t tell me.”

“They do now. They didn’t the whole time I was growing up.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea.”

“*Qué pena, Alan.*” Then: “Ay, we should have brought wine.”

“Too late.” We were at the last stop in Silver Springs, hailing a cab. My watch said it was past seven-thirty, and I knew that because of Margaret’s health, this evening couldn’t go much beyond nine. Sensing my anxiety, Cecilia squeezed my hand. With her woolen glove she brushed her light brown hair out of her eyes, revealing a broad, smooth forehead. From her temples, the lines of Cecilia’s face descended straight to her jaw before converging toward her chin. Although we had known each other only six months, I had seen these distinctive, square features all my life.

"Never underestimate the incompetence of government," my Uncle Herman declared. Late in his Washington career, he'd been assigned to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. At FEMA, he was once assigned to design a form that refugees from cities destroyed by nuclear attack could submit to their former post offices to have their mail forwarded—notwithstanding the fact that such post offices by then would be glowing rubble. "Let's talk about more pleasant things," he said, filling our wineglasses. "What about you two?"

He smiled invitingly at Cecilia, who managed to diplomatically reply, "We're in the process of finding that out. It's been wonderful getting to know Alan. It's wonderful to finally meet some of his family."

Coming to her rescue, I described what we called our first date: a night march in the Andes of southwestern Colombia, with a guerrilla group comprised of Páez Indians who specialized in terrorizing haciendas stolen from their ancestors four hundred-fifty years earlier. We'd shared a tent with two *guerrilleros* named Francisco and Claudia, whose loaded AK-47s clanked sweetly together as they made love in full gear.

Aunt Margaret, who appeared to have nodded off, woke up with that story. "My heavens! Be careful, you two."

That night, Herman cleared up speculation over a question that interested us: whether Avraham Weisman and Mauricio Vaisman possibly had been brothers. Cecilia knew that her grandfather had two male siblings, but Herman was certain that his father had only a sister, named Rivkeh. Maybe, Herman surmised, our great-grandfathers were related. "It's possible," he said. "My grandfather may have had brothers. I know only that his name was *Shuel*—Saul."

If Saul Weisman and Cecilia's great-grandfather were brothers, that would make us fifth cousins, a sufficient dilution of the bloodline regarding any future concerns that might arise between us. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were," said my cousin Abbi, fingering the pictures. "He really looks like you, Dad."

Herman gave Cecilia a hug. "Welcome back, relative."

He went to a closet and returned with an oval-framed portrait of my grandfather Avraham. The severe man in this antiquated photograph was balding and bearded; nevertheless, he resembled several people in the room. I could also see my father.

"What happened between the two of you?" I asked my uncle.

He knew who I meant. "That was a long time ago, Alan."

"I know. I remember the last time I saw you. At Grandma's." His picture of my grandfather, which had formerly hung on my grandmother's wall, stirred dusty recollections of her dark, cramped house in Minneapolis. It was a gloomy little gallery of the deceased, featuring framed tintypes of her rabbi father and his wife; of her husband, Avraham; a photo of Milstein, the hypochondriac she married in the States, who surprised everyone by actually dying from one of his multiple complaints; their daughter Frieda, taken at thirteen by pneumonia; and a graduation picture of Herman and Si's brother, my Uncle Harold, dead at twenty-seven from infected kidneys.

The same year that Harold died, my grandmother had remarried again, this time to the widower of my grandfather Avraham's sister, Rivkeh. This third husband, her former brother-in-law, had contributed his own photographic cache of deceased relatives to my grandmother's dreary display, including an enlargement framed in white gold of his first wife, invalidated in a pogrom, which hung from a tasseled cord. As a child, it was not a joy to go there. Among my few pleasant memories was playing with Uncle Herman on my grandmother's thin floral carpet. Then, at one point, whenever we made our usual Sunday visit, he was absent. "Why?" I repeated.

Herman and Margaret exchanged glances. "All right," he said. "It was around the time when Si started his law firm."

By then, Herman was teaching at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. One evening my father found himself dining with one of his brother's colleagues, a physics professor. He was visiting Minneapolis, and Herman had given him his brother Si's phone number. Sometime after his third whiskey, my father turned to

him and inquired, "Tell me: Is my brother still a goddam Communist?"

This was 1951, the McCarthy era. When this comment filtered back to my uncle, he confronted his brother and raised hell. After forty years, Herman's mild face still colored as he remembered. He had demanded an apology and had insisted that my father call their mutual acquaintance and retract the remark. "Of course, he refused. Si can be pretty stubborn."

I could picture my father's response to such a request. Herman saw my eyes roll. "But," he hastened to add, "so can I. I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't forgive him for quite a while. We lost seventeen years."

During a trip in 1968 to see his mother, Herman contacted my parents. The feud had lasted long enough, he said. My mother phoned me that night at college to describe the lovely dinner they'd had. Now I realized why she had called: Her relief at seeing her husband reunited with his left-wing intellectual brother was partly because history was echoing itself with his son.

"I understand completely," I told Herman. "You can imagine what we went through during Vietnam." Actually, he probably couldn't, because our rupture was pretty spectacular. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, my immigrant father, now a prominent attorney, was serving as a strategist for Vice President Hubert Humphrey's presidential bid.

"Yes," my uncle said, nodding. "Your father, I gathered, became an important man in the Democratic Party."

I, meanwhile, was encamped with thousands of anti-war protesters across from the Conrad Hilton Hotel, where he and all the delegates were staying. The evening before the riots started, we met in front of his hotel. Following that encounter, our own silence began.

Cecilia hadn't heard this story. "My God. What did he say when he saw you?"

"Among other things, that I was supporting the sons-of-bitches who killed his father."

"What do you mean 'killed his father'?" asked Herman.

"Communists. All my life I've heard how they assassinated my grandfather—your father—in Russia. And now I wanted to hand them Southeast Asia on a silver platter. Et cetera."

Herman looked at me quizzically. "Communists didn't kill my father."

Now it was my turn to ask what he meant. "I've heard that story all my life," I repeated.

He shook his head. I stared at him. "Then who?"

"It was the Cossacks."

For three years following the 1917 October Revolution, civil war convulsed the Russian federation. The Ukraine especially was bedlam. When occupying German forces left after World War I, parts of the region were seized at various times by Ukrainian nationalists, Bolsheviks, the counterrevolutionary Volunteer and Cossack armies, and even the Poles. At one point, according to Herman, the Cossack Army led by General Anton Denikin launched a massive plunder of Ukrainian Jews. One evening, Denikin's marauders rode their horses into Mala Viska.

They set fire to the village, burning my great-grandparents alive, seizing jewels and property, raping and disemboweling my grandmother's sister. When my grandfather Avraham saw them coming, he ran with my grandmother and their sons through the fields. The Cossacks fired after them. My grandfather, a big, easy target, was hit. He told Rebecca to take the boys and flee. Late that night, after the pogrom had waned, she returned to find he had bled to death. A neighbor helped bury him, then hid them overnight in his haystack. The following day, they left on foot for Yelisavetgrad, where they had a cousin. My grandmother carried a suitcase filled with Czarist rubles. She kept them until they left for America, but they remained worthless.

Herman removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. "Once," he said, "when we were still in Yelisavetgrad, but after Denikin had left the Ukraine, she went back to see what she could rescue.

Everything had been confiscated. All she got were some sacks of flour. She shared them with the neighbors to make *matzohs* for Passover."

"Wait a minute, Uncle Herman," I interrupted. "You were only a couple of years old when this happened. My father was nearly seven. How could you possibly remember all this?"

"What I remember is my mother telling it, all the time I was growing up. I can still hear her, cursing the name of General Denikin."

## CHAPTER 2



July 1960

A ripple of interest followed the bulky, white-haired man in the shiny blue suit as he passed through the hotel dining room, moving from table to table. He headed to ours.

"Good to see you, Si. Nice work. This your boy?" he said, shaking my father's hand.

"My son, Alan."

He shifted to my hand and pumped. "Well, Alan, you can tell your friends you met Melvin Belli."

He faded toward the door. "Who's Melvin Belli, Dad?" I asked my father.

"A lawyer. A jerk."

"Is he important?"

"He thinks so, doesn't he? Eat. We have to go soon."

I returned my attention to my prime rib with creamed horseradish, which I'd never tasted before. I wasn't quite finished when my father wiped his mouth with his napkin and rose. "Let's go." I hesitated. "On the double, mister!"

"Yes, sir."

I dropped my fork and leapt up, glancing wistfully at the remaining gob of horseradish, which I'd just discovered how much I liked and had been saving for last. It wasn't, however, worth the consequences of failing to carry out his orders immediately.

## CHAPTER 23



"These," said Nikolai, indicating yet another rolling cart stacked with gray boxes full of blue folders.

I sank into my usual chair at the oak table. For several days, I had been sifting news clippings, photographs, meeting minutes, handwritten notes, and legal documents that Tcherikower had amassed. I read down long foolscap strips of Hebrew characters, containing ledgers of the dead, painstakingly sounding out the *gimels*, *lameds*, *dalets*, *mems*, *nuhns*, and realizing with a start that, for instance, the name I just read—גולדמן—said Goldman. Somehow, it made the past terribly real to pick my way through this ancient alphabet and discover names so familiar to me. Goldman had been my great-grandmother Bessie Meshbesh's maiden name. Goldman, Schwartzman, Rosenbaum, Blumenfeld: Seeing these names in the old tongue made me feel like I was related to them all.

Cyrillic was harder, but one day in two separate news clips I ran across the name Вайсман—*Vaisman*. Excitedly, I called Nikolai, who was cataloging manuscripts in an adjacent office. He ran his finger across the pages. Both, it turned out, referred to the same man named Weisman who lived near Odessa, who had been robbed of everything in a pogrom but survived to tell one of Tcherikower's associates about it. "Not my grandfather," I told Nikolai, after he translated. He shook his head sympathetically.

