Mythical moments in national and other family histories

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My theme will be the links between a life story told in interpersonal transmission and larger, public history and commemoration. I shall elaborate it by presenting a case study of the transmission of loss, but first I need to sound some precautions and elaborate some of the ideas I shall be using.

Writing about the transmission of loss tends toward a merging of history, life story and the processes of blocked and eased recall, both psychologically and socially. ‘Memory' and 'forgetting' seem to pull all of this together. In his introduction to Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End (2000), Peter Homans seems to favour such a merging of history, life story, recall and loss. He would allow concepts deriving from the level of the psychic, specifically attachment and separation, to be applied by careful analogy to the collective and to the historical. Rituals of mourning and commemoration could, by this analogy, be treated as containers of psychic loss. Economic activity could be explained as manic future-oriented activity that closes off loss in the miraculous post-war German recovery. 'Trauma' would also bring together the physical, the psychic and the social by the metaphor of tissues: a blow that breaks through and destroys tissues is a wound, and we can think of both psychic tissues and social tissues being thrown into shock and anomie by injury (Homans cites Kai Erikson 1994 here). A loss so great and sudden damages the inner capacity to contain. I agree that life story, history, psychic and social processes do need to be considered together. But they should not be treated as analogous.

It is important to spell out how the social is internalised. Psychically the container that might be damaged is a narcissistic ego ideal, which is derived from internalised social objects and their imagery, provided by rituals and other means of representation, such as the telling and retelling of stories. Socially and at the same time for the individual the container is based on an assumption of trust in a first person plural, such as ‘my family’. The unabsorbed blow is a wound to the ideal and to trust. The blow returns to break through the container constantly, unbidden, as vision or as compulsive acting out. The result of this personal disaster is of course social, even though it is describable psychically as alienation, foreboding and paranoia. Its ‘scar tissue’ or a less ‘wounded’ recovery or creation of a shield of containment and survival can be surmised in the more social activity of telling the story of the event and the way that in turn is recognised and reinforced by more public commemoration. But this too should not be generalised as ‘social’ in the sense of true for all. We have to be careful how we aggregate individual responses to shared, catastrophic losses. They are social events, but responses to them are psychic and individual.

Cognitive anthropologists like Dan Sperber insist (1985), I think properly, that individual representations of the social, of what has been learned by experience or by schooling, are to be studied like epidemiology - through the variations of individual

practice and transmission. We must study the ways in which narrations are checked against each other in social gatherings or by more mediated ways to other stories and to more generalised histories. We cannot jump to the assumption that they all add up to whatever reinforces the social totality of the present time in which this cross-checking occurs. I want to make way for thinking how representations act upon one another. I want to open out the field of effects in the experiencing body of internalisations of social relations and events, and in turn treat the social as a field of events and the effects of individual responses. Obviously I am not going to tackle the whole gamut. Instead I want to see how a repeated story told by all the interviewed members of a family – in other words, a well-rehearsed declarative and transmitted memory – can be related to more general historiography and to institutions that embody histories.

A key idea in this exploration will be that of the 'caesura', which I use to refer to points of before/after that inaugurate a present and demarcate a past. These caesurae are mythic because they mark the moment of creation of a relative past, the before of a given event and the after of a new present. They create a present by demarcating a past, though of course they can also be laid out in a series of past presents, which historians call periods and eras. Each caesura creates heroes and villains, heroes of the good after and villains of the bad before, or vice versa; or it may just be the time itself that is villainous compared to the present, or vice versa. A present bad time waits for a new caesura, a new mythic event. Either way, each bad before or bad present will have its caesural inauguration in which it might not have had to occur but did, and the reasons for it have to be found in that past. Stories with before/after events are told in biographies, or in the stories people tell about themselves that are otherwise chronologically inchoate (organised according to triggers other than chronological sequence). However triggered and ordered, personal recall is often ordered according to a sequence around such mythical moments.

