



# Back to the River

Shalom Eilati

(translated by Vern Lenz)

*But Lot's wife looked back  
and she became a pillar of salt.*

— GENESIS 19:26

AND IN THE END, DID I EVER RETURN?

As with so many of my friends, I too had for many years deep-seated reasons for rejecting the idea out of hand: the abhorrence, amounting to hatred, of this land of blood, where so many of its citizens had served as enthusiastic hangmen. And whom will you visit there, with all your dear ones absent; your rescuers no longer alive; the ghetto long since destroyed and its land built over again? Will you go to find out who the Lithuanians are who now live in the house you lived in before the war, who might even have kept for themselves some of your family's furniture?

What point can there be in enduring the pain once again?

And what would be the point of confronting again those silent witnesses — the tranquil landscapes, the forests and lakes, which like a pastoral blanket cover up the murders and atrocities that took place in their midst?

And on the other hand, to try once again to confront the difficult memories, to bring them up to the surface, and attempt to diminish their strength. To return and test your own strength, to see if you are able to look back.

*But Lot's wife looked back.* At my heartstrings tugs the interpretation that says Lot's wife had compassion for her married daughters, who remained in Sodom. She looked back to see whether perhaps they too were following in

her footsteps. And when she saw what was happening to her birthplace, her heart broke.

After I had safely crossed the river, my mother, too, had commanded me not to look back. I obeyed her, got out of the boat, and headed straight for the gully that led to the opposite hills. That was the first step I took on the journey to my salvation.

Thirty years passed before I began to look back and to write. The writing itself lasted twenty years. It was hard to remove old bandages that had long since merged with the living flesh. But once the book was completed, my body could breathe again.

And that's when the definite desire awoke to go back for a visit. Twice even. The first time after fifty-five years, and a second time, four years later. A great curiosity awoke as well — how do those places look where I passed the first years of my life? How wide, in truth, is the river I crossed; how high The Green Hill from whose hideout I looked down on the ghetto on the other side? What was the size, in fact, of the field in that distant village across which I suddenly saw the sugar factory rise in the air in one piece and crumble into bits, with me there in a field of fire and exploding shells?

And so the moment came when the decision to return was ripe.

The first time we went as two families, Aliza's and mine. With deep excitement, and not without fears for the safety of our bodies and souls. But we went.

I did not regret it.

I was shocked by the visit — how had the landscapes of my childhood waited for me here in secret, and I knew nothing of them? A world preserved fifty years and more, where

time had stopped and stood still; like a lost city in the depths of a jungle that had retained, beneath the thick vegetation, the contours of its former houses and streets as they had been long ago, remembered, familiar. Nothing seemed to have changed, except for growing older and considerably fraying.

As if in lifting fog, specific questions sprang up, and sharp wishes spurred me to find answers. So I went a second time. At the end of the second trip, after I had seen and visited nearly everywhere I wished, I left behind me

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sites that my longing will continue to caress, that will remain with me for years to come. But since I now know just what they are, I feel that I may be able to live with them without turning to a pillar of salt.

## A. In the City

As the car approached Kovno, signs appeared — just like everywhere else on the planet — that listed the decreasing distance to the city limits, and the suspense grew.

Just before I reached the city, a billboard came into view with a jingle whose message was suddenly so timely for me:

*Tu Nori, Tu Tori, Tu Gali!* (You want, you need, you can!)

A dizzy ride down the main artery of the Green Hill, and I was in the lower city. We settled in a fine hotel near the old quarter.

At dawn the first day — during summer, the nights are very short — my wife Miriam and I hurried with suppressed excitement into the adjoining Vilnius Street. Once more I am treading through the streets of my childhood to my house. Here is the president's palace, which is surrounded by the same fence with round iron posts, topped with spearheads, but without any poker-faced guards around. We proceed into the heart of the old quarter, to our street, which is now paved for pedestrians. All along the street had been various stores to which my mother used to take me in search of pieces of cloth from which to sew a dress, summer and winter clothes, shoes. This had been a Jewish area, a bubble lined with shops and workshops, carts and porters, all of them Jewish. Now there are no Jews. Only the street signs of Mapu and Zamenhoff keep their original Jewish names. The district has become a complete tourist attraction. Most of the shops have been converted to coffeehouses and boutiques.

It was odd, my curiosity about the house and yard of my childhood. After liberation and my return from hiding in a village, I was in the city for a year and a half. I was already more than 11 years old, and it never once occurred to me, so far as I remember, to go back to my childhood home for a visit. Perhaps I felt some discomfort, some anxiety even, about peering into places where we had lived before the storm, and where Lithuanians who had seized our apartment and household goods now lived. And perhaps it was an aversion to peeking down the stairwell of the abyss into which we had been cast.



I had known beforehand that the building that housed our apartment had changed in form. Messengers that I had repeatedly sent, with detailed addresses in hand, had brought me photographs whose meaning I could not make out. Now, with a single glance from the adjoining corner of “Butcher Street,” the mystery of my house became clear: The building was still standing, but had been remodeled — our story at the top, which had roofed with tin, was gone. In its place was a wide colorful tile roof, bordered in decorative relief.

Not for nothing had I heard it said that our building had once been a monastery. I had found certain evidence for that when we sought safety in its catacomb-like cellars during the bombings on the first days of the war. Now a copper plate affixed to the facade testifies that the building has

been pronounced an ancient historic landmark and listed for restoration and preservation.

My home. What is a man's home? It was natural during my childhood for us to move from one flat to another every few years, according to my parents' considerations, mainly economical. My inner home, the one that was destroyed, was not the one we left against our will in the city's old quarter. My last home had been in the ghetto, at Vigriu 44, and it had been burned and destroyed.