Nikolai returned to his work, and I continued my search. At random, I selected a folder that held a large yellowed envelope. The index sheet simply read "Torah." I opened it; the contents came sliding out on the table, and I jumped back. As grisly to me as if they'd been shreds of human skin, I was looking at a pile of Torah scraps.

I am not an observant Jew, but a Torah is hallowed thing. Each scroll, executed in flawless, solemn calligraphy, represents years of a scribe's work. The parchment fragments that lay before me had been gathered by some sorrowing Jew after *goyische* infidels in seconds had ripped apart a Torah easily hundreds of years old, over which untold generations of bar mitzvah boys had chanted the blessing, just as I had once done. One swift pogrom had severed that lineage. There was no indication which one: In their very anonymity, these remnants stood for them all. Feeling sick to my stomach, I gingerly replaced them in their box, labeled "1919"—a year when "which one" became irrelevant. The pogrom was everywhere.



Czar Nicholas II had assumed personal command of the Russian army in World War I with disastrous consequences. Supply lines soon failed, and thousands of soldiers, desperate for ammunition and food, deserted for home—only to find that under Czarina Alexandra and her bizarre counselor Rasputin, their country was no better off. Starving workers in Petrograd—St. Petersburg—amassed outside the czar's winter palace, demanding food and wages. Soldiers sent to disperse these strikers ended up joining them instead. The day following his March 1917 abdication, the czar and his family were arrested and led off, never to be seen again. A provisional government formed, and a thirty-seven-year-old moderate, Alexandr Kerensky, became prime minister. Kerensky immediately set about suppressing the radical Bolsheviks, but promised political freedom to everyone else. Even Jews.



This must have given my grandfather a taste of sweet vindication. Kerensky spoke not only of full Jewish civil and political rights, but even of Jewish autonomy. His social democracy might even have worked, and the twentieth century might have turned out very differently, but for one fatal mistake: The new prime minister tried to keep his nearly wrecked nation in World War I, in which more than a million Russians had already died. The demoralized survivors were easily swayed by Communist revolutionaries who promised no more war. Where Kerensky spoke of eventual land reform, the Bolsheviks pledged immediate expropriation of the hated nobility, and army deserters who rushed home after the czar's abdication happily began seizing lands. In late October, a coup removed Kerensky and put Trotsky, Lenin, Rykov, and Stalin in power.

With this turn of events, Ukraine—along with Georgia, Armenia, Finland, and the Baltic states—tried to bolt from Russian rule. Their independence went unrecognized by the Bolshevik government, which sent in occupying troops. But just as suddenly they withdrew, as for an instant in history all those lands fell into the possession of Germany, ceded by the Bolsheviks in a humiliating separate peace they signed to rid themselves of the world war. Ignoring Ukraine's new national assembly, Germany moved its own forces into Kiev and placed a *hetman*, a regional governor, in command.

Soon, however, this *hetman* found himself quite stranded, as the Allies won and the Germans were forced to withdraw their occupying troops. At that point, five flags were raised over Ukraine, each heralding forces at war with the other four. They were:

- Ukrainian nationalists, again claiming their independence;
- Bolsheviks, reiterating their intentions to include Ukraine in their Soviet Union;
- Galicia, a former Polish-Ukrainian principality, seceding to form its own republic;
- The Poles, whose country lay historic claim to Ukraine's Galician territory;

- and, a loyalist "White" army, rising from the ranks of the once-proud Imperial military, financed by rich landowners to defeat the Reds and to reinstitute the monarchy of Holy Mother Russia.

All these opposing forces agreed on one thing: The great belt of rich black earth of central Ukraine, replete with grain and sugar beets, would be critical to their future. All swooped in to seize it. During the subsequent civil war, which lasted until 1921, Ukraine's capital, Kiev, changed hands fifteen times.

As I tracked the fate of Jews through this bloody maze, I tried to imagine the choices now facing my grandfather. Several Jews—including Trotsky himself—had helped engineer the Bolshevik revolution. My agro-industrialist grandfather Avraham logically would have opposed nationalization of property. Yet early in the revolution, to avoid the food shortages that helped depose the czar, agriculture was the one private enterprise the Bolsheviks permitted to continue—especially in loamy Kherson province, home to most Jewish farmers and where Mala Viska lay. So perhaps my grandfather felt secure there, and, since his lands were doubtlessly still in some nobleman's name, maybe he surmised that nothing would really change at all. Even if his holdings technically transferred to the state, they would still profit from his expertise.

And something else: Later, when the pogroms began again, Jewish presence in the Bolshevik movement and Lenin's initial sympathy for Jews as an oppressed people provided a shield for the Jewish populace—the histories I found and the Tcherikower archive attributed few Jewish deaths to the Red Army. So, did my grandfather feel more protected by the Bolsheviks because he was a Jew, or more threatened by them because he was a businessman?

In the Tcherikower archive there was compelling evidence upon which to make a good guess. My good guess is that my wily, successful grandfather did whatever it took to be useful to whoever happened to be in power on any given day, because he must have known that every day could have been his family's last.



The Ukrainian nationalists, whose fledgling independent government in 1917 had been easily thrust aside by the Germans, rushed back when the German Hetmanate collapsed near the end of 1918. The head of the Ukrainian armed forces that took Kiev from the scattered remaining German troops was a short man of thirty-nine named Simon Petlyura, a former journalist and propagandist for Ukrainian independence. Not long after the Germans were defeated and the new Ukrainian National Republic was declared, Petlyura became president.

He would not hold that office for long; by mid-1920 the Bolsheviks won Ukraine and stayed for the next seventy years. But Simon Petlyura's name would again resound worldwide. In 1926, while the deposed president sat in a restaurant on Boulevard St. Michel in Paris, where he published a tabloid for other exiled Ukrainians like himself, a graying man named Sholom Schwartzbard would step up to his table and carefully shoot him in the head.

Calmly handing his revolver to a gendarme, Schwartzbard explained that he had just rid the world of a mass murderer. In the ensuing trial, the true defendant turned out to be not Schwartzbard but the dead Petlyura, as dozens of Jewish men and women testified how their loved ones were raped and disemboweled and murdered in their beds, and their homes looted and burned by Petlyura's troops. After a while, the French jury forgot that a man was being tried for a cold-blooded killing in broad daylight that he didn't even deny, but grappled only with one question: Could Petlyura be held responsible for 50,000 Jewish deaths perpetrated by his legions? Yes, they decided, and acquitted Sholom Schwartzbard of murder. What he had done, the jury ruled, was slay something so evil it was surely inhuman.

During the trial, it was argued in Petlyura's defense that Jews were Bolshevik ringleaders out to undermine the Ukrainian National Republic, and hence fair targets. Actually, in 1918 fewer

than 1 percent of Ukraine's Jews were Bolsheviks, but it is true that their first choice wasn't an independent Ukraine. After decades of pogroms by Ukrainian patriots, most Jews preferred the Russians, Czarist repression and all—Russian, not Ukrainian, was usually their second language after Yiddish. They had also heard how Petlyura's Ukrainian troops massacred many German officers, who had treated Jews with refreshing courtesy during the hetmanate.

And, in 1918 they were also hearing even worse. This time, Petlyura's men were coming after them.

The first pogroms of the civil war, in the spring of 1918 in northern Ukraine, had been isolated robberies and crimes against property attributed to scattered Bolshevik units withdrawing as the German troops advanced. Back in Russia, the Soviets vowed severe measures against any pogromists in their ranks, a discipline that not only held thereafter, but belied the later protestations of Petlyura and Denikin that they had no way to control deplorable acts perpetrated by their own forces. But if the Communists themselves weren't the marauders responsible for the ocean of Jewish blood spilled in 1919, their presence in the land was its foremost cause. The German hetman was barely gone when the Bolsheviks invaded Ukraine again, scoring a series of quick victories. As defeated Ukrainian nationalist troops evacuated regions they had previously won, they vented their frustration by taking vengeance on the hapless, helpless Jews.

It began on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1918, in the town of Ovruch, which one day would know the added misfortune of being situated due west of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Shouting "Kill the Jew Communists," retreating Petlyuran soldiers that night shot, stabbed, and clubbed to death twenty-six Jews. To the same battle cry, over the next ten days they hit a dozen more *shtetls*, exacting revenge for the beating they were taking from the Red Army. They went as far south as the Hasidic center of Zhytomir, where they killed fifty-two. Two months later, *pogromchiks* returned there to kill fifteen hundred more.

The Bolsheviks kept advancing. By February, they had seized Kiev. Nationalist strategy quickly degenerated into attacking the civilians under the guise of stamping out "Communist sympathizers"—a handy twentieth-century euphemism that in various places would later refer to Vietnamese and Nicaraguan peasants, Guatemalan Indians, Colombian banana-pickers, El Salvadoran fishermen, and North American entertainers. But here it meant only one thing: Jews.

The Petlyurans swept into Novomirgorod, dangerously close to my father's town of Mala Viska, but after killing one hundred Jews they followed the railroad the opposite direction: north toward Kiev, throwing Jews from windows of speeding trains and strafing railway platforms in each town. On February 14, Petlyura sent his most trusted ataman, or commander, a lieutenant named Semosenko, to head off a rumored Bolshevik coup in Proskurov, a city of 50,000 inhabitants, half of whom were Jews. Ataman Semosenko saw a wonderful opportunity. First he gathered leaders of the Proskurov Jewish community and exacted a fine of three hundred thousand rubles for their alleged pro-Bolshevik conniving. Once paid, he went to the town council. All Jews, he ordered, were to be shot—especially children, so that "no more Bolsheviks in Proskurov would reach adulthood."