A caesural event is a feature of histories of large-scale social groups where, because of its destructive or transformative impact, it is a point of reference for all those who by narrative knowledge of any kind and material trace themselves to the 'before' that it demarcates. History writing and teaching are monuments and commemorations. It is often said that history will be our judge. It will absorb personal narratives into a series of greater events. Historians transport personally narrated selves to other narrations of self. Historical publications in the broadest sense, including documentary television programmes, are a public record in which people can recognise their own or their forebears' lives. It is no wonder that a nation's history is inscribed, as Anderson notes, as family history, reminding the nation-family of its collective genealogy of events and key players (1991: 201).

Between the familial and the larger scale mythical moment there is a relation of recognition. The larger caesura adequately or inadequately includes or endorses the family caesura. The inadequacy could produce a motive for seeking or contributing to an alternative general history. But there is also an opposite movement of reserve, holding back and keeping private something in the life story, something in the make-up of the person's many possible identifications, from the known historiography and commemoration. This too might indicate, were it to be combined with similar reserve in others, another potential history and its institutions.

The unifying myth of a family of Russian Jews in Germany

Perestroika (restructuring) and then *glasnost* (transparency and the opening of the Soviet Union to the world) have together become a caesural moment that bears different evaluations. It can be construed and experienced as a good time of opening, before which there was a bad time of closure. But it can also be construed as a bad time of chaos before which there was a good time of stability and followed by a better time after migration from the Soviet Union. As Alexei Yurchak (2003) points out, the time before was a system that seemed to those living in it, including the young like him, to be forever. Yet *perestroika* and *glasnost* became a caesural moment during which everything did change. For good or for bad depends on the current situation, or on principles of judgement - ranging from ideas of economic stagnation, political stagnation, liberal human rights or socialism and welfare, to a hankering for strong, autocratic leadership. The revision by historians like Yurchak of how *perestroika* was presented outside Russia in journalistic and historical accounts could provide confirmatory recognition to the way in which the members of one family related their decision to migrate to Germany. They were interviewed by my colleague Tsypylma Darieva for a larger research project on the transmission of loss.

Yosiv, a Russian Jew told her that what happened in and after *perestroika* made him think it was 'better to be a foreigner in a foreign country than to be foreign in one's own country'. His feeling of being a foreigner was not because he identified himself as a Jew but because he was part of what was called the 'intelligentsia'. In 1991 he had decided to emigrate because conditions had so changed that a small number of the intelligentsia had become immensely successful in what he called 'the *nomenklatura*-bandit world', the mix of Party appointment to privileged position and the use of force to win wealth in the market. The rest of the intelligentsia was in severe economic and professional difficulties, unable to find its way, many vegetating and turning to drink. He had lost his job as cultural manager at the House of Medicine in the centre of Moscow. 'That is why we applied for a German visa as quota refugees' (21 Jan 1998: 1).

The time before *perestroika*, the time that seemed to be forever, was a time of security for the family. Being in the intelligentsia meant having worked hard at school and entering university, graduating and eventually securing a job. The job could be absorbing and was often driven by a vocation for building socialism, an idea that could be interpreted individually from the formal blocks of ideological discourse. As Yurchak (p. 5) points out, standard Cold War *and* post-Cold War historians produce dichotomies of an official discourse of lies and dissident secret transmissions of the truth. What they leave out is the fact that 'great numbers of people living in socialism genuinely supported its fundamental values and ideals', at least in the Soviet Union if not also in Eastern Europe. Their regular transgression of official norms and rules only means that they could and did insist on their own selection of what those values and ideals meant.[1] But both the West-centric dichotomising historians and the more

[1] Yurchak's startling but probably commonplace example is the secretary of a branch of the Communist Youth organisation Komsomol who is an enthusiast of rock music. He can denounce bourgeois ideology and morality, in accordance with senior speech writers. He remains an enthusiast for

open and questioning, more Soviet-centric historians such as Yurchak agree that *perestroika* was a present-defining event. I shall come back to what that present is for Yosiv's family. But first I want us to stay with the time before.