During my second trip, I found an old article in an architectural review thanks to which I understood the changes that had rendered my home unrecognizable. The building originated, it says, in the Middle Ages. Because it was situated where two rivers met, on the main road from the ancient fortress to Vilnius, it served as a hostel for foreign merchants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century another unstable story had been added. The sketches in the article showed our flat. Here is my life's fortress nakedly exposed, a shaky addition wrapped in tin, an eagle's aerie with a wide window sill from which I could, or so it had seemed, look out in safety over a stable world. From this same window, in so far as I was brave enough, I had also been able to follow the last days of the world when it was safe.

When they started restoration, the added third story had been removed. I have therefore no place to look for our flat's windows, and I was relieved. Without a family, there is no need for a home.

A glance across to the opposite street corner reminded me exactly where the flat of the girl Yehudith was, to whose dolls I had played doctor and given shots; where Arke and Maimke, my childhood ghetto playmates, had lived; the flats of my friend Yehoshua, who had disappeared at the start of the war. Nearby — the enormous cathedral and the priest's quarters. How did we have the courage to live next to a Jesuitical compound?

The Rotushe — the town hall — stood in the central square like always. I could reconstruct exactly where they had erected the demo shelter as the war loomed, opposite the Society for Jewish Ethnography Museum. Once more I found myself — this time only long enough for a photograph — on the spot where I waited for the truck that took me to that distant village, a journey that brought me back to the shores of life.

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I walked the city with Aliza, who was my age and from my city; we reconstructed sites and places. Everything as it had been. Here was the promenade beside the river (“nabrezhna” in popular Russian slang), the market alleys, and the nearby streets in the old quarter. We identified the Hebrew gymnasium and the public school from the days of the Russians.

The wonder is that my sixteen months in Kovno after liberation did not leave me with many more memories. It was as if I had gone through a certain deadness of senses. I had been overburdened with the struggle against the memories of the past three years, with waiting for my parents to return, with the fact that my sister had been torn from my life.

We went to the town hall and requested birth certificates. With some suspense, we waited a good while behind a large wooden door. When the door opened, we were both issued certificates. We had indeed been born in the city, and though we had gone as far as we could from this planet, here our names

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remained, many years after we had been as good as dead. What is more, on my certificate my mother is inscribed with two first names — Leah-Margola, a name I had never before heard. As it turns out, the municipal archives registered local rabbinical marriages in the years before the war.

Both of us had lost younger sisters during the war. Would it be possible to get their certificates? — we ventured. The technocratic reply was, “Only the parents have the right.” Go find the parents who can exercise that right.

Then we came to the synagogue. Aliza’s youngest daughter decided to say the Mourner’s Kaddish in memory of deceased relatives. At the sound of her sobbing voice, my strength left me and I too was seized by deep weeping, the first during this visit. Perhaps it was a wail for all my childhood friends, with whom I hung around on prayer days and during Holy Days; or perhaps a lament for the Jewish congregation, wrapped in *tallitim*, which would gather here and listen to the sweet voice of the *hazzan* and the choir above the *bimah*, to whose gradual disappearance I was a witness.

And perhaps — yes — for my entire childhood world, which was buried here in smoke and fire.

Now we went to the fortress of death, the Ninth Fort. Until that time, all I knew about it was the way up to it, the path that rises diagonally from left to right up the hill, as I saw it from the ghetto full of our people being led during the next day of the Great *Aktion*. Now, for the first time, we ascended it ourselves.

There was an annoying drizzle and I gave up on my deep desire to walk the length of the road on foot, perhaps even on our knees like the pilgrims in the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. To try looking back, through the eyes of those who were taken, down and to the right upon the ghetto behind them at those of us who were left, who stood there watching, frozen and dumbfounded.

And at the top, on the level, past the line of vision from the ghetto, the fortress of death appears. God in heaven, already from here the victims could have seen it clearly.

Not in the depths of a dense forest; not beyond the ridge, as in the Babi Yar quarry; nor in the treacherous showers of Auschwitz. Here, atop gently rolling hills, clear, sharp, and definite, sits the fort and its moats, like a beast of prey, perched securely on its belly, waiting to swallow the rows of victims as they come closer and closer to their end, which they see and recognize ahead, before they are led, group by group, to the killing pits. It is beyond my power to imagine the process of execution, where they were detained and where they were taken. The pits were opened two years later under German orders to try to erase the traces of their deeds, and the remains were burned. The victims numbered at least about 50,000 over the course of three years.

And beyond the sidewalk which abuts a peaceful and tranquil village, there stretches a green plain. I was glued to the sight of the western moat of the fortress, all of it punctured with bullet holes. This is without doubt the very execution site, in use daily during the years of occupation, the maw that swallowed the relatively small shipments. Here were sent, according to the memorial slabs and documentation, people not only from our city, but also from distant places — the Lord knows why — from Berlin, Drancy, Marseilles, and Vienna.

I wonder whether my little sister — after she was delivered to the Gestapo by her “protectors” one or two months before the Germans retreated — perhaps she, too, was led to this place, together with other Jewish children that they had gathered up here and there.



Choking, I said Kaddish aloud in a sobbing voice while we fell into one another's arms. Every one of us in our little band had someone here to mourn.

## B. In the Country

Years ago, after having woken from my deep decades-long sleep, I could still find the living traces of some of my rescuers — of Pečkyte, the woman who had found shelter for me in a distant village and conducted me there, and Ona, the spouse of Daugela, the peasant in the country. I owe my life to these three and to two others; in all, five Lithuanians.

I managed to send to Pečkyte a few parcels, and even a sum of money, which reached her just a few days before she died and apparently it helped her have a decent burial. Before my second trip, Rima, a good hearted Lithuanian who lives in Kaunas, discovered the grave of Pečkyte at the edge of the city. Now, on my second journey, we went together to the grave, where I planted flowering begonias.