On *shabbos* morning, Proskurov's synagogues were machine gunned. Hospital patients were bludgeoned to death. After being raped senseless, Jewish women had their breasts and buttocks sliced off with bayonets. Years later, at the Paris trial of Petlyura's Jewish assassin, survivors described old Jewish men flung by their beards from windows, children burned alive, eyes gouged, fingers chopped to collect rings, and streets littered with beheaded corpses. That Sabbath, the death count may have reached 10,000.

Others now joined the slaughter: renegade atamans who had broken from the Bolsheviks and hoped to return Ukraine to imperial Russian rule, self-styled patriotic saviors of Ukraine, or simply apolitical freebooters. Inflamed with centuries of anti-Semitic resentment and assured that Jews and Communists were synony-

mous, loose peasant armies hung Jewish "spies" as warnings to others who might favor the Bolsheviks. Jews were stuffed down wells and locked in rooms that were then torched. The price of ammunition having inflated to fifty rubles per cartridge, bayonets were the weapon of choice; or, as happened in one Sunday in Zhytomir, Jewish men were packed in a line to see how many could be killed with a single bullet (reportedly, six).

The most notorious brigand leader, the Ukrainian ataman Grigoriev, managed to wage civil war from all sides before staking out his own position. He began in the economic section of the German hetmanate, but left to organize insurrectionists for Petlyura. After World War I, realizing that the stronger Bolsheviks would regain power, he joined them, but his troops robbed the civilian population so often that the Soviets declared him an outlaw and disowned him. With that, Grigoriev issued a manifesto demanding that "foreign elements from the ever-hungry land of Moscow and from the land where Christ was nailed to the cross" be expunged from Ukraine.

On May 15, 1919, Grigoriev's 16,000 troops entered Yelisavetgrad. As usual, he released all imprisoned criminals and incorporated them into his ranks. To foment Jew-hungry fervor among local Christians, he had the former mayor, shot earlier by the Bolsheviks, disinterred and given a patriot's funeral. Yelisavetgrad's Jews, however, had coexisted peacefully for years with the Christian community. Many belonged to the local Peasants' Assembly and the metalworkers' trade union. When the pogrom commenced, their fellow unionists took up arms to patrol against looters, and sent delegations to Grigoriev's staff, imploring them to cease. When they were assured that "only Jews would be attacked," many Christians hid Jews in their cellars and barns. Later, the Russian Red Cross reported that wherever the *pogromchiks* found Jews hiding, they tossed in grenades.

For three days, Grigoriev's men shot their way into Jewish houses, killed anyone inside, and carried off whatever gold, silver, or jewels they saw. Behind them came civilian mobs that carted

away everything else, including beds and furniture, and smashed whatever remained, continuing until the arrival of four Soviet regiments forced Grigoriev to withdraw. Although heroic efforts by their neighbors held the number of Jewish dead to two thousand, 50,000 Jewish survivors lost everything they owned. Among them was a cousin of my grandmother's named Shika, who would somehow shelter my father's orphaned family when they arrived in Yelisavetgrad that fall, just four months later. Considering that out of several hundred Jewish stores, only five were left standing, it is difficult to believe that my grandmother fled there for safety. But she had little choice; pogroms were everywhere.

From Yelisavetgrad, Grigoriev moved to Novomirgorod, barely twenty kilometers from my family's home. There, Jews were made to dig their own graves, line them with lime disinfectant, and then were buried alive. Again, courageous Christian neighbors came to the defense. Advised that Grigoriev's gang was approaching, they arrested more than a thousand Jews and crammed them into a house of detention for eight days until the pogromists had gone.

According to records in the local soviet, Grigoriev's forces also controlled nearby Mala Viska in mid-May. If so, how my grandfather escaped death that spring is incomprehensible to me, unless my family was among those hidden in the Novomirgorod jail, or unless he paid an enormous bribe. Possibly he was protected by his employees—who, my father and uncle recalled, numbered more than a hundred. Probably the richest man in his village, he was doubtless powerful and canny enough to cut all kinds of deals. But even with Grigoriev?

As it happened, before my grandfather died, Ataman Grigoriev would be assassinated by an anarchist named Nestor Makhno—another leader of yet another army roaming the Ukrainian countryside. Makhno justified this deed because of Grigoriev's excessive pogroms, but his demise brought Jews no relief. Grigoriev's peasant legions were simply absorbed into Makhno's own ambitious

campaign, responsible for scores of Jewish deaths in southern Ukraine.

But both Makhno and Grigoriev's names would soon pale in comparison to what came next.

"Scotch or bourbon?"

I tasted. "Scotch," I answered.

"Right you are. Come here, son, I want to show you something." I'd been summoned to my father's den, where we often spent Sundays together watching pro football. This, however, was a school night. Taking an oversized book in a shiny gold jacket from the shelf where he kept his World War II histories, he motioned me to the couch.

"I bought this today. I think you might find it interesting."

It was about the American Civil War. "All the techniques of modern warfare—use of trains, telegraph, repeating rifles, armored ships, submarines—were developed during our Civil War," he said. "Understanding it is critical to military scholarship. You know, son, before long you'll be going to college. Have you ever thought about West Point? I can ask Senator Humphrey or Senator McCarthy to get you an appointment."

Until that point, I'd assumed I would probably become an ornithologist. That same year, an eighth-grade science teacher who disliked Jews and an English teacher who loved me would permanently alter my future trajectory. A military career had never been a consideration, but not wanting to disappoint my father outright, I replied, "Maybe," and tried to show interest in his book, as we didn't often share moments like this. Years later, it proved useful, too; while researching my own writings, I learned that the training grounds for those innovative Civil War generals was the 1848 Mexican-American War, where Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Stonewall Jackson all served as young officers.

Later still, I would also learn that, as my father had characterized it, our Civil War was indeed considered an incubator of modern battlefield strategy. It was studied not only at West Point but in

European war colleges—such as the officer candidate school in Kiev, where an excellent student named Anton Ivanovich Denikin graduated in 1892.



During the early twentieth century, Anton Denikin served with distinction in two humiliating wars. By the end of the 1905 Russo-Japanese debacle he rose to lieutenant colonel, and in World War I he became a highly decorated general. When Czar Nicholas II assumed command of the armed forces, Denikin was selected to head Russia's Eighth Army. After the monarchy collapsed, he was named chief of staff to the provisional government's minister of war.

To his disgust, however, the new Soviet-pressured government was permitting soldiers' committees elected from the lower ranks to share decisions with officers, many of whom were being purged. When Commander-in-Chief General Lavr Kornilov protested, he was jailed under suspicion of planning a coup, and Denikin was among the loyal generals imprisoned with him. After the Bolshevik revolution, realizing they would be executed, they managed to escape to southern Russia. There, Kornilov began to muster a volunteer army from a few thousand former czarist troops, to seize the country back from the Communists.

His natural allies, he believed, would be the Don Cossacks, who were the first to take up arms against Lenin. The Cossacks were old Ukrainian and Russian peasant societies, noted for their abilities as warriors and horsemen. Over centuries, Cossack communities had developed into virtually autonomous regions, most notably in the southern valleys of Russian rivers that flowed to the Black Sea. Gradually, the Cossacks lost their autonomy to the czarist empire, but maintained their status as military castes. Especially distinguished as soldiers were the Cossacks from the Don River. When not off repressing uprisings against various czarist regimes, the Don Cossacks had also become successful, often wealthy farmers.

Naturally, they detested Bolshevik land expropriations, but their alliance with Kornilov's volunteer force quickly disintegrated over purposes: The Cossacks were mainly interested in defending their property and homeland along the Don, while Kornilov wanted nothing less than to reclaim from the Soviets everything from Ukraine to Siberia for Mother Russia. Discouraged, he retreated south of the Don, where his volunteers were surprised by a Red Army ambush. As he lay dying from a grenade blast, Kornilov passed command of his remaining tattered loyalist force to General Anton Ivanovich Denikin.

Unlike his predecessor, who had Cossack blood, Denikin was born a Polish peasant. Yet it was Denikin who finally forged an uneasy pact with the Don Cossacks against the common Bolshevik foe. Two developments brought their armies together. The first was a victory by Denikin's Volunteer Army of only 8,000 men against some 30,000 Red Army troops in the Kuban steppe, Cossack territory that was the gateway to the Black Sea. Deftly, Denikin had parlayed his underdog forces along railway lines, capturing key stations that effectively cut off the Red Army's communication with the rest of Russia.

This tactic impressed the Cossacks, as did another surprise: Germany lost World War I. The victorious Allies based a small force under French command in the southern Ukrainian port of Odessa. Concerned by Bolshevik boasts of incipient world revolution and indignant over their confiscations of French and British property in Russia, the French Allied commander pledged the Volunteer Army Allied support. With that, the Don Cossack ataman decided that the best way to rid the land of the Communist menace was through an alliance with Denikin.

In December 1918, the Don Cossack ataman delivered 50,000 blooded, disciplined, and well-armed warriors to General Anton Denikin, commander-in-chief of the combined armed forces of Southern Russia. Denikin's own Volunteer Army had grown as war prisoners were given a choice of serving in its ranks or facing execution. They had tanks, artillery, and ammunition

furnished by the British. But the Bolshevik army, newly rejuvenated by Trotsky via purges and forced conscription, was now a huge fighting force of nearly 800,000 men, and the front that Denikin needed to maintain would also have to expand.

Denikin's Volunteers and Cossacks—known together as the White Army—worked their way north to Ukraine, where Petlyura's army and Grigoriev's and Makhno's gangs were circling each other. As they advanced, more joined their ranks, sometimes through inspiration but more often by coercion. Throughout the civil war, all sides experienced the same: Soldiers on the losing end would save their selves and their villages by switching allegiances—often in mid-battle—to the apparent victors. As long as an army maintained momentum, it was guaranteed reinforcements, albeit not especially loyal ones. In this war, commanders had little choice. Loyalties were spread too thinly among too many options; soldiers and citizens were demoralized to the point of stupor after years of governmental disarray and a world conflict in which Russia lost nearly two million men, and now with the generalized uproar of civil war.