For Yosiv's family, the time before *perestroika* had its own inaugural moment in a story told first by his mother and her sister. This momentous story is a family myth. For Yosiv and his brother it was their prehistory, what precipitated the meeting of their mother with their father. For its protagonists, their mother and her elder sister, it is the story of their own mother. Since their father had been killed eight years before, it is at the same time the story of their sudden coming of age - they had both just graduated from university, one as a doctor, the other as a lawyer. So the story is climactic for both generations at once.

It is 1941. The invading German forces approach Minsk and are bombing the city. The two sisters - both in their twenties - and their younger sixteen-year-old brother flee the bombardment. They know that their mother is at work as a nursery school teacher just outside the city, but they have to take flight in the opposite direction. Their attempts over several years to find out what happened to her fail. Years later they receive a letter from an official describing the manner of her death. Before Tsypylma went on to interview the aunt, Yosiv's younger brother informed not only Tsypylma but also his older brother for the first time about the content of the letter from the official: their grandmother was burned alive with other Jews herded into a barn. That most horrific part of the story is of course in none of their experiences. The first-hand episodic memory, now ordered into a declarative memory by the aunt by means of a clear noting of the places and dates in which everything occurred, is of the failure to reach her mother and then the long flight on foot, lorry and train.

In their Soviet childhood and early adulthood the bombing of Minsk is also the beginning of the Great War of the Motherland. The invaders were eventually turned back and defeated. That indeed is how Yosiv's younger brother's father-in-law Yakob tells it. He too is a Russian Jewish refugee in Germany, but the story he insisted on telling Tsypylma about himself concerned his war service, a chaotic retreat from Brest past the burning Minsk to Tula, where his artillery unit held out against the invaders and the tide began to turn.

The tragic story of Yosiv's mother's father comes before this climactic moment, in 1933. He was a bookkeeper, not a prominent job. But he was arrested by the Minsk secret police (the NKVD) in 1933 in order to extort gold from him. They were acting on a stereotype of Jews hiding gold. They beat him up and then released him because he had nothing to yield and because he was in a very weakened state. He had caught typhus and died five days later. According to Yosiv's aunt, her younger brother's

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educating youth about the vices of capitalist cultures, the deceitful soporifics of their cultural industries, but reserves from this condemnation what he considers to be great popular art, even when produced by a musician addicted to a drug. He writes a newspaper article promoting the German heavy metal band The Scorpions. (Yurchak 2003: 21-24). There is a continuity from this enthusiasm through *perestroika* and into Germany itself, in the writing of Vladimir Kaminer, a Jewish Russian migrant to Germany. His very popular book of short stories, Russendisko, was written in German, recalling his similar enthusiasm in the time before. He and it are included in the Berlin Jewish museum as an example of contemporary German Jewish life, another incongruity for he is not a religious Jew. Many thanks to Tsypylma for this information.

halting *kaddish* (he was only 8 years old) was also the end of the family's Jewish religious observance.

Without father and then without mother, the sisters entered their careers as lawyer and as doctor. They were wholehearted servants of socialist society, identified by and in their work, without reference to their minority ethnic identity in any vital way. The elder sister's response to the flight was patriotism, identifying her personal danger with that of the country, with duty to her motherland like her mother's duty to her kindergarten wards. But in 1991 her patriotism seems to have become eroded. This is how she described the period before *perestroika* to Tsypylma:

> I became a member of the Party already during the war. At that time I was a big patriot of our land. After my awful flight experience I perceived the whole danger that faced our country as my personal danger. Being an assistant at the State Bar I entered the Party absolutely consciously. In 1990 when I was convinced of the background of the real idea of the Party I left it.[2] I just stopped paying my membership fee.

This was followed a few years later, in 1995, by her departure for Germany. She attributes this departure to ' big problems in everyday life and other unlucky circumstances', but it was on her part a reluctant decision. The problems were those suffered by her daughter and her sister's children, who were unable to find work or sustain themselves. She would have preferred to stay in the job she had done for nearly fifty years: 'I was actually against emigration because I knew that I would miss my job. I loved my office. I had very interesting work as an advocate. The work was quite creative and I lived for my work.' Her mother's ghastly death and the trials of her flight from Minsk are a family myth. But for nearly fifty years the story was submerged for her in the far larger story of the Great Patriotic War of the USSR.