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“We’re photographed beside the pear tree that you no doubt remember,” wrote Ona, enclosing an old worn photograph. After my brief correspondence with her, I received a letter whose return address was unfamiliar to me. “It is the local postmistress who writes to you,” it said. “I used to bring your letters to Ona. I am sorry to inform you that she did not see your last letter, having died after a prolonged illness.” I wrote back thanking her and I kept her address. Now the postmistress’s son Algis was waiting for me in the town’s train station, and in his car I began to cross the town toward the village.

Was this the same route I had taken when I first arrived in Daugela’s wagon, and the same by which he brought me back after the liberation? I cannot know. For 55 years the town of Marijampole has grown, paths have become paved, and a convenient road cuts through the outskirts toward the village I was seeking.

Of the old house nothing remained. Since the Soviets had identified Daugela as a dissident, they did not allow him to renew the house, and the structure gradually deteriorated.

But I could distinguish, rising in a front corner of the property, a mound of dirt covered with vegetation typical of ruins — here the house had

once stood. Now, like its owner, it has returned to dust. A vigorous growth of young pear shoots that sprouted from the felled tree mark the traces of the man's yard, and that is all.

From there, back with Algis, I wanted to find the gravesite of my rescuer. We went through the fields, first to the sugar factory, to its tall chimney stacks that tower over the expanse — a cornerstone in my memory, that had been rebuilt after it had exploded in that night of battle. I naively thought that I could find Daugela's grave in the Catholic cemetery by myself, but I was wrong. Algis offered to take me to his brother's family, who still lived in the town; they would doubtless be able to find the gravesite for me.

"But meanwhile," he said casually, "there's a Jewish memorial stone nearby that you might like to see."

We approached the place, above one of the bends in the beautiful Šešupe River to whose beauty I, too, like all the denizens of that country, have sung nostalgic songs. In that pastoral landscape, adorned with picturesque birch trees, there stands a memorial stating that in this charming spot, one thousand Jews from here and the environs were executed in the summer of 1941. A few steps further was the rectangular mass grave, bordered by a low fence.

That was one of the first mass graves that I saw in Lithuania.

To my surprise, in a quiet street nearby, I met Daugela's sister-in-law, a 91-year-old woman whose existence I had not known about. And not only did she remember me, but she was also able to quote back to me the words I had apparently shouted when I heard the news of liberation: "I'm alive! I'm alive!", demonstrating how I waved my arms. Amazing. She is now the last living witness from the world of my memories, about which I myself sometimes wonder whether it was real. These things indeed happened; I did not imagine them.

Since my return from there, I have made use of the various pieces of information I have gathered, and have at last been able to nominate Daugela and Pečkyte for a Righteous Among the Nations certificate from Yad Vashem, an act that nagged me for years but which I hadn't the strength to perform.

And within me are still buried certain stones of memory, enveloped in a kind of unclear longing. A part of me would like to return and visit these places again, extend my investigations and inquiries, talk with the neighbors, peer at maps, try to understand and assimilate the changes that have taken place there — and perhaps in my soul.

## C. The Shtetls

Ostensibly, I returned in order to visit the Jewish shtetls, the dwelling places and settlements of generations of my family. I knew in advance that there was no point in searching for their houses — there is no one to ask, and no one who wants to answer. The memory of my visit to my grandfather's home would not be enough to find it; the photograph of my mother's home from the 1920s is unlikely to help locate it in her town. I knew only that all my family members were killed in their respective towns.

I set out to find traces of my family and I found towns with a Jewish presence in its very absence. Even if there is no half-ruined or tightly locked synagogue, no empty lot preserving the outlines of the structure that once stood there, the small wooden houses with colored shutters and modest doorways in the center of town offer hints of this absence. In these towns, the Jewish shtetl often accounted for more than half the population; most of these houses belonged to the Jews.

The daily round of the lives of local residents goes on as before, like a theatre stage with the same setting and props throughout the entire plot, except that a large number of the characters have disappeared. In a big city, the missing presence is diluted among the population. But in a small town the Jewish absence seemed to cry out to me. As if its former occupants, who filled the space for many generations, were ghosts.

I went to visit their living places, and I found myself unwillingly occupying myself with their graves. More precisely, the mass graves, called by a more sanitized name: common grave. Since my visit there, I never leave the pits, the groves, the silent road crossings that lead to the depths of the forest. I cannot pull myself away. I return and dive into reconstructing the details of the great killing: how did they imprison them, how and where did they lead them, how did they murder them?

I have always had, embedded deeply within me, a picture of the executions, assembled over the years from photographs and television screens. Images of the last moments of life, captured by the murderers themselves and burned into my flesh. Among them — how can I sort them? — the image of a mother with a child on her lap, leaning toward the barrel of a gun aimed at her head, or the backs of a group of women, standing crowded next to one another, leaning over a cliff.

But where are their mass graves? These graves are now the only evidence of the lives they once had here. In the traditional cemeteries, the gravestones are mostly shattered and the mounds obscured. During the last sixty-five years, thick trees and shrubs have grown up there.

Signposts to these places mostly are missing. The locals didn't like the signs and vandalized or removed them.

Before my second trip, I equipped myself with a book of photographs of 220 mass graves in this country. Most of them are local killing sites, each of which swallowed only a few hundreds or thousands; they are hidden in thick refreshing and blossoming forests, approached by an innocent dirt road that winds like a snake to its deadly end. I have visited six of them, in Mažeik and Plungian, Vidukle and Šavli, Nemokšt and Žežmer. Six among more than two hundred like them throughout this country. Little workshops of death, operated by the locals, mostly for a short period only — during two or three months of the first summer of war.

O land of forests, rivers, and lakes.

How then did it happen? How, with orchestrated steps, did someone send circulars and instructions to all the villages as to how and when to kill their neighbors? Or was it that, with wondrous inner coordination, they set their sights, in every corner of this land, on the Jews in their midst, leading them on a similar path of death?