A professional like Denikin knew the chance he was taking with conscripts faithful to little cause beyond their own survival. Worse still, all the adversaries were supplying themselves on the march, which meant requisitioning or simply seizing provisions and war taxes from the populace wherever they were. It was an unruly way to run a war that practically sanctioned soldiers to loot and pillage, but in the short run it seemed necessary, and it worked. By mid-1919 Denikin had won a succession of victories that melded into a tremendous forward surge. His growing forces took cities controlled by the Petlyurans, and maintained a line that stretched for hundreds of kilometers across Ukraine and southern Russia. Anton Denikin began to dream of Moscow.

Soon, however, he would pay for the compromises in military standards and discipline he'd accepted to achieve all this—but not nearly enough.



In June 1919, a delegation of Ukrainian rabbis, lay leaders, and Jewish businessmen sought an audience with General Anton Denikin at his seaside field headquarters, just west of the mouth of the Don. Only a month earlier, most Jews had believed that the advancing forces of the White Army were a godsend to rid them both of the savage Petlyuran pogromists and the Communist extremists. Jews had even enthusiastically joined Denikin's troops. But something, it was now apparent, had gone terribly wrong.

They were received by the broad-chested, beribboned general himself, his shaved bald pate gleaming above his upswept eyebrows, full handlebar moustache, and inverted pyramid of a goatee. They congratulated him on his army's stunning progress. However, they reported, the Whites' success had brought no end to the pogroms, but exactly the opposite. Volunteer and Cossack soldiers were joining in the plunder and gore. In Podolsk province, for example—birthplace of all my great-grandparents and untold generations that preceded them—Jews had been doused in oil and set ablaze. Cossack troops had buried Jews up to their necks, then galloped horses over their exposed heads.

Denikin heard them out. "Gentlemen," he replied, "I will be honest with you. I don't like you Jews. But my attitude toward you is based on humanity. I, as commander in chief, will take steps to prevent pogroms and other acts of lawlessness, and will punish severely those who are guilty. But I cannot guarantee that in the future there will be no excesses."

Denikin, in fact, was genuinely concerned—because, as he later wrote in his memoirs, the pogroms "struck at the troops' own morale, corrupting their minds, destroying discipline, causing disintegration." He was leading a fighting force, he complained to the Jewish delegation, comprised in part of the "dregs of humanity." He directed the Volunteer Army's commander to issue a proclamation guaranteeing the inviolability of life, home, and property of all citizens, regardless of race or religion. His assistant also penned a memo expressing gratitude for help that Jews had extended to the Volunteer Army, and—in reference to universal *pogromchik* dogma that all Jews were Communists—an assurance

that they would never "hold an entire race responsible for the faults and crimes committed by separate irresponsible individuals."

With no other hope to cling to, some Jews at first believed him. As White Army troops neared Kiev, they were greeted as saviors. A schoolteacher from suburban Fastov assured Elias Tcherikower that only a fraction of the Jewish proletariat agreed with the Communists: "The other sections of Jewry, consisting principally of merchants, artisans, and persons of liberal professions, had rather a bourgeois frame of mind and were awaiting with great impatience the arrival of Denikin's troops, being persuaded that they are the bearers of principles of ownership, of free trade, of freedom of word, and in general of all that order characterizing a middle-class public. They had to pay dearly for their mistake."

The pages containing schoolteacher Isaac Berland's Yiddish eyewitness testimony were long, legal-sized yellow sheets, with attached copies in blurry Russian, tied together with hunks of brown string. As I gradually apprehended their contents, at times I felt myself hearing his language coming faintly through my genes. The scene he described, unlike anything I had seen in this life, seemed nevertheless familiar, and I found myself nodding in recognition. Of course, I kept thinking. Of course.

A Cossack White Army regiment, Berland recounted, had arrived in August. In groups of ten, they systematically visited every house in town. In each, they wrapped a cord around the head of the household's neck, strung him from a rafter, and threatened to leave him that way unless the family gave them all their money. If there was no place to hang a rope, they shoved his hand between door and jamb and warned that fingers would be lost if cash wasn't produced.

As this was obviously an organized plunder, a Jewish committee protested to the Cossack commander. He charged them ten thousand rubles for protection; nevertheless, the pillaging continued, interrupted only when a passing detachment of Bolsheviks briefly attacked. The following day the Cossacks announced that

a female Jewish spy had betrayed them to the Communists, and must be avenged. They began torching houses, forcing people back inside at saber-point to burn to death. Children had to sing and dance as their parents were eviscerated with bayonets. Any Christians found concealing Jews met the same fate, which persuaded others to turn out the Jews they were hiding. The streets of Fastov filled with feathers from mattresses ripped apart by soldiers looking for hoarded kopecks and gold. No one dared to bury the corpses piling up in the streets, which became meals for dogs and pigs.

Berland himself hid in an orchard behind a school, struggling to remain motionless while he watched Cossacks first rape, then kill high school girls among the apple trees. The pogrom finally ebbed just before Yom Kippur. The sorrowing survivors convened for services—until Cossacks swarmed into the synagogue, demanding more tribute. No one, of course, had money: To carry it violated the rules of abstinence on the Day of Atonement. While men in the main sanctuary pleaded with the invaders to wait until nightfall, other White Army soldiers climbed the stairs and burst into the women's gallery. Soon, women were throwing themselves off the balcony, as others were seized and defiled in the synagogue on the holiest of days.

General Denikin had raised considerable Jewish money for the Volunteer cause, and his officers were often quartered comfortably and at great expense in Jewish houses. In the midst of the Fastov pogrom, wealthy Jews vainly tried to appeal to these White Army officers. In their presence, one colonel admonished his troops that not only was the looting and bloodshed inhuman, but all Europe was watching. He was interrupted by his hooting men, who reminded him of things he'd said when no Jewish witnesses were listening. Berland, pleading with a White Army major, was told that Jews had brought this on themselves. "Why do Jews fight with the Bolsheviks?" he demanded. "Why is there not a single Jew in the Volunteer Army?"

Probably, Berland said, because they weren't allowed to join. "Probably true," the major agreed.

In fact, many Jews had enlisted in the Volunteer Army. But the chief physician in Denikin's field headquarters hospital soon instructed doctors not to admit wounded Jewish soldiers, under the pretext of lack of space. Shortly thereafter, an order expelling all Jewish officers from the White Army came from Denikin himself.



By September 1919, Denikin's armies had driven nearly all the Bolsheviks from Ukraine. The international press reported that the Communist revolution was tottering before the White general's march toward the Russian heartland, ever nearer to Moscow. His astounding progress was interrupted that fall, however, when Petlyura's Ukrainian nationalists declared war on the White Army following a collision of both forces in Kiev. As Denikin's Volunteers and Cossacks turned west to push the Petlyurans back, they were also engaged by the pesky anarchist troops of Nestor Makhno, still at large in the steppes. All this prolonged the fighting in Ukraine—and thus, the pogroms continued as well.

In early September, General Denikin was sent a memorandum from an organization identified as the Main Committee of the Alliance for the Regeneration of Russia in Ukraine. It is an odd document. By its title, the committee that produced it would not appear to be Jewish. Deferential to the point of being obsequious, it reaffirms the committee's faith in Denikin and the "honor and esteem of the Volunteer Army." But it then delineates the grievances of Ukrainian Jews in such detail, and argues in such pragmatic terms for drastic measures to halt the carnage, that a Jewish hand was unmistakably at work.

The memorandum's list of pogromized towns describes a wide swathe of the countryside. It notes the participation of White Army officers in violations "everywhere" of women in the presence of their parents and husbands, following the extortion of every last

kopeck. It catalogues demolished banks and synagogues, desecrated Torahs, systematic murders of revered rabbis, the destruction of Jewish schools down to the last book, and repeated shootings of delegations of respected Jewish citizens who had gone to welcome the Volunteer forces as delivering heroes. "Unquestionably," the authors assure the general, "said outrages are done by non-intelligent elements of the army, in striking contrast to the spirit of self-sacrifice of the best men in the Volunteers. All organizations which serve the cause of the Volunteer Army, among them ours, are well informed that the responsible commanders are grieved at these events and condemn them strongly."

They mention a meeting with Denikin's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant-General Bredov, during which he vowed "the harshest punishment" for zealots who continued agitating against Jews—yet mysteriously, neither military companies nor local populations had apparently ever received such an order. Next, the authors appealed to Denikin's grasp of economics, describing how ravenous Cossacks, after exhausting all Jewish sources of booty, often turned their hatchets on shops belonging to Russians. Continual harassment of Jews in trains and railway stations, they noted, was disrupting the country's industry and enterprise, to which Jews made such a vital contribution. Devastation and death in the Jewish merchant community, they warned, would assure shortages of food and heating materials in the coming winter for everyone.

Finally, aiming at Denikin's sense of strategy and history, if not his conscience, they also reminded him: "The news of these outrages that stain the real character of the Volunteer Army, strikingly in contrast to [its] principles of lawfulness and tolerance, could reach the West, and cause there general condemnation and draw the attention of the Allied Powers."

This last point surely gave General Denikin a good laugh. After just winning at terrible cost the most horrific war in history, the Allies, he knew, weren't about to intervene in Russian affairs; even if they did, it would be squarely on his side. Compared to how alarmed they were by Communism—with Lenin and Trotsky



pontificating about first European, then world domination—the Allies didn't give a damn about Jews. All their hopes, too, were embodied in the White Army, which, their press was excitedly reporting, was now turning the tide on the Reds. The West wanted Denikin to win, at whatever cost.