We come now to the story of her younger sister, for whom the family myth seems to have been even more painful. After fleeing Minsk, Yosiv's mother was assigned a medical post with the armed forces in the far northeast. She met her husband, a fellow Jew from Minsk, in Harbin, China. They moved from there to Moscow and then to Omsk, in Siberia. Yosiv says that after the war as a Soviet officer she had a chance to return to Minsk:

> All Soviet officers had a right to return home and get back their house or apartment. But this idea never occurred to my mother. Instead we left for Siberia escaping the hard living conditions (7 persons in one room) in Moscow. My mother never talked about that and tried to avoid talking about her childhood and everything that was connected to Minsk life. I think somehow she was scared during all her life. She worked a lot just for her patients in the hospital [in Omsk] and for her family. She was never interested in other things (2nd interview p. 9).

His father was the railway stationmaster and sat drinking vodka with his colleagues. He too was usually silent about his Jewish upbringing. Yosiv remembers that when he was 12 he was out shopping with his parents in the market in Omsk and heard them speak Yiddish. But it was a fragmentary experience, not followed by any questions or explanations. In fact his mother and aunt can still speak Yiddish. It is part of the

[2] She did not say what she had discovered. But in the same year institutions seem to have stopped collecting Party membership fees, so it would have taken a much more deliberate commitment to continue membership.

senior living generation's stock of childhood habits, their habitual archive. But it is kept as part of their childhood and not passed on. It was submerged into their socialist vocations, but they did allow fragments of it to be revealed to Yosiv.

Yosiv's next fragment of memory relating to his parents' Jewish culture was when he 'was 15 or 16 years old overwhelmed with creative energy. I had started to write short poems and musical pieces. I was so interested in my father's past that I asked where and what he studied.' And that is how he learned about his father's first years of schooling in a *cheder*, a Jewish elementary school, and that he had himself written poems at that age, in Yiddish. Yosiv wanted to write poems in Yiddish too. His father showed him some Yiddish books that he had kept in his suitcases throughout his great journeys to, from and back east. But when Yosiv bought a small book of Yiddish songs and tried to play them on the piano, his father interrupted and said he would not need them in his future. It was an accurate enough prediction, for Yosiv concludes 'that was my last contact with Jewish culture. Even if God wanted to communicate with me, I would not choose the Jewish god' (26.3.02: 4).

In Yosiv's account, his father insisted he study a useful, professional subject at university, so he took a degree in Physics in the University of Novosibirsk. He was not conscious of being Jewish and married a non-Jewish fellow student. They were brought together by their shared passion for theatre. She describes Novosibirsk-Akademgorodok [campus] as being 'like a free island in Russia'. The academic park of Novosibirsk was a bastion of Soviet scientific progress, the pride of the Soviet Union. At the same time, like all the special schools, conservatories, and universities in which Soviet intellectuals were nurtured in sealed and highly privileged circumstances, it was a haven in which a degree of freedom of inquiry and expression not tolerated elsewhere was permitted.

When Yosiv's father died of leukemia in 1985 his mother moved to Moscow. By then Yosiv's son was 13 years old and showing talent as a musician, and they too moved to Moscow so that Yosiv's son could enter a specialist music school. In Moscow Yosiv switched from science to arts and got into the High School for Theatre to study stage management. Here his Jewishness became a factor. Jewish entry into institutions of research and higher education was kept low by a quota system.

Yosiv found that 'In Russia as a Jew you have to remember that people can treat you differently just because your surname sounds Jewish and that as a Jew you have to be better than others, for example to matriculate from university…and to get a good job' (26.3.02: 4). But he experienced nothing worse. Just as the older generation had done, Yosiv and his younger brother also enjoyed work in Soviet socialist posts. And until *perestroika* their children were already on the way to joining the intelligentsia and having secure and absorbing jobs. Their Jewishness was held in a private reserve, outside public knowledge and career. Shortly after he moved to Moscow friends had visited the synagogue in Moscow. It was the time for celebrating the completion and restarting of the reading of the Torah (*Simchat Torah*), the last day of the joyful festival of the Tabernacles. But Yosiv did not join their dancing and singing.