And I, all unwillingly, on tiptoes and with great trepidation, I am drawn into a kind of comparison between those who were led to death in the gas chambers and those who were led to the pits in the forest.

The anonymous, industrial scope of sealed transports in train cars to a place unknown. And in contrast to them, the country Jews, led along the village's main street, their home of several generations, in the presence of friends and acquaintances, among them their clients, people they had helped in time of need, classmates and playmates, while from the windows all around they are looked down upon with scorn and glee over their downfall.

(I recall one of the short and pointed stories of Ida Fink, about the elderly people led through the main street in the heavy rain, and a young girl running after them and calling out to her grandfather: "*Zei gezondt!* Be well, *zeide* — be well!")

For days or weeks, they were assembled at the synagogue, and then — the men first — they were marched to the edge of the village, to a thick grove

where, when things were as they should be, they had wandered and played, in paths that they knew. And there they were ordered to dig long pits, and before they understood what it meant, a shower of shots put an end to their final minutes.

Irena, a Lithuanian whose house sits next to the Jewish cemetery of my grandmother's village, where they had led the hundred women and children of the town, tells me of her childhood memories: "When the shooting started, my mother would take me into the shelter, so I wouldn't hear."

Here I stop. Impossible for me to imagine what the women and children went through while they waited, imprisoned in the synagogue for as much as a month later, before their turn came. And throughout this time — this model was repeated in Vidukle and in many other shtetls — their neighbors — again, their neighbors — did not refrain from describing to the

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women in detail, through the barred windows, how they had killed their husbands and brothers, and what awaited them one of these days. And those days did indeed arrive. Sometimes, of all days, on the Fast of the Ninth of Ab, or at the New Year and the Day of Atonement.

And so in at least 220 places in that country. More precisely, 220 signed and catalogued sites. I doubt whether on the Day of Judgment the dead will find each their own bones. Here all is mixed together with screams, protest, and shock.

O land of forests, rivers, and lakes.

Who were the people who carried out the comprehensive killing? I look at the people around me, some with impassive faces. Some whose body language tells of the hard years they lived through, some still young — dressed in jeans with shaved heads — blasting loud rhythmic music from their cars like in every other place in the Western world. Who among their parents accompanied people to the pits and pushed them in; who shot them and buried them alive, who stripped and robbed and plundered them? Two hundred twenty sites? Let us say that at every killing site there participated fifty to one hundred "local abettors," as most memorial plaques delicately put it. This rough calculation too yields a sum of at least ten

thousand. Ten thousand in the shtetls and villages only. And what about other places in that country?

And once more, on tiptoe, I approach the subject with the greatest caution, trying to touch and understand — how did they determine where the killing would take place, where the pits would be dug? Why just “there”?

In Kovno, the ancient fortresses — the underground vaults and catacombs — were chosen as suitable sites for the killings. In Ponar, near Vilnius, it was giant pits that had been dug to store fuel. In Marijampole, they imprisoned the Jews in empty military barracks beside the Šešupe River, and on the banks of that river the victims met their death. In dozens of other places, the margins of the Jewish cemeteries were the natural choices, as it were, for the killers.

But sometimes they led the victims many kilometers into distant forests. That is what I saw near Žežmer, Nemokšt, Vidukle. The Jews of Šavli — the third-largest ghetto in Lithuania — were placed tens of kilometers into the Koži Forest. So it was in Plungian; they went to a hilly thicket west of town, bringing victims from half a dozen other places. Why there?

In Koži, there is a row of mass graves. Eleven giant pits, long and rectangular, each at a distance of several meters from one another. In what order did the digging, and the killing inside them, take place? First deeper in the forest, then toward the perimeter, or the other way around? And similarly in Plungian. It is a sharp, pointless question that will not leave me alone.

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In Vidukle Jewish life had bustled around the synagogue and the house of my grandfather, the rabbi. The story told by mocking locals after they returned from the site of the bloodshed is that the old rabbi, my father's father, lagged at the end of a line of people, as they were led to a grove beside the train station, and refused to hasten his pace. It was a march of two or three kilometers to a trench behind the railway station. There now stand a few defeated trees, remnants of the thin grove that perhaps provided killers with a measure of cover for their abominable act. Among the trees is a concrete stone bearing a plaque that tells what occurred.

“For years, human bones would rise and stick out of the ground on this lot,” a neighbor told us. I have childhood memories about the wide open space between the town and the railway station. My father and I used to walk

along this road, when we took vacations in the town. But no one then imagined a script about leading a mass of innocent people on a hot August day to be shot at the edge of a pit.

As for the Jewish cemetery, beyond some lonely old gravestones peeping here and there among tall trees, on a back slope, near a small lake, we discovered a fenced, rectangular mass grave.

My slow-moving grandmother, and with her all the children of the town with whom I used to play, who grilled me about the big city that I came from — here all of them met their death.

At least she hadn't had to march a long distance like my grandfather.

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Siad, my mother's birthplace. My albums are crammed with photographs that I collected from the belongings of her brothers and sisters overseas, pictures brimming with the romance of youth.

Those were days of enthusiasm, of dreams whose fulfillment they pursued across the sea, far from the small and stifling village. Only their aged parents and a few members of their generation stayed behind to stand in place.

They are the ones I found in mass graves. The women and children, among them my maternal grandmother, on the edge of the local cemetery. The men and boys are 20 kilometers to the north — they dragged them that far.

A village full of wooden buildings strung about a main street, sprawling on the shore of a small lake, with a stream that traverses it. And all around it, a forest.

I would like to stay here for a number of days. To get up at dawn and go out of town, to the edge of the forest; to feel the cool dampness wafting the scent of pine and oak trees, the odors of dairies and goats that had been in the yards of Jewish townspeople. To wander, towards evening, in the paths that lead to the nearby stream and lake, to try to reconstruct the position captured by the photographs I have in my hand. To walk into the thick forest, where "youth full of life and joy," in the words of the caption written on the back, would be photographed in a certain pose while leaning against a tree trunk, or at a professional photographer's studio, holding a guitar, decked out in holiday clothing, their expression suffused with undefinable longing.