In the streets of New York, thousands of horrified Jewish immigrants demonstrated in frantic support of imperiled relatives left behind. They pressured U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who commissioned an American inquiry into alleged anti-Semitic atrocities in Russia. "The situation of the Jews," it concluded evasively, "is evidently precarious but will naturally improve greatly when order is restored."

A report by the head of the British mission in Odessa to the prime minister, in response to similar marches in London, was far more blunt:

By continuing to supply General Denikin with arms and identifying ourselves wholeheartedly with the Russian National Cause, we shall be constantly in a position to exercise a modifying influence upon what are, after all, some of the most terrible hatreds which have ever afflicted mankind.

It must be realized on the one hand that the Jews are identified in the minds of the great majority of the people of Russia with the hideous tyranny from which they are now finding deliverance, and on the other hand that the one who has the keenest sense of the responsibility of the Government to safeguard the lives, property, and civil liberties of the Jews, and is doing his utmost to ensure that the obligation is fulfilled, is General Denikin . . . so much so that he has been attacked by disgruntled Ukrainian elements as the protector of the Jews and has been accused of being bought by them.

I cannot too strongly emphasize . . . the fact that

Bolshevism is daily proclaiming itself more clearly . . . as the most diabolical anti-Christian movement that the world has yet seen, and . . . that a tide of feeling against the Jews is being piled up which will be impossible to control much longer, unless there is a radical change in the behaviour of the Jew commissars.

The Jews responsible for the memorandum of the Alliance for the Regeneration of Russia were not "Jew commissars"—they were Ukraine's remaining Jewish capitalists, about to lose everything they had. I can imagine them arguing amongst themselves whether they should stop equivocating and just let Denikin have it. Finally, their patience clearly waning, they noted that not only had the general neglected to personally order a stop to the pogroms, but via the right-wing press, the Volunteer Army was actively promoting Jewish genocide. They quote one such paper, *The Kievlianin*, in which Jews are characterized as "Communists and executioners who drink from the bowl of retaliation to the last drop."

*The Kievlianin*—in case Denikin needed to be reminded—was edited by one of his own advisors, and was distributed directly to officers and soldiers. Among its principal contributors was A. Savenko, known for an internationally famous 1913 trial in which he accused a Jewish brickmaker named Mendel Beilis of murdering a Kiev boy to mix his blood with Passover *matzoh* flour. Savenko was now the White Army's chief propagandist.

As I read this desperate document, its language proceeding from unctuous to furious, and grasped the risk its authors had taken, I kept wondering if my grandfather Avraham might have been among them. Had he attended the meeting in early September with Denikin's aide, Lieutenant-General Bredov? He was one of the shrewd, resilient Jewish capitalists who had prospered despite the oppressive restrictions against Jews in the Pale of Settlement. He had somehow lasted through successive waves of the Red Army, of Grigoriev's gangs, of Nestor Makhno, and of Petlyura.

But just as it seemed that things couldn't possibly deteriorate further, here was Denikin, riding a crest of military glory atop a wave of foaming hordes of madmen. Avraham Weisman must have known that this time he and the remaining Jews were pressed to the wall.

On the few occasions that my father shared his memories of my grandfather Avraham, what he most recalled was his temper. "My old man," he told me once, chuckling humorlessly, "was plenty damn strict. He could be a real mean son-of-a-bitch."

Was that the irascibility he had inherited, which perhaps he clutched as one of the few shreds that remained of his father's legacy—irascibility that, given those appalling times, was certainly understandable? Over what matters had my grandfather roared in anger—anger at his wife, for instance, that later would reignite in my father's mindless rages at my mother? Did my grandmother Rebecca berate him for not getting them out of there in those final days, like her sister's husband Sam Friedman had with his family? Did he bellow back that if she didn't like it, she should have listened to her rabbi father and not been so set on marrying a businessman, only to find out later that he couldn't just get up and walk away from his investments like her *shochet* brother-in-law, a ritual slaughterer who didn't own *kasha*?

Was this, in fact, why my grandmother later turned down the proposal of a rich jeweler whom everyone urged her to marry—because she'd learned how fragile the security of money was in a world that hated Jews? Had she therefore instead chosen Milstein, a pauper junk peddler but a religious mystic, as an atonement, fearing that perhaps God had punished her for disobeying her Talmudic father?

Confirming the testimony of the old woman in my father's village, town records show that during the same month that the Main Committee's futile memorandum languished on some White Army bureaucrat's desk, General Denikin's troops arrived in Mala Viska. Both the local soviet and the history museum in Kirovograd—for-

merly Yelisavetgrad—date that invasion as occurring during August 1919, according to the Julian calendar still in use at the time, which bled into September in the new Gregorian system. The date of my grandfather's *yahrtzeit*, the anniversary of his death, according to the Jewish calendar—an ancient semi-lunar confusion whose relationship to western calendars gyrates substantially—generally coincided with early September.

About my grandfather, the regional archives were mute. He was not listed as a landowner, although that was no surprise. There was a reference to the sunflower oil press and to the mill, both in a Russian's name—again, to be expected—both of which were confiscated and nationalized by the Bolsheviks the following year, 1920. "Because of the turbulent events in the country from 1914 to 1919 and loss of records," concluded the researcher I'd hired, "it is impossible to trace anything related to this period. Weisman could have lived in Mala Vyska or Elisavetgrad without being registered as a household owner or a business owner."

In New York, as I looked for a name I recognized in the Tcherikower archive, I was told often that during those times Jews disappeared and left no trace, as if they'd never existed. The thought filled me with panic—how could my father have died without leaving me more memory of who we were? How doomed were we to act out traumas inherited from our forebears, without understanding that those ancient sorrows were the hidden cause?

But one morning, the Tcherikower archive finally yielded something. It was a Russian Red Cross list naming tiny Mala Viska as one of the villages in Kherson province to be rocked by a pogrom. No details: just enough of a time frame to place it in the realm of Grigoriev or Denikin. But that same afternoon, Nikolai added yet one more shard he'd discovered: a handwritten transcription of an article from a Kiev Jewish newspaper, *Hebrew Thought*, dated September 20, 1919. It described the unnamed author's journey from Kiev to Odessa earlier that month, and mentioned an immense pogrom around Yelisavetgrad by Denikin's White Guards. The situation was finally improving in the city, he

wrote, but it was getting worse in outlying places. In one hamlet called Mala Viska, where there was a railway stop and a sunflower oil factory, a post-pogrom auction had been held of valuable articles that had been plundered.

Again, no names. But who else's could they have been? Who else had owned anything of sufficient value to warrant an auction, other than my grandfather: mill owner and purveyor of sunflower oil, the biggest employer in the village? Who else of means would have lived in that backwater, with so few Jews it was barely even mentioned in Holocaust archives?

By the end of September 1919, Denikin's troops stretched over a huge, crescent-shaped line more than a thousand kilometers long that bulged through Ukraine toward Moscow, barely two hundred fifty miles away. But it remained the goal they never achieved. Like avenging ghosts, the thousands of pogromized Jewish dead came back to haunt the commander of the White Army. Greed, plunder, and wanton savagery had corrupted his troops far beyond his ability to maintain the discipline necessary to confront an early winter and the replenished, more battle-wise Red Army that awaited them. Frostbite, typhus, and fighting on northern Russian soil weren't nearly as attractive to the Cossack army as the chance to grow rich off booty, plucked as easily from Jewish bodies as apples in the fall. Deserters melted away by the thousands, carrying their loot back to the Don.

At the same time, a mindless, tenacious charge by Makhno's anarchist hordes at the Volunteer Army's rear was first an annoyance, then a serious diversion that gave the Red Army time to seize the initiative back from Denikin. Trotsky had conscripted new recruits and had built a cavalry as well, and faced Denikin's 100,000 shaky troops with nearly twice as many men. In the end, a lack of reinforcements spelled the difference. Stalled by winter, attacked from ahead and dogged from behind, Denikin's forces disintegrated almost as miraculously fast as they had come together. By early 1920, Trotsky's Red Army ruled Ukraine, and Denikin relinquished his post as commander of the White Army.

That spring, my grandmother, now barely surviving with her sons in Yelisavetgrad, would return to Mala Viska at Passover to find the mill and sunflower oil press nationalized. The Communists would not return them to her, but they gave her bags of flour with which she made *matzohs* for her family and neighbors. Within a few months, the outcome of the entire war was decided, and Soviet Communism held sway for the next seventy years.

According to the Russian Red Cross and the Kiev Central Committee for Aid of Jews, nearly a quarter-million Jews perished in Ukrainian pogroms during the civil war—more than half of them, including my grandfather, at the hands of General Denikin's troops. It was a staggering figure, but barely remembered by the time I was born, because it had been so colossally trumped by the Nazi Holocaust.

Like Simon Petlyura before him and Nestor Makhno shortly afterward, Anton Ivanovich Denikin fled to Paris. He passed his days there in relative peaceful boredom, gardening and writing his memoirs about the exciting first half of his life when he nearly became the savior of Mother Russia. Later, in his dotage and after World War II had passed, he would resettle again, this time in a country distant from the recent unpleasantness of the Holocaust and the forthcoming Nuremberg trials—which perhaps he feared might recall earlier Jewish carnage, for which he continued to absolve himself in his writings.

He needn't have worried. Except for the single-handed justice that Petlyura's Jewish assassin took into his own hands, and the trap set by Makhno for his rival Grigoriev—"two scorpions in a jar," Denikin had called them—no *pogromchik* was ever tried for crimes of genocide against the Jews. Denikin emigrated to a country whose freedoms a stalwart foe of Communism like himself was welcome to enjoy: the United States.

There he would die in bed, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1947, the year I was born.