> Maybe I had a kind of scare, or did not want people to ascribe to me a Jewish belonging. To speak honestly, I always had this latent unwillingness to say I am a Jew. Not a fear, but also not a will and no interest (26.3.02: 3).

Later in the interview he repeated this sentiment: 'I tried to keep a distance from all Jews who did not hide their origin. To be Jewish at the family level or among relatives is fine, but to refer yourself to the Jewish people as a nation or a group is almost dangerous' (26.3.02: 5).

He seems to share in whatever he thinks causes his mother to have been, as he put it, 'scared during all her life'. There seems in this sentiment to be a combination of fear of antisemitism and refusal to be ethnically or nationally sub-categorised. This slightly frightened reservation of his fragmentary Jewishness is kept from the good time of the intelligentsia, before the chaos initiated by *perestroika*. As we shall see, it has been a lasting reservation even in the new circumstances of life as a Jewish refugee in Germany

The present present

In Germany the family myth refers to what is now in aggregate referred to as the Holocaust or the Shoah. The interviews took place in Berlin 2002, in a context in which the Holocaust is commemorated and is a very common event of reference. This will without doubt have reinforced Yosiv's refugee family picking the flight from Minsk as their most repeated and stressed myth. Like a great many other Russians, this family migrated to Germany as part of the quota accepted in reparation for Nazi destruction of Jewish communities such as the large one in Minsk. Their Jewishness was a national identity on their internal passports in the Soviet Union, but it conveyed little else. Now it is vital to their existence in Germany.

The great majority of Jews coming to Germany register when they first arrive with the quasi-state public corporation, the Community (Community) for Jews (there are also Community for each of many denominations of Christians). Through the Community they gain access to substantial social benefits, including German as well as Hebrew language classes, advice and help finding work and inexpensive housing. In addition the Community provides places for their children in day-care centres, summer camps and Community schools. For the elderly there are Community old people's homes, and subsidies for burial in Community managed cemeteries.

To the Community a Jew is primarily religious. The Community is responsible for the synagogues in its territorial and communal remit. Its core is religious, but its cultural section organises activities such as exhibitions, film shows, musical concerts and book launches that are not religious even though the artists are Jews. By contrast, in East Germany, the Jewish Cultural Union, continuing its activities after unification, is mainly secular and cultural, though it also provides a venue for religious services.
To many Russian German Jews like Yosiv's family, however, both the Community and the Union are cultural centres. Their Jewishness remains a private and reserved, problematic, fragmented and residual identification. Like his father, Yosiv's son has a personal God: 'I have religious inner imagination, but without church or synagogue attributes. I can communicate with God without special rituals' (p. 3).[3]

[3] Rapaport, Lomsky-Feder and Heider (2002: 184) follow what they say is standard fare in studies of Soviet Jewish migrants, which divides responses to the anti-semitism they experienced in the Soviet Union into two. One is identification with Russia, minimising the anti-semitism they experienced, going as far as self-hatred and denial of being Jewish. The other is positive affirmation of being Jewish.

In Germany over the past ten years Yosiv claims that he heard such Jewish words as *shabbat* and *kashrut* for the first time. He also learned more directly about the Nazi annihilation of Jews from documentary films. One in particular was about the Minsk ghetto, and has affected his keeping of the story of his mother's escape. From the way he spoke about it, this documentary encapsulated his family's story and for that reason made the whole world of antisemitism real. 'Earlier I had just an abstract imagination that my grandmother "died in the ghetto",' he explained, 'but I was absolutely ignorant of what these words meant'. When watching the documentary 'I had the feeling that I was seeing the murderers of my grandmother, but I know that the murderers were more likely to have been Byelorussians, not Germans' (26.03.02: 6).