They whispered words of love and courtship, recited poems by Jewish poets, dreamed of distant lands, quoted words of philosophy and spirituality about the soul's salvation and the pursuit of happiness. "Remember, my sister, friend of my soul, these marvelous, magical days that we shared before I sailed across the seas."

Now there is no one to lead me through the streets and paths of the village, to tell me a bit about the area, the views that attended my mother when she grew up here nearly a hundred years ago.

I wish I could pull at the wooden planks of the houses' walls, like a child tugging his mother's apron strings, begging and pleading — tell me, tell me what memories are buried in your boards about the days gone by before the new tenants invaded your midst.

In a shack that was threatening to fall, in a neglected, untidy room, sat an old toothless man of 95, leaning over his plate. He was hard of hearing, but his gaze was clear. They repeated my question to him several times, and suddenly his eyes lit up: "Greenstein? *Blechar!* (tinker). I worked for him!" I was agape — my grandfather Shalom

Zvi and his son Idel (who had migrated to Palestine with his family, and because it had been too hot for him, had returned to his town and to his death), had been the local ironworkers — blacksmiths and locksmiths.

And other evidence stands in the town — its main synagogue. Already on my first trip, I had been surprised to see the wooden, two-storied building, still in one piece. I was told that in all of Lithuania, only about 15 such structures remain standing today.

In the intervening years, the building had been used as a workshop, a garage, and a storehouse. It is now standing empty and neglected. The stylistic trim on the edge of its roof, the remnants of the latticed partition in the women's section, left no doubt about the structure's past, although I could find no traces of a mezuzah in its doorways.

I went back and circled the building with wonder and excitement. Here my grandfather — according to my aunt — would emerge at times and, in a

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good-humored way, shush the children playing outside during the hours of prayer.

During my second visit to the place, four years later, the building had already fallen. Its second story and roof had collapsed, and there is no one to repair or preserve it.

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In Žežmer the archivist produced for me documents and a picture of my aunt and uncle. The photographs are wonderful in their crispness — mounted in glass panes that were discovered only in recent years in the ruins of an abandoned house, apparently that of the local Jewish photographer. In the pictures, Aunt Libeh and her husband Shmuel Sidrer, both of them teachers, in their classrooms. She is in the girls' classroom, he in the boys'. Beautiful children, tender, bright-faced Avremeles and Shloimeles, good, beaming souls. Together with the photographs is an annual report from the district supervisor about the school in the year 1939. There were four classes in the elementary school, "Yavneh." The staff were the principal Moshe Sheifer and two teachers — my uncle and aunt. In all, 138 pupils. Lessons were in Hebrew, according to my father's books — "Dawn" and "My ABC Book." The supervisor's summary: positive.

Two years later, most will be led to the nearby forest. I wish I could cry to them, "Escape while you can!" The men and youths were led to one place, and the women and girls to a different woods (among them Rivkah and Zionah, my aunt's daughters). And buried half-alive.

O land of forests, rivers, and lakes

One of the survivors of the village who was identified in the pictures tells me how, on the third day of the war, a relative came from another town with a truck and took them with him to escape to the east. At first, the rabbi came too, but immediately decided against it. He must stay with his congregation, he said. So he got down off the truck. To his doom.

Siad, Mažeik, Vidukle, Nemokšt, Žežmer, Marijampole, Koži, Ponar, and the forts of Kovno — they are now among my possessions, places deeply rooted in my world; I brought them home with me.

## D. On the Green Hill

*The gray willows of my longing —  
Whose real location on earth I never did find out  
(The Demon, Marina Tsvetaeva)*

Until I finally paid a visit to my city, I didn't know what I was looking for. I knew I wanted once more to see our house, the last one before the ghetto, as well as my two hiding places, in the city and village.

It became clear to me, with ever sharpening focus, that the Green Hill was still a special place of great significance for me. Here was my first path of escape. Here began the one hundred ten days of my rescue. My mother had ascended its green slopes, under cover of darkness, from the Pilz-Fabrik brigade where she worked, to visit her two children, each in their own hiding place.

In all, half a square kilometer.

The Green Hill is that part of the country that falls from the plain to where the rivers meet; alongside it stretches most of the city. To the inhabitants of the ghetto, that slope rising on the other side of the river did indeed look like a kind of hill. Along the line of its ridge, sharp roof edges peeped through the trees, hinting at a world that we could no longer reach. Some days before my escape, I had already known that in one of those houses my hiding place was waiting, and there I went after I crossed the river.

I was confident that I shall be able to identify the house of my old Lithuanian woman, since I could see in May the ghetto's buildings from its attic, when I was allowed to climb up to catch a little sunshine. In this way I could even see another stretch of the river and follow my mother's boat brigade as it returned at day's end to the ghetto.

In addition I had in my memory the sight of the deep gully cut through the hill alongside the old woman's house; I had walked up it to reach her house.

During my first trip, I came to the place from the city itself. From the perspective of ghetto dwellers, it was as if I arrived from behind the scenes. In one of these streets my parents had once lived as a young couple, and here, if I were to invest some time in exploration and inquiries, I could reconstruct, using the photographs that I have, exactly where my grandmother could be seen in the window, or where I had been photographed at ten months at my

mother's side, on the verandah through which could be seen buildings, most of them still standing now, after sixty or seventy years.

But I was in a hurry. Here we were at "Workers Street," which later becomes "Little Workers Street," and at its end, standing apart a good distance from the houses in front of it, house number 59A was supposed to be standing.