## CHAPTER 24



There are truths we are told and congenital truths we only sense. My father's account of his own father's murder was fundamental to my upbringing, yet, as it turned out, I was shaped even more by hidden undercurrents he was trying to escape. In this, I am not alone. Especially in my land called the United States of America, for reasons that my father's bewildering deception eventually led me to understand, children inherit not just the legacies our elders impart but a void left by what they withhold. Instinctively, we yearn to fill it.

As I stayed up nights with my sister after our parents' deaths, going through papers and photographs, confronting the knickknacks of a lifetime—so invisible until the decision to keep or toss onto the miscellaneous table at the estate sale—it began to dawn on me how often in my career I had chosen to write about the themes of their lives: immigration, orphans, violence, and displacement. But it was only later, when I returned from Ukraine and attempted to unravel the reasons for my father's fabrication, that I began to grasp that it was no accident that I became who I am. My journey to Mala Viska had led me to the truth. Yet instead of ending a search, the answer I exhumed there began one.

In the windowless YIVO reading room, surrounded by boxes of the Tcherikower archive and holding those frail scraps that formed the fragmentary record of people and places from whence I sprang,

I began to see how the dramatic narrative of each era becomes wrapped around the double helix of genetic inheritance and bequeathed to the next generation. Whether we know their history or not, it is our legacy. But like so many to whom meaningful history begins only with their own births, I had never understood to what extent the consequences of displacement are my psychological heritage, passed from an immigrant forebear to his children. And in this inconstant nation and upheaving world, I am far from alone. Our roots, once torn away, run shallow. Easily, they loosen and wither, or blindly wander the surface.

This understanding came gradually. For months, I felt mainly numbed, my system overwhelmed by grief for one parent after another, by the shattering revelation in Mala Viska that had belied my family's creation myth, and by sorrow that, like Chernobyl's taint, settled invisibly but inevitably over a world of vanishing homelands. And there was loneliness: I had no one with whom to transmute these multiple anguishes into a possible tomorrow. An attempted liaison with a woman in New Hampshire dissolved away in unreachable silences. Several evenings I guided my canoe along the rocky Cape Ann shore and dared myself to follow the current to open sea, where I imagined tossing the paddle and drifting beyond sight of land, toward oblivion.

Late that fall in an unlikely setting, I had an epiphany about why my father had emended our family chronicle. One night I'd received a distressed phone call from Mexico. I called an editor, and a week later, I was in a meadow high in the Chihuahuan Sierra Madre, sitting in a drizzle and watching a Tarahumara Indian elder named Agustín Ramos roast corn. A leather band held his thick inverted bowl of gray hair around his walnut-brown forehead; he wore single-thonged sandals and a breechclout secured by a tassled girdle around his loins. By the reckoning of some anthropologists, Tarahumarans had been dressing this way and harvesting corn—or its genetic ancestor, *teosinte*, which still grew here—in this place for nearly 10,000 years.

According to Agustín Ramos, Tarahumara had always been

there. The Sierra Madre, a hulking jumble of colossal barriers interrupted frequently by profound chasms, had isolated them for millennia, making the Tarahumara one of the earth's most enduring cultures. I was there, however, because their lands had lately been invaded by growers of heroin poppies, who coveted this secluded, fertile nook of northern Mexico that was just an hour by single-engine plane from the United States. The *narcos* gave the Indians a choice: tend poppy fields or get out. Those who refused were shot, at a rate of about four per week.

Entire Tarahumara families were now doing something so unthinkable that their language barely had words to describe it: leaving home forever. Some huddled in Catholic churches and evangelical missions; others fled to the ring of detritus shacks surrounding Chihuahua City. "How will your people survive if you have to go?" I asked Ramos. At that very moment, their survival depended on a squad of armed *federales* with whom I'd arrived the day before—a tenuous shield, because entire regional police forces were routinely purchased by drug dealers.

Ramos knew that; what he didn't know was the answer to my question. To leave would change the meaning of life itself, and he groped to imagine what that could possibly entail. Among his replies was: "We would have to tell our children new stories."

In that instant, I understood that telling their stories is how the cells that compose a society collectively breathe, the reflex that propels human culture forward and carries life with it. When the chronicle is interrupted, we are left dangling without meaning, until we reweave the slack thread of the narrative into some new fabric—or splice it to whatever lifeline we can.



"But do you know why your father lied?" Cecilia asked.

"I think I've figured it out."

We were sitting atop a granite boulder in front of my rented fisherman's cottage. Above our heads, locust branches were beginning to leaf. Just offshore, a galaxy of black-backed gulls orbited

above two lobstermen cleaning their pots. Through the late afternoon spring air we could follow Ipswich Bay to the point where Massachusetts blended into New Hampshire: at the gray dome of the Seabrook Nuclear Power Station, four miles from where my biologist ex-wife was raised. The previous summer while writing about Chernobyl, I would watch Seabrook's winking red light from my second-floor office and recall her stories of high-school classmates invariably zonked on marijuana and more, as they labored on the nuclear plant's construction.

"So tell me," she said.

"I will. We need to sit and talk awhile. But don't you think we'd better get back to them now?" Inside my house, Sandy and Nancy sat in separate rooms, the pain of their disintegrating marriage momentarily too intolerable to continue the meeting for which we had gathered.

"God, I suppose so. *Un minuto más*. Okay? It just feels so good out here." In the distance, a finback whale was spouting. "This is so beautiful," Cecilia said. "You were really smart to come here, Alan. You pick such beautiful places to live."

"I'm going back."

She turned and stared. "To Arizona?" I nodded. "But you sold your house."

During the year I'd been away, a magazine aptly named *Money* had anointed Prescott, Arizona, as the ideal place in America to retire. A plague of developers bearing templates for new connector roads and gated communities promptly descended. My renter called: The county was straightening and paving the forest path leading to my cabin. I put it up for sale the following day, and it sold the day after. Having just paid off the mortgage, the wad of cash I'd gleaned from this latest curse upon the earth would at least buy me a fresh start somewhere.

I'd considered buying my fisherman's cottage, and poked around some in the Berkshires. But after a year in New England I'd realized that Arizona's dust was imbedded too deeply under my skin. For better or worse, over more than two decades it had been my home. "Isn't it a little absurd," I asked Cecilia, "after spending

the past two years telling the world what a tragedy it is for people to lose their homelands, for me to voluntarily leave my own?"

"I'm not sure I even know how to define 'home' anymore."

She wasn't alone. While pondering my father's puzzle, I'd realized that nearly everyone in my country is either an immigrant or the psychological heir to someone who was wrenched from someplace else and arrived here a stranger in a strange land. The birthright of millions of Americans includes a sense of loss, born of migration—even for Native Americans, internal refugees clinging to a sliver of what they once had. Perhaps this is why so many of us move away from our birthplaces, often ending up someplace conspicuously different. We seek something we were born missing.

"Back in those *shtetls*," I told Cecilia as we walked back, "our ancestors lived, married, worked, and died within a few kilometers of where they were born. In America, either directly or through inheritance, we're all immigrants, and we act like immigrants. Consciously or not, we envy the ancient taproots of Europeans whose forebears hung onto their ancestral soil. We yearn for the cultural authenticity we sense in indigenous peoples, even as we gorge on television. We revere the world's fine old architecture, but build strip malls instead. We're restless, obsessively mobile, escapist, prone to latch onto neofundamentalist religions or exotic, imported spirituality—all these pathetic substitutes for the traditions we've lost and left. Subconsciously," I concluded as we reached my house, "we feel a profound lack, so we have to come up with something. Just as we have a nagging urge to fill the expurgated gaps in our family histories."

Cecilia paused in the doorway. "Expurgated gaps? ¿Cómo?"

"The things our fathers never told us. The stuff they left behind, across the ocean. Or thought they left behind."

"Why not Minneapolis, if you really want to go home?" she asked that night in the restaurant where we'd gone to talk. "You love those lakes, those birds. Your sister."

I'd considered it. But at an early age I'd felt compelled to escape a family of lawyers and liquor salesman that scoffed at an in-

ipient writer in their midst. They still made me nervous. "I don't think it makes sense to start over now. I've been an Arizona resident longer than I've lived anywhere. Pretty shallow connection, but my family wasn't exactly yoked to the land in Minnesota. I was just the second generation."

By moving away from there, I now understood, I had emulated the way my father had receded ever farther from his family as he established his new identity in the new country. "He was reinventing himself. You and I have seen precisely the same thing, Cec. I saw it with Mexicans jumping across the border to a new life. We saw it with dispossessed people all over Latin America. But I never recognized it in my own family."

"Recognized exactly what?"

"How displaced people create new histories, or revise old ones, to define themselves in alien settings. Even for brave risk-takers seeking a fresh beginning in a new place—like your father, selling pots and pans door-to-door in New York—the need to migrate bequeaths humiliation. People feel guilt over being unable to surmount whatever led to exile. They feel shame for the homeland that forsakes its sons and daughters."

Consequences of this disgrace ripple through succeeding generations. How often had I heard that from U.S.-born *latinos* whose immigrant parents, clutching at America, had deprived them of Spanish? "Their parents don't want to be reminded of what they had to leave, or why. It's too painful. They're trying to forget. Just like my father never taught us the Yiddish he spoke with his mother. Not only did he deny us a bond with this grandmother who'd barely learned English, but that way he also kept us from knowing her truth. Our truth."

Cecilia frowned. "But did he do that on purpose?"

"I think he simply, blindly, did what all immigrants must do: whatever it takes to survive."

Football glory and the rewards he reaped by returning a hero from World War II had taught him that success in America came from *being* American. By associating with non-Jewish attorneys, he continued disengaging from his past. "But then, just as things were

finally going great for him, along comes the McCarthy era. Suddenly, Jewish entertainers and writers were being hounded as Communists. Then the Rosenbergs were executed as spies for the Russians. A lot of Jews panicked, remembering the pogroms when being Jewish was a death sentence, because it was considered synonymous with being Communist. My father would have heard that constantly as a six-year-old kid. It had every Jew in Ukraine petrified. But now, in America, he found a way to transmute this potential peril to his benefit.”