This new knowledge has changed his understanding of his previous experiences: 'It seems that I left Russia because of antisemitism' he commented. 'But in reality it is not so. Nowadays I grasp what kind of world I live in and that antisemitism is everywhere…Here in the free Western world I started to comprehend the complete situation' (p. 7). It is shaped by the stories he hears about antisemitism in Germany:

> Today I understand properly when I read that yesterday … two women [here] were attacked by young Arabs. One woman who wore on her neck a golden chain with a *mogendoved* [star of David, but he used the Yiddish] was bitten by the Arabs and the chain was ripped from her. I am afraid that some Germans are also still antisemitic and shout antisemitic slogans. Such situations are very serious and my attitude is [now] more emotional compared with my knowledge that my grandmother "died in the ghetto".

Yosiv's brother had used the same word, 'abstract', to describe his earlier idea of the flight from Minsk. 'Earlier I was not able to grasp the whole meaning of this fact and to estimate the whole event. I started to understand this fact very late and slowly. For me it was always strange that people can have grandparents and in my case the year of the death of my grandfather was very far away for me and an abstract notion' (2 May 2003: 1). But for him too, living in Germany has made it more concrete. For them both, the story of their mother's mother, instead of being a story of flight as it still is in their aunt's telling, has become a story of the Minsk ghetto.

And antisemitism in Germany has brought a continuity with the reserved Jewishness of the time before. When Yosiv's aunt and younger brother were living in a hostel for refugees they came back one day to find that someone had scrawled "Asylum seekers get out" and a swastika above the broken window of his brother's room. They phoned the synagogue administrator who phoned the police and within two hours the inscription was scrubbed off and the window repaired. The aunt said she is very impressed by the German state's responses to anti-semitism. 'In Russia they do nothing'. But when Tsypylma then asked her whether she had suffered from

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This dichotomy assumes a truth, their Jewishness, that is either denied or affirmed. Of course, it is quite possible that assimilation to socialist vocational or professional commitment did imply a choice and therefore a minimising of what was not chosen. Rapaport et al make a good point when they say that the Russian migrants present anti-semitic attacks and discrimination in Russia as normal and unimportant, because they could cope and thrive despite them. They also convincingly point out that their respondents in both Israel and Germany resist the available grand narratives of the nations in which they have settled, in favour of an affection for Russia. But it seems to me that Yosiv's family does not fit into either of the two categories: they are neither deniers or affirmers.

antisemitism in Russia, she said she could not say. She was, as we have already heard, very happy in her work in Moscow. She came to Germany, she said, because her grandchildren would have a better future here.

The Holocaust and the reserved family Jewishness of Yosiv and other Russian refugees in Germany

In Germany the family has become more aware of antisemitism and of an event commonly publicised as the Holocaust. It is a caesura extending well beyond any single *national* family-story. It has become the caesural moment of the present of every Jew and many others. Before turning back to Yosiv's family myth, I want first to say some things about how this historical myth is embedded. It is of course incorporated into two nation-stories with particular force, those of Germany and Israel. For Germany it is the least acceptable part of the Nazi past, the part that as a state it has had to find ways of reckoning with in public and as citizens in private in order to establish the present, new Germany as a European partner.

For Israel it was the event that inaugurated a new history that has affected Jews all over the planet. In the first place, before the Holocaust, as Yerushalmi points out (1989 p 101) 'Zionism was a revolt against messianism'. It was a new beginning, a nation history like others. But it was at the same time a return to biblical time and a negation of the Diaspora. Mythic but not messianic, the creation of a Jewish state in Israel was memorable history and like all other memorable histories it suppressed other memories. It made the Diaspora a negative memory. Israel is honour to the Diaspora's shame.

The Holocaust is the most problematic part of this dichotomy between Jews in Israel and the Jewish Diaspora. Idith Zertal (1998) produces a telling image of the problematic encounter of the Yeshuv - the pioneers of the Zionist settlement in Palestine - with refugee survivors of the Judeocide. It is from a poem written by Nathan Alterman, 'the poet laureate of Labour Zionism and the state of Israel in its first two decades' and the poetic alter-ego of its first prime minister David Ben-Gurion (pp. 270 and 327). The poem, 'Michael's Page', describes a night disembarcation of refugees in which the young strong Zionists in their land carry the weakened refugee survivors ashore on their backs (pp 269-270). The refugees have arrived in Palestine by illegal means organised by Mossad, the secret arm of the Yeshuv military forces active in Italy, France and Romania. As Zertal demonstrates, the secret operation became a myth-making public display, a making of history in both senses. In May 1946, a Mossad leader Yehuda Arazi made a global shame out of British refusals to let refugee survivors embark on a ship to the only land they could now call home. The shaming of the British in this way made the clandestine population of the future Israel with European Jewish refugees at the same time a series of publicity coups to popularise the Zionist claim to land and state.