Though the street had changed its name, we came easily enough upon house number 59, and my suspense grew. But here began an impenetrable mystery. New houses were interspersed among the old in an unbroken stretch — the numbering starting anew, in a street with a different name stretching to the top of the slope. Was it naïve on my part to expect that 59A would appear right after number 59? But now, where is the house that hid me; where is Maria's house?

Onto the memory of this house converge my distress and my desire. Here traces would be preserved, perhaps, that I could find in no other place. This is the house which, for several months, took into its walls my feelings of anxiety and loneliness, the constant fear, the endless longing for my home and my family, for the ghetto. The walls of this house shut up the memory of my mother's last footsteps during

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the only visit she paid me, a visit that lasted one full day of apparent tranquility, a full day that I could not know would also be our last.

I wandered dizzily about, trying the residents. No one remembered where Little Workers Street was.

While I was still looking for a landmark, a point from which I could see the opposite river bank, now full of new neighborhoods, when suddenly a dark haired woman darted out of the gully, somewhere beside the river, from Jonavos Street where a number of factories stand. She was returning from work, taking a shortcut.

At once I understood — here was the end of the path I had ascended after crossing the river. At which point here did I leave the path, turn right, and take a steep path to the yard of my old lady?

In that gully there is now a stream of automobiles on a highway that crosses the river at about the place I had crossed it by boat. It even continues across the ground of the former ghetto.

And more. I saw that the same path coming out of the gully ended in a small open place, and I realized — here, in this forgotten corner, nearly hidden from its viewers, in this empty, partly secluded place, the old Lithuanian grandmother had taken my sister on a walk of sorts, instead of taking walks as one would with normal children in parks and gardens.

The tense body language of this seven-year-old child, who looked restlessly behind her from time to time, was what persuaded me that it was my sister, not just any girl. Thus I had seen her, from a distance, by leaning far out of the opening in the attic. One time and one time only.

On the second day of my search, I found a house that seemed to me to be standing where Maria's house had stood. From its roof one could see the ghetto out front, and, toward the back, looking down, one could make out the opening of the end of the path from the gully. The generous current occupants of the modern duplex could say little about the new house's history except that its owner had been a famous sculptor. And who owned the lot before him? Had the house that held my hiding place stood here? There was no one to ask.

Nearby, a few houses away from mine, was the house that hid my sister. Her presence there was not so invisible after all. My host, Maria, and the blonde woman on the other side of the wall who shared our secret, had both been able to tell me that they had seen her walking with the grandmother, and both of them knew the house where she lived. After liberation, they told me about my sister's disappearance and the rumors in the street. Two or three times during my hiding period I had gone out, under cover of night, stealing under the shadows of trees, approaching what I thought to be my sister's house, to look at it from a certain distance.

I wish the house's appearance were better fixed in my memory, for in fact I never saw the house itself, but rather its presumed direction. There remains in my memory no concrete trace of activity, of voices, or lights in windows, that could help me make the connection, then and now, between a certain house and the one where she stayed.

When I returned to that street after liberation, I never dared to approach that house, to knock at its door and to ask direct, pointed questions.

Now I was walking to the presumed place where my sister had been, following my dim memory. Once more I stood across from it, examining the houses across the street, but they were silent. We asked the oldest neighbors in that row of houses, but they knew nothing. They had passed their youth in Siberia, and they did not know their neighbors in the first years after the war.

And so, here too remained a question, as before.

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On my second trip, waiting for me on the city-archivist's desk were a number of documents, each one exciting. One file was a list of voters from Workers Street in 1940; another, reports of municipal supervisors during the world war period; the third, a file on the Pilz-Fabrik Company, the felt-boot factory where my mother worked.

The 1940 Soviet voters list, region of Little Workers Street, a year before the Germans arrived. The Green Hill neighborhood belonged to simple people, and Jews had always lived there. Their names fill these lists — within a year or two most of these names would vanish without so much as a gravestone.

Here my father had lived as a bachelor; here I had passed the first years of my life. It was only when I was about five that we moved down to the more modern city. In the voters list I quite easily found the name of my old woman from Little Workers Street, but then I came across two other occupants of the same house, the Orentas couple — an exciting discovery. Perhaps I had finally found the name of the blonde lady, the key to the whole operation of my rescue — it was she who worked with my mother in the factory, she who persuaded her elderly neighbor to conceal a Jewish child. During all these years I had tried to discover traces, or to find some indication as to her name, which I didn't remember — but in vain. Now I had a definite clue. Or did I? How could I be sure the registered tenants of 1940 were the same as those in 1944? The puzzle remains a puzzle.

This seemed to put an end to my searches, yet I didn't want to be done with the lists. With hesitation, with some aversion, I went to the lists to find the full name of the woman — the one who — perhaps it was her husband — had turned my little sister in.

Was it not better that they sink into shameful oblivion? But I had practical reasons for discovering their full names — I wanted to know exactly where my sister stayed hidden during the last half year of her life, and how close I had

come to the house during my clandestine nightly forays. I took a deep breath and once more combed through the list of voters, looking for the woman's first name, the only one I knew. But I found nothing there about Martha.

As for my old woman, the municipal records verify it. Grincevičiene is registered in Little Workers Street, as I remembered. But her name, it appeared, was Julia, not Maria — so says a form from the municipal tax inspector of 17 September 1942. The description of her apartment matches exactly what I recall: “wooden house, property of 80 m<sup>2</sup> [square meters], one living room of 24 m<sup>2</sup>. Heated by stove.” At the bottom of the document she testifies by signing that the details she has given are true. Her handwriting is shaky — an old woman who knows only how to sign her name.

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A narrow opening  
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A child's imagination. I had remembered her as an old woman. On a form from 1940 in the blank for her date of birth, is written: 49 years old (it would appear she did not know her exact date of birth). Which means that when I met her in 1944, she was only 53.