“Which was—?”

“Think about it. How many times do you suppose he was asked casually during those years, maybe on the golf course or while sharing a drink after a day in court, ‘Si, aren’t you from Russia?’ How long before he learned not only to disarm this question but to turn it to his advantage with a story of how the goddam Communists butchered his father?”

Cecilia set down her wineglass. “Amazing. Perfect.”

“Perfect,” I agreed. “During the McCarthy era, I imagine this became a very useful, revisionist personal history. Unfortunately, to pull it off meant severing himself from his only living brother, whose mild leftist tendencies, he apparently decided, posed a threat to what he’d achieved.”

“Poor Uncle Herman. You really think he sacrificed him intentionally?”

I had pondered this a lot myself; the very notion outraged me. But listening to people who’d known my father far longer than I had, my anger over this question—and over memories of how he’d intimidated me—began to soften. During his lifetime, he sustained more shocks to his system than most humans I’d ever met. As a child, he’d witnessed his father’s murder by brutes who stole all they had, plunging him instantly from a genteel existence to three years of near-starvation, amid unrelenting dread of the next pogrom that might strike any minute.

Then, he’d immigrated to an alien land just in time for the Depression. As if that weren’t enough, then came his forbidding

odyssey through World War II, littered with the bodies of his dead comrades, with artillery constantly roaring in his ears. In that light, his screaming and the way he browbeat my mother, followed by his sudden shifts to loving husband and father, his arms filled with presents and roses and hugs for us, were emblematic not of evil, but illness—illness today defined as post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Oh, horseshit!” my father’s voice barks from the grave, and I cringe, picturing his lip curl in disgust to hear himself portrayed as a victim of a chronic syndrome. Yet in the 1960s, the bravest soldier of all, Audie Murphy, broke military taboo by publicly revealing his sleeping pill addiction. Until his 1971 death in a plane crash, Murphy crusaded to extend veterans’ health coverage to the lingering shock of war, citing the insomnia, depression, and panic that tormented him and so many other vets. Back then, it wasn’t PTSD, but battle fatigue. By any name, it described the erratic conduct of my thundering father, who loved but terrorized his family, drank himself unconscious in his recliner every evening, and then, never able to sleep past 3:00 A.M., snapped on his bedside lamp and read paperbacks until he could escape to work.

So he was a damaged man, which in a court of law clouds the issue of intent. Contriving a self-serving myth about his father being martyred by a Communist firing squad was, on one level, a survival reflex. On another, it was too auspicious an opportunity to resist. It was a time in Minnesota when Hubert Humphrey leaped to national prominence from a local campaign he’d begun against anti-Semitism, by demanding equality for blacks as well—even as he was sponsoring legislation to deny American Communist Party members their civil rights. Humphrey thus not only provided a progressive anti-Communist coattail for my father to grab, but, as many Jews must have seen it, in Minnesota he created their first safe haven of the century by dissociating them from Communists. Hubert Humphrey had accomplished what repeated Jewish delegations to Denikin and Petlyura tried in vain to do: convince them that the words “Jew” and “Bolshevik” weren’t synonymous.

In Ukraine, the result had been the massacre and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Jews. If my father had learned anything, it was to not make himself vulnerable like that again. Here were politics he could trust, and he did: following Hubert Humphrey and Orville Freeman, and then John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson—until, years later, one of the paperbacks at his bedside, Daniel Ellsberg's *The Pentagon Papers*, pierced even his battle-hardened resistance to question such leaders.

Following Ellsberg's disclosures of how egregiously Johnson had lied to the nation about Vietnam, my father lost interest in politics. It was a bit tragic to see his faith in the illusion of public trust implode so quickly, and I sometimes wonder if his sickness didn't begin right then. But at least he started talking to me again.



"Alan, I've got something to tell you," Cecilia said.

I knew, of course, what was coming. "You're getting married."

She smiled shyly. "I am. I'm going to marry Gary."

The previous Fourth of July I had met this future husband, an eminently likable and talented reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. In an awkward but sincere moment, I'd embraced them both and mumbled something maudlin about being happy to see Cecilia so happy. Now she and I rose and hugged each other in the Union Grill in Beverly, Massachusetts. Neither of us understood exactly at what point the ancestral genetic strand that we'd attempted to resplice had twisted so far that it finally snapped. But now it felt like its ends had grown back together of their own accord, yet straighter this time, no longer bound in the taut bundle we'd once forced it to occupy, but settled into some proper channel. Ours, we sensed, was a blood connection across time and oceans, which had been fated to come together as we did.

There was something encouraging in this, almost as though our lineage was being given another chance to acknowledge who we are and to finally get it right. "You know what was amazing in

Mala Viska, Cec?" I said, when we were seated again and refilling our glasses to toast her news.

"What?"

"I kept looking at these raw-faced collective farmers and at the workers from the sunflower oil plant—I looked at them and thought: Here, but for my grandmother, go I. And there, but for your grandparents, go you, too. It's incredible, given our urbane, airborne lives, to think that we are just barely removed from our own peasant origins."

She raised her glass again. "We have a lot to thank them for."

That we did. Yet the price they'd paid back in the old country continues to be charged in the present. As I grow older, not only do I recognize my father's expressions in the mirror, but I notice how often his words issue from my mouth. To the extent that our parents don't deal with their wounds, a counselor I saw after *Vanishing Homelands* told me, we are doomed to suffer them ourselves: "Your father never had a way to purge his pain and fear from his system. So you inherited it. He resented his children for not suffering what he suffered. That's unfair, and it made you furious."

This insight helped, but later I realized that it also missed a huge point. "I keep thinking about my father's frustration as he tried to make me comprehend what I couldn't possibly grasp," I told Cecilia. "His psyche was molded by huge events swirling around him: The Russian Revolution. The pogroms. The great tidal wave of immigration. The Depression. World War II. The McCarthy era. He knew they affected everyone, even those who weren't eyewitnesses like he was. He kept trying to tell my mother that in his letters, and us kids that in his lectures."

The waiter was there with our check; we were the last ones in the restaurant, I realized. "One more minute, Cec," I said. "As journalists, you and I go through the same helpless feeling. Right? We wonder if anyone actually reads or hears us, if anyone realizes that all this is happening to them, too. That when forests burn and birds fall out of the sky that their own homelands are next on the line."



Cecilia nodded sleepily and moved to rise. "Come on, Alan. We should go to bed. We all have to meet again tomorrow. Thanks for dinner."

"Wait, Cec, let me finish. This is important. Listen."

She sat down again. "Okay."

"I mean, my dad's life proves that the times we live in shape our mentalities just as powerfully as all those family issues that are the focus of personal therapy. You know how pissed off we get because people avoid the news. They're denying the personal impact that current events have on us. Out of sight, out of mind. People just don't care. Until it's too late. For the world and for them."

Cecilia reached for my hand. "Maybe," she said, yawning, "some things are just too awful for people to comprehend, until they're right in front of them and they can't avoid them. Maybe that's what your father could never accept. And neither can you. Meanwhile, all we can do is keep trying to give voice to the unspeakable. At least we'll know we did our best. Now, let's go, Alan. I'm really tired."



I am a journalist, and, like my father, I have only words to convey unspeakable truths—truths we all would rather deny—to an audience of immigrants and their offspring: linked by legacy to a conspiracy of omitting and reinventing, of keeping secrets, even of out-and-out lying. An American audience that has learned to mythologize and tidy up the past, that it might segue smoothly to some far better future. An audience that, often, would prefer to forget.

"I'm bearing witness to a pogrom against the ecosystem," I told the therapist.

"By the time you were three years old, you were sensitized by how your father treated your mother" was her response. "You wanted to save her. You've wanted to rescue all the women in your life. And now you want to rescue the mother of all mothers: Mother Nature."

Well, perhaps. I decided not to mention environmental destruction again—why depress the poor woman? I understood. This unspeakable litany feels so unbearably beyond our control—atomic fiascos we seem doomed to repeat; glaciers crumbling into dying seas; the very atmosphere flaking away. The dispossession of our forebears now multiplied by the millionfold, choking cities with refugees fleeing wrecked landscapes or the latest mass plunderers. The world simply does not know what to do with them all, let alone with its exhausted earth, air, and water. So we pretend that fish, topsoil, ozone, money, and our way of life simply can't run out.

If we manage to conceal such huge truths from ourselves, how much of our legacy to posterity will be only our self-deception, rather than wisdom to survive the future? Unless, of course, there is method in that madness. After all, as my father's life attests, rewriting history to suit our needs is among the best survival schemes we have. Even American Indians, those exiles in their native land, have learned to reinvent themselves, creating mythologies of environmental virtue not always supported by the historical record. A story half-told or distorted nearly beyond recognition may be better than no story at all—such as my mother's way of squelching all uncomfortable probing: "What you don't know won't hurt you." Or, if we persisted: "You're too young to understand, and that's final."

Except it never is. Family secrets can't really be kept—the facts may dissolve away, but their consequences remain.

Among them for me, I realize, is my abiding aversion to my inherited religion. While never denying my Jewish heritage, in dark moments I have sometimes regarded Judaism itself largely as crude tribalism based on a book of bloody war stories, which today might as easily chronicle turf battles among Los Angeles street gangs. The vengeful, egocentric God depicted therein strikes me as a brilliant but lonely, sulking, and brooding deity, resentful of the pleasures and deeds of His creation and thereby spiteful and demanding. The widespread notion that man was created in His image has only confirmed my suspicions: It certainly doesn't say much for Him.