David Ben-Gurion had made clandestine migration of refugee survivors to Palestine the top priority for the whole Zionist movement. It was also the basis on which he achieved for himself overall and unrivalled leadership of the movement. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s he had been talking about turning the Jewish tragedy into a Zionist redemption. The actions of the refugee-survivors themselves are acknowledged in his news-making pronouncements only when they engage in a

hunger-strike, try to swim ashore or are killed in the attempt to reach the land of their Zionist destiny. Their transformation from defeated dregs into new pioneers was prefigured in the name given them by Zionists: 'summit climbers (*ma'apilim*)'. Zertal finds strong evidence of Ben-Gurion's horror at what he saw on visits to concentration camps. And of course the same can be found in accounts by soldiers of the Jewish brigade recruited in Palestine to fight with the British forces in Europe. But he refused to grieve in public. Instead, he promised redemption. The qualities necessary for survival through that horror were said by most Zionists to be despicably selfish and defeatist, wrong for the new Jew being created for the new state of Israel. Hence the abiding image of the unsullied young, military men of Zion carrying the burden of the dregs of Europe into their land, their only home. In fact only a small minority actually disembarked in Palestine and furthermore it was the refugee-survivors who did all the fighting against the British to get to Palestine. The Zionists organised, the refugees fought.

Zertal has nicely described the survivors who migrated to Israel as absent presences, shadows in Israeli public space in the 1950s. They are counterparts of the Palestinian ‘present absentees’, as the expelled were known in the bureaucratic language of the Custodian of Abandoned Property that made space and provided furniture for the European immigrants. They are the disavowed past of the new, Israeli Jew and of Jerusalem as the redeemed centre of the only true home of Jews. This founding myth affects not only the private lives of those living in Israel, but also those who remained in their lands of European settlement or resettlement. Jews in Germany, France, the UK, and the USA define themselves in direct ways with Jewish religious observance and domestic rituals. Even secular Jews define themselves as Jews by distinction from religious Jews. Without their existence how could we secular Jews be Jews? In turn, synagogues nearly everywhere in the diaspora, and certainly those of the Community in Germany, define themselves in relation to both the Judeocide and to Israel as the home country that is both the focus and the negation of the diaspora. But the Russian Jewish refugees to Germany since 1991 bring with them a more muted and diluted recognition of the Holocaust. Since he came to Germany,Yosiv has been to Auschwitz. He felt little until he entered a cellar in one of the barracks and broke into a cold sweat. But he keeps his distance and has severe doubts about public memorials, not because he is a Jew but for three other reasons. One is that he thinks they forget the other victims of the Nazis. He is reminded that in Russia the victims of the totalitarian regime are still not commemorated. They remind him of the dark side of the 'forever' before *perestroika*. But in the end, he prefers Dostoevsky's notion that every individual has to expiate and regret his own sins. As with his personal Jewishness, he is against collective, public and mass commemoration. 'All these public things are just a big dramatisation' he says, a curious dismissal coming from a stage manager. Maybe they remind him of the collectivism of the USSR. In his view, they are artificial and cynical. They are like the belated and therefore relatively cheap compensation for expropriated Jews and for slave labour. He thinks that their property and work were the basis for the amazing German economic recovery after the war from which non-Jewish Germans are still benefiting. He does not even attend the service at the Community's Holocaust memorial each year, when the names of Jews eradicated by the Nazis are read out.