And the house was gone. How could it be? Rima came to interview people, and found an old man who also worked in the Pilz-Fabrik. At the top of the slope he pointed down in a certain direction and said, “That's the factory's roof.” And as for Maria's house, he said it was demolished because it was in danger of collapsing at the edge of the gully. While I was still urging Rima to return and ask the man more questions, the man died. A narrow opening closed once more; once more there is no one to ask, and no one knows.

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A surprising and precise document awaited me in the municipal archives — a professional labor force roster from the felt-boot factory, dated the end of August 1941, that is to say, only seventy days after Germans had taken over the city. At the top of the form, in German and Lithuanian:

*Ostland B Faser Gesellschaft m.b.h.*  
*Aussenstelle Kauen*  
*Valstybinio Veltinis fabriko “Žvaigžde”*  
*Kaunas, Jonavos gtve 74, tel 26806*

With a single stroke, an unknowable mystery became a concrete reality in the form of an address, ownership, and organization.

Under cover of the Pilsz-Fabrik brigade, at the end of the exterminating Kinder Aktion against children, I left the ghetto one chilly dawn. Only by virtue of the special circumstances in this place, where women from the area worked without partition with people from the ghetto, could one smuggle and make deals, not only in matters of barter and commerce, but also in matters of salvation.

Here my mother arranged hiding places for my sister and me; from here the blonde lady brought me mother's letters; and from here Pečkyte set out to her distant birthplace, to find me another hiding site. In this place, between these walls, while their hands were kneading boot felt for the Germans, my mother and two Lithuanian women wove the first fibers in the rope of my rescue, which led me back to life.

Jonavos Street, which runs along the riverbank across from the ghetto, leads to the townlet with the Jewish name Janeve. Here is where my mother's brigade turned every morning. I remember precisely that, after they crossed the river in the boat, its people were to turn right in that street, to the west. I hadn't known how close their destination was to my hiding place.

Together with Rima, we hurried to the place.

Jonavos 74. On one side of the street lay the river. On the other side of the street stood a row of industrial and commercial buildings, bordering the slopes of the Green Hill. At the end of a row of factories, we discerned a compound, enclosed by a low wall, with a gate at the entrance, and a one-story building with several wings. A shack to the left of the gate doubtless housed the guards. How many German soldiers had stood sentry at this place? Had the German firm paid the army for them?

The compound is now divided into a row of offices and small separate workshops. In a nicely restored and painted office we find a secretary and a manager. Neither knows a thing about the place's past. They look at us in silence and with a certain reserved wonder, a complex look that I encountered in many places in this country. They seem not to understand, these Lithuanians, the meaning of the bold investigations of Jewish tourists in these places.

Cautiously I leave our group, circling slowly once and once again the surrounding area.

Where did she work here? Where could she move around a bit and pass from one point to another? Somewhere here, traces of my mother are preserved. Since it was Sunday, the offices are closed, and there is no access to the space inside. There, perhaps, might be an address, some graffiti perhaps, that testifies to the former presence of the Jews.

At the beginning of July, 1944, at the end of her final week of work here, they announced to the last remnants of the ghetto that they would be transported westward during the next few days. The forced evacuation of those who

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I shall sit upon a stone here and  
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obeyed the order took four days, and on the fifth, they began to blow up and burn all those who were in hiding and who hoped to avoid evacuation, my mother apparently among them.

Perhaps somewhere in the compound I will feel my pulse quicken, just as my friend Aliza felt across from a certain house in a distant

resort town. Just as perhaps I felt near the fence of the Catholic cemetery next to the ghetto: there my mother may have been shot when she tried to escape from the fire on the last night of the evacuation.

I was in the city for a year and a half after the war, and it never once occurred to me to look for this factory. How could I now leave the place? I went back and circled it, unable to let go.

I turned to the back of the building. I had to find my way among huge piles of old worn-out tires, looking to me like mythological creatures guarding the door to a great secret.

I clambered past the tires until I got behind the building, to a gap between it and the hill close behind it. Was there some passage here, a hidden opening of some kind that would allow captives to steal out to the Green Hill? The wall abuts a slippery incline here, the beginning of the steep slope, leaving only a narrow space beside the building. Passage is impossible.

If it were possible, I would wander about here constantly, round and round. How many of my friends have found similarly clear traces of their lost parents' work places in the barracks at Auschwitz or in the trenches of Dachau and Stutthof? She spent no less time here than she had with me in the ghetto, in the half-room that had been our home.



I shall sit upon a stone here and wait. Perhaps she will yet return; in the end, she will surely come back.

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Some weeks later, when I had returned to my home, I mustered courage and turned to the wizards of the Internet. "Ostland-Faser Gesellschaft"— what would land in my net?

Windows and gates emerged, each of them containing clues verifying that such a firm once existed. To flesh out the information, I went to the archives at Yad Vashem. An entire vista stretched before my eyes.

I now know that a month after the invasion into Russia began, on the initiative of the German Minister of Economics, a corporation was formed to manage light industry (wood, paper, textiles, clothing, and so on) throughout Ostland (the occupied territories east of Poland — the Baltic countries, Belorussia, and the Ukraine). Corporate headquarters were in Riga, with branches in Reval in Estonia and Kaunas in Lithuania. In one of the tiny cages of this economic whale fluttered my mother's brigade.

The corporation's annual reports list the number of workers, broken out by nationality. On the last row of this table are listed, separately, the Jews. So many in 1939, but 1943 is marked by a hyphen. That is to say, their number was not important.

And in the production tables, in 1942 the corporation supplied 190,000 pairs of felt boots to the German army, the Wehrmacht.

How many of them had been shaped by the bare hands of my mother and her colleagues?

After the factory had been identified and located, I still wondered — how had Mother slipped out from the place and ascended the hill? A look at a map of the city revealed only a single alley rising from Jonavos Street to the top of the hill. It nearly adjoined the felt factory from the east.

