

---

*Dvar Torah*

---

## My Father's 30th Yortsayt

5 Adar I 5757 • Parsha Terumah

*Michael Steinlauf*

You died 30 years ago today.  
Unfair is what I thought back then,  
still do.

Back then,  
the world on fire all around me,  
new world rising  
from the ashes of the old,  
birth pangs  
of those chosen  
by something  
to bury the old.

And you,  
William Robert Steinlauf  
(Robert because American businessmen  
need middle initials)

Wladek  
Wolf  
Zev  
Zev ben Moyshe  
Zev ben Moyshe Varshever  
Mi-Varsha  
from Warsaw,

*vos hot ibergelebt*  
who survived

flames.

How hard it was  
for you to grasp  
this second burning.

II.

What world was it in which  
your father no longer even thought  
to send his youngest  
to the Gerer Rebbe's yeshiva?

Big brother Eric had to go,  
but you were far too spry to let the black hats  
snatch you for their own.

(40 years later on a Brooklyn street  
you did the same for me:

"A *dank*," you told the hosid  
hovering beside us.

"He'll go to public school.")

A modern Jew,  
a Polish Jew.

Yiddish and Polish both your own,  
but one culture only:  
longing for the stars.

"*Ad astra per aspera*,"

you repeated in gimnazium,  
and probably believed it,

for hadn't Peretz taught you even better:

*Oyb nisht nokh hekher.*

---

*Ad astra per aspera*: To the stars by way of adversity.

*Oyb nisht nokh hekher*: "If not still higher," the title of one of I.L. Peretz's most popular stories.

But your world was rooted too,  
and how!

*Ayzn-gesheft oyf Gzhibov*:  
the family hardware business  
in the heart of the hardware business  
in the heart of Jewish Warsaw  
in the heart of Jewish Poland,  
800 years old.

Wife  
then child  
then war  
then ghetto.

*Homo homini lupus est*  
is the Latin I learned  
from you.

III.

500,000 Jews  
passed through that ghetto,  
499,000 into death.

Not you.

Slave laborer,  
you worked each day outside the walls,  
locked up each night inside.

15 years later, some things you told:  
the German that Jews called Frankenstein  
who randomly killed a Jew a day.

Some things you hinted at:  
Umschlagplatz  
where trains were loaded.

---

*Ayzn-gesheft oyf Gzhibov*: Plac Grzybowski was and is the center of Warsaw's hardware trade.

*Homo homini lupus est*: Man is a wolf to men.

Some things you never spoke of:  
what was done to your little boy.

When the ghetto burned,  
you were already on the other side,  
the Aryan side,  
but off the streets  
since you didn't look so Aryan.

Once on a train,  
a German looked you in the eye and said,  
"Sie sind Jude!"

To which all you knew to do  
was look him right back  
and laugh  
and laugh and laugh,  
until you both wiped tears of laughter from your eyes,  
and he offered you a cigarette.

#### IV.

New wife  
new son  
new business  
new world.

Thrown up like flotsam on the American shore,  
the edge of the world,  
Brighton Beach, Brooklyn,  
1950s.

That's where I came in,  
the new son  
living on the edge,  
looking for the heart of things.

What you wanted was redemption  
in me,

millionaire-genius-famous writer-secretary of state.

But in tepid murky beach water,  
insisting that I stand beside with arms beneath you  
helping you learn to float,  
you'd fold in the middle, flail, sink, splutter  
and grab me around the neck.

Too much to handle is what I thought  
every time.

What I wanted was escape  
from you  
from me  
from off the edge of the world.

America was the center.  
America was the heart.  
America let me say we,  
and we held the matches.

Just as all of this was gearing up,  
you went out.

Unfair is what I thought back then,  
still do.

#### V.

America, old or new,  
was not the heart of things.

30 more years of looking.

Slowly  
things got easier.  
Saying we, for instance:  
we family,  
we Jews.

And that center,  
that heart of things,  
that *Varshe shel mayle*?

Longest way round  
is shortest way home,  
someone said in Joyce's "Ulysses."

How about if home is carried on your back?  
You take everything with you,  
then pause from time to time,  
take the best stuff out,  
dust it off,  
wait for a guest.

Isn't that what our parsha's about?

In a midrash on the building of the sanctuary,  
God says to Israel:

"It is customary in the world  
that whoever has a little son,  
cares for him, anoints him, washes him, feeds him,  
and carries him,  
but as soon as the son is come of age,  
he provides for his father  
a beautiful dwelling, a table, and a lamp."

Come sit a while, father.

---

*Varshe shel mayle*: A play on *Yerushelayim shel mayle*, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Michael Steinlauf teaches Jewish history at Gratz College in Philadelphia. He is the author of *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse University Press, 1997) and is working on two books on Jewish theater and popular culture in prewar Poland.