At the same time, the documentary film on the destruction of Minsk's Jews has substantiated his family myth dramatically, and confirmed it as a story of the Minsk ghetto. Yosiv's son heard the story of the flight from Minsk directly from his grandmother when living with her in Moscow. He had heard it in addition from both his parents. 'Several times I heard about how they fled from Minsk to Kazan. It is significant for our family story. We never forget it' (1.4.02: 1). He has checked for information about the Minsk ghetto on the internet, but found only the Warsaw ghetto. On the other hand, he has never been to a Holocaust exhibition because he is 'not very interested in this topic' (p. 3). He has heard about the debates concerning the new Holocaust memorial in Berlin, but again they do not interest him. For him the subject is confined, like his Jewishness, to his family. He does not associate it with the general commemoration of the Holocaust, but he does to some, possibly only a small, extent feel the lack of a history of the Minsk ghetto on the internet.

Yosiv and his son hold back their Jewishness and a more diluted and at the same time familial sense of the Holocaust from its German public commemoration and from the Jewish Community's two track sense of historic mission. On the one hand as organisations of the central administration of Jews in Germany, the Communities have since 1945 reminded the state and the population of Germany in every way possible, such as their membership of the state Council on Evaluation of the Media, of the Holocaust and of each recurrence of antisemitism in Germany. On the other hand, balancing this negative mission is positive support for Israel. Yosiv holds back from these prevalent historical missions for personal reasons. But he has been active as a volunteer in organising cultural events in the Community. And in his involvement he has been scandalised by an establishment that has battled against the use of Russian in religious services and Community literature, and excluded Russian Jews from its senior positions. Russian Jews have tripled the Jewish population of Germany.

In wishing to promote an affection for Russia and the use of its language, he is up against two things. One of them is a Zionist policy manifest in 1944 when Ben-Gurion met an assembly of Jews in Bulgaria. They asked him to speak to them in Russian, which he knew fluently. But he refused and instead addressed them in Hebrew, a language few of them spoke, saying 'here I will speak only in Hebrew - the official language of the future Jewish state, the language of the Bible. Who ever doesn't want to listen can leave' (Zertal 1998: 221). In the same mood he told a meeting of partisans and ghetto fighters newly arrived in Palestine that Yiddish, which they were speaking, was 'a jarring language' and refused to converse in it, although he was well able to.

Yosiv is explicit in his opposition to the anti-Russian policy of the Community. He is less explicit in keeping a distance from the Community's mission to be a constant reminder of the Holocaust and of anti-semitism. But with his reserved, familial Jewishness comes the pleasant surprise he feels when he discovers yet again the Jewish authorship of a scientific or cultural achievement. As part of the Russian and other countries' intelligentsia, that is his preferred mode of being Jewish. Were it to be added to others in some form, through a Jewish cultural organisation for instance, his family story and his reserved Jewishness would inscribe a very different history to that of the current German Communities and their international relations. Instead of a history of redemption and reminders of anti-Semitism, and the new Judaism of Israel,

it would be a history of Jews like themselves, their parts in the histories of Russia and other countries of Europe.

In Russia, Yiddish and Jewish identity were privately recalled in fragments from their submersion in socialist vocations. They crystallised around the pain of Yosiv's family myth of the flight from Minsk. The myth unifies them as a family, acting as a container. It does this in conjunction with the larger social myths. But it was kept in reserve. It was submerged under two caesurae, the Great Patriotic War of the USSR and *perestroika*. Both are part of the grand history of what is now Russia. In a paradox that could well strengthen it, their myth simultaneously identifies them with the greater myths and holds them apart. In Germany, the myth encountered a third caesura, the Nazi Holocaust. In this encounter the family myth became more substantial for the children of its protagonists. It gave them their prehistory, became a charter for their acceptance as refugees, and provided a redemptive recognition of their Jewishness. Even so, the family has kept its myth and its Jewishness personal. Yosiv seems to have attached to it a broader identification of Jewishness with the life of the intelligentsia that he had left in the tatters of post-Soviet Russia but which he tries to recreate in his work for the Community in Germany.

Maybe it could envisage another present, over which the Holocaust does not hold a haunting monopoly.

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