At the end of the workday, my mother had two choices. The first was to wait until the brigade returned to where the boats were anchored, taking advantage of the commotion of crossing to leave the ranks and go up the path I had climbed to make my flight. The second was, immediately after the brigade left the factory gates, to dart to the right into the steep and winding Kapsiu Lane. I had to walk it myself.

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Kapsiu Lane. Tense, full of hidden anxiety, I turned into the lane with my companion, Ari. His mother, too, had been saved by concealment in this country.

The first part of the steep ascent was paved. It would have seemed fitting had I crawled it on my knees — here my mother's feet had trod.

It was Sunday. The few residents at the start of the lane sat on their porches in the garden and sipped drinks, sending suspicious, quizzical glances at the two of us.

Then came the first sharp curve. At the turn, girls were playing with a ball; they too cast wondering looks at the two strangers, while the inexplicable tension in me grew. Tall green trees hugged the path on both sides, like those that met me back then, when I climbed the hill on the day I escaped. The dimness they created must have been good for the figure slipping out of the factory, after she had removed the yellow patches and buried her face as deep as possible in clothing so that her long nose, and the sight of her suffering face, would not deliver her to destruction.

The climb was tiring, but in this stretch there are no houses or people, allowing one to proceed without fear of prying eyes. Then came the top of the hill, where streets are straight and wide, with sidewalks, landscaped trees, windows that face the street from both sides, people coming and going, dogs barking, children lingering before going home. I too found these streets unsettling. It seemed as if we were being watched from all sides, with suspicion.

So how did she pass here? How did she overcome the immense fear of exposure, identification, entrapment? They would point to her and shout, “*Šita Žyde*, it's a Jewess! Quick, run her down, catch her!”

How many obstacles Mother must have passed before she reached Martha's house. And after staying there for the night, she had to retrace the long route back. How had she done it? I am somewhat consoled that her visits began in January, during the bitter winter months, when hours of light are few and faces are buried in their coats. But there were also visits in the warm months of April, May, and perhaps even June, months when darkness is late to fall. How many such visits did she make after April 20th, the date of her visit to me, I cannot know. Martha had asked Mother to limit her visits, which left her daughter restless and capricious for several days afterwards.

And the thought comes to me suddenly, if they had invited the Gestapo to take my sister, what would prevent them from doing it on a day my mother was to visit? But it is likely that it was only during the last days of the war that their resolve weakened, when Mother had stopped visiting.

And for us, how long did the entire climb take us? About 45 minutes. Forty-five minutes, and forever.

## Closing

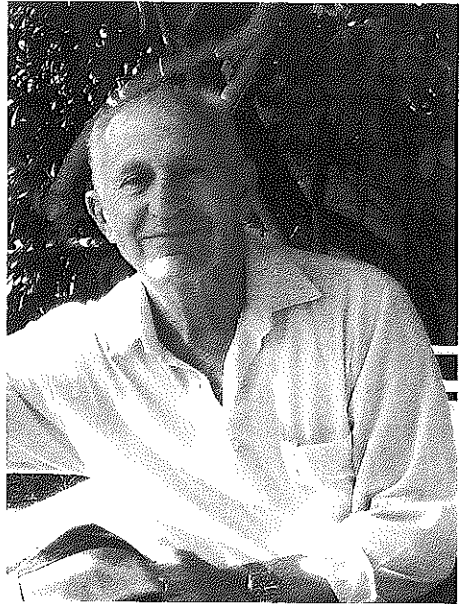
At the end of my two journeys, having seen nearly all I wanted to see, I think I have had enough.

I count the possessions that are left to me: a roofless building in the old quarter, a pile of rubble in back country with shoots of a pear tree sprouting from it, a factory that holds traces of my mother, a stone path that climbs the Green Hill and guards her footsteps, a little open place where the image of my sister is etched, and a patchwork of mass graves in groves saturated with blood.

After my voyages, my possessions increased. They include the towns of my forebears, who sit now on both sides of me as in a family portrait. I may not have found an actual home where I belong, but at the least I have located my longing for it. A person needs an identity, a place to start. My restless longings have found a place in the universe.

Jack, an American who joined our second journey, dreams of buying the old house in Slobodka, where, according to documents, his parents lived as a young couple, before they had the urgent need to rescue their young baby. In that spirit, I must buy up half of the Green Hill.

Perhaps for both of us, our searches are variations on the theme of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* — we drag with us our mothers' corpses, refusing to part with them.



Time passed. Aliza and I were sitting in a café in Tel Aviv, talking again about our visits in Lithuania and events of the past.

“Aliza,” I ask, “Will we ever leave the 22nd of June 1941? Will we ever stop hoping that we’ll still wake up again on that summer day and go to summer camp as planned?”

Even sixty-five years later, the question is still open.

And I also ask myself, still, endlessly, how is it that from that crowded press, from the piles of thousands of corpses, the rows of mass graves and mounds of ashes — how is it that I, a random sliver like me — how was only I pushed out to remain alive?

That question, too, remains unanswered.

*But Lot's wife looked back —*

How hard it is, hard to look behind, and not turn to stone.



*Shalom Eilati (Kaplan) was born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1933, the son of Israel Kaplan, writer and historian, and Leah (nee Greenstein), nurse and poetess. He survived the ghetto (as did his father), and reached Palestine in 1946. He was a member of Kibbutz Tel-Yosef, earned a Ph.D. in citriculture, and became a lecturer in the Faculty of Agriculture at the Hebrew University in Rehovot. Later he was among the founders of Israel's Environmental Protection Service, and the coordinating editor of Cathedra, a quarterly on the history and settlement of Israel. He is married with three children and five grandchildren, and lives in Jerusalem. His memoirs of his childhood in the Holocaust, Lachatzot et Ha-Nahar (Crossing the River) were published in Hebrew in 1999 and are forthcoming from Alabama University Press in 2008.*