It does not require too much of a leap to understand how much this portrait resembles my father. Just as God never failed to remind His Jews how fortunate they were to be chosen above all others and how much they owed Him for that, I endured repeated sermons on how lucky I was to be among the anointed, living in today's promised land of America replete with all the advantages my father never had—my father, who begrudged me so for having these things, even though it was he who had provided them.

The message seemed pretty clear: For not having to overcome hardships like war and ruin that had tempered him under fire, my relatively tranquil, secure life would never be as valid or meaningful as his. Like any man before his God, I was properly humbled—until I backslid ferociously, rebelling against both father and Father. Neither Si Weisman nor אלהינו, the Lord Our God of the Jews, was going to tell me how to think. Yet distancing myself from being Jewish was a reaction I'd unknowingly absorbed from my father, who had directly paid the horrible toll exacted periodically from Jews for their stubborn refusal to pass into extinction.

I began to understand this better two years after his death, when my work took me to a country I'd never before visited: Israel. It would be, I thought, just another stop in my worldly sojourn. In fact, I was en route from an assignment in Germany, a country that fills me with no particular apprehensions, one that actually seems quite civilized compared to most—among the first sights that greet arrivals disembarking at Dachau's train station today is a health food store.

Then, from Frankfurt, I caught a flight to Tel Aviv, where I met Sandy Tolan. Our story was for a series on whether technology might help extricate our world from the mess it had gotten us into. We'd come to Israel because, upon realizing that the promised land of Zion was the one place in the Middle East where The Almighty neglected to put oil, Israelis of necessity had become masters in mining sunlight, producing some of the world's most advanced solar energy systems. Might this expertise, combined with nearly 6,000 years of accumulated wisdom, help free the planet from its Faustian bargain with dirty fossil fuels?

We'd arrived at an auspicious time: Israel and Jordan were

negotiating a peace treaty, whose technology-transfer annexes included Israeli solar energy. A Palestinian journalist Sandy had met at Harvard arranged for us to interview Jordan's Royal Scientific Society in Amman. By now, Sandy had been divorced nearly a year from our partner Nancy, who was currently in Bolivia, immersed in the doctoral research she had entered to transcend the heartache they'd sustained. Sandy had no idea when we arrived that he was on the verge of his own momentous self-discovery. Within two years, he and the Palestinian journalist would be married. But that is his story, and this is mine. His inclusion here is as witness to my own enlightenment.

On the way to Jordan, we stopped at the Dead Sea. At Qumran and Jericho, we visited remnants of stone dwellings along the Judean Desert cliffs that resembled Indian relics I had so often seen in the Americas. And there, something dawned on me, unprecedented in my forty-seven years.

We were on a hillside overlooking intersecting heaps of limestone rubble that had once comprised the walls of several ancient rooms. Suddenly, it hit me—what so many indigenous Americans still clinging to their vanishing homelands had tried to make me appreciate. Places such as these are not mere archaeological sites, but someone's history. The dust beneath their feet, Indians insist, is the ground bones of their ancestors. And now, in my very marrow, I grasped that this was my own ancestral dust swirling around me in the hot breeze blowing off the Dead Sea. These were not the ruins of structures erected by some exotic, extinct culture. These were built by *my* ancestors. My people.

In that moment I finally, fully understood the Zionist claim to this land. It was ours. Our fathers were buried here. The land was our mother, whose honeyed milk had suckled our people.

Of course, as we reflected that evening while strolling through the *mizmar* sounds that filled the date-scented streets of newly autonomous Jericho, Palestinians justifiably assert the same claim to the same land, and for the same reasons. Still: For the first time in my life I did not merely know I was a Jew, but felt it, to the depths of my DNA.

Yet I have not returned to the faith. My sole dialogue with God remains the lonely kind: through my writing, not the melodious rituals of those whom I acknowledge as my people. I have no idea if He understands. I have not noticed that my prayers for the world to come to its senses before it commits ecocide have particularly been heeded. But I am married now, and to a Jewish woman. Perhaps we will one day have children who, sufficiently removed from pogroms and immigration pangs and strategic incentives to assimilate, will know the blessings of spiritual community and tradition that I never could.



"Wait a minute," said my cousin Harlan. "If you blame your life on what happened back in Russia, how does that explain the differences between you and me? For that matter, why did my father turn out so different from your father, if they lived through the same history?"

Harlan—Dr. Harlan Weisman—is my Uncle Herman's son. First cousins, we'd never met while growing up because our fathers didn't speak. I finally visited him and his wife and children at their home near Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. They keep kosher and study Hebrew together. Harlan, with his high forehead and black wavy hair, resembles the handsome dead Uncle Harold we never knew, for whom we are both named—his first, my middle. He posed these questions to me at 1:30 A.M. both of us barely awake after eight hours of long overdue conversation and two bottles of white wine. His wife, Sally, an employee benefits consultant to Fortune 500 companies, slumbered on the couch with her head in his lap.

Harlan, son of the leftist intellectual brother and embracer of social causes, had been a rebellious child and incorrigible pupil, I learned that night. After an unruly passage through high school that included some brushes with the law, he enrolled in the University of Maryland to avoid going to Vietnam. There, surprising even himself, he decided to study medicine. Following a cardiology

fellowship at Johns Hopkins, he'd remained there for several years on the faculty. Now he directed research for a bio-pharmaceutical firm employing recombinant gene technology to develop cardiovascular medications.

I, on the other hand, as a boy had been too scared of my old man to dare to get into trouble. I remained a model little citizen well into college, until around the time of the Chicago Democratic convention when I veered off on a tangent that had yet to loop back to the roost.

"Has it occurred to you," Harlan asked, "that somewhere you and I crossed? I became the professional, and you became the professional rebel. Each of us turned out to be the son that the other's father tried to raise."

I could surely see it. Despite all my father's efforts to dissuade me from becoming a "starving writer" like my Uncle Herman, Herman was who I took after, while Herman's son became the successful Jewish doctor. "You're right," I said. "My father would have been so proud if I had been you."

"And my father brags about you constantly. He sends us your articles."

So why had those two brothers responded so differently to the same upbringing?

"Well, they were both orphaned, both migrated, both went through World War II," I speculated out loud. "My guess is that my father was four-and-a-half years older than yours. At six, going on seven, he was old enough to be aware of Ukraine's Jewish-Communist witch hunt, old enough to know his father quite well when he was murdered. And he was an eyewitness. That's one more enormous traumatic shock than what your father sustained. I guess it was the one strong enough to ripple through the rest of his life."

"Exactly," the therapist concurred. "And the important thing is that you've now come to grips with your anger toward him. You've acknowledged it, allowed yourself to feel it, and gone beyond it to find your real feelings about your father."

"Meaning that anger isn't a real feeling?"

"Of course it is. But—look: Once I had to evaluate an eight-year-old boy who had been kicked out of three foster homes. His mother had died and his father was a drunk who'd been declared incompetent to raise a child. From his relatives, I'd learned that the boy had never been a problem to his parents. 'Do you know why they took you away from home?' I asked him.

" 'Well,' he said, 'my dad's an alcoholic.' "

" 'And how does he treat you?' "

" 'Good—when he's not drinking,' he said. "

" 'And when he is?' I asked. "

" 'Well,' the boy replied, 'when he drinks, I've learned how to duck.' "

"My recommendation was to stop sticking this kid in foster homes and put him back where he belonged. He loved his dad—loved him enough to understand him. So did you, Alan. You loved your father enough to look beyond the fear he instilled in you, and to understand why."

"I hope I'll be able to someday," my sister says. "I don't know if I can."

She reminds me how he would sit in his den and bark orders down the hall, and she would have to leave her homework to bring him a drink of water, only to have him knock it out of her hand because she brought him the wrong size glass. Again, my bile rises, and I recall how often I felt impelled, often recklessly, to prove myself after being crushed by him. Even as I tried to live up to his image, I distanced myself from him as far as I could. Yet ultimately, my search to understand his saga has explained my own meanderings. Just as our families, for better or for worse, inevitably impose their meaning on our lives, understanding the times that he lived through reminds me how they continually give birth to our own.

Even as his death drifts farther back in time, beyond the visible twilight of grief into the darkness where memories gradually decompose, I still dream of him. Have I truly forgiven his lie—the

anger and loneliness he caused his brother, the easy false premise by which he tried to convince me what to think and whom to hate? Obviously, before long, he actually believed it. It became his truth. What concerns me more now is to what extent this lesson of expediency at the expense of ethics has crept into my own life. What myths do I invent, which corners do I cut? Do I justify doing so, just as my father's need to assimilate justified his own deception? Do we all ultimately resort to self-delusion, just to survive? Do entire nations do the same?

These questions are also my legacy from him: a terrorized eleven-year-old when he arrived here, witness to his own father's murder in the roiling aftermath of the Russian Revolution. I'm sure that the eleven-year-old boy, hawking papers in the Minnesota cold, didn't care whether Bolsheviks or pillaging Cossacks did it. All he knew was that his father was dead and his uprooted family now had nothing. The mythmaking came later.

Yet, I tell myself now, maybe that myth really wasn't so calculated. Maybe the traumatized, fatherless boy needed an anti-Communist martyr to live up to as he groped his way in a bountiful but callous America. Maybe later, as a man, he never fully trusted that his considerable attainment of the American dream was due more to his grit than to his subterfuge.

And one more: Whenever today's conservative demagogues of greed appear on TV, justifying their pogroms against the poor while distinguished economic analysts nod approvingly, I suffer a flashback. I am again four years old, watching Joe McCarthy whip his subcommittee into a froth on a black-and-white screen, naming names and spitting accusations, while my tight-lipped parents murmur God, say it can't happen here, too. And I realize that maybe my father's truth was that he just never forgot how flimsy the dream really is, after losing nearly everything one unholy night in Mala Viska.