13

Where Did Those People Go?

Karen Alkalay-Gut

Introduction

It was the portrait in my in-laws' dining room that began my journey back—a somewhat comical rotund man smoking a cigar, that seemed to be placed there as a warning of the dangers of overindulgence. He was known in the family as Gromek, from a grotesque character in a Danny Kaye comedy called *Knock on Wood*, and placed opposite the dining-room table in order to remind us not to eat too much. But this complacent man seemed to command a deeper presence and demanded more than a comic response. My mother-in-law, who had completed her doctorate in Berlin just before the war and was known to have extensively experienced night-life, must have known much more about this character, but dismissed the subject and went on to talk about other issues, other paintings. I would have to ask elsewhere.

There were books about the painter, Shalom Sebba,¹ and there Kurt Gerron's name was mentioned as belonging to this figure. Not only was Gerron a well-known German-Jewish actor, the singer who opened Berthold Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* with "Mack the Knife" and co-star of Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings in *The Blue Angel*, but he was also a prolific actor and director who appeared in ninety-seven films, although most of these were now unavailable including his last, *Hitler Builds A City For the Jews*.

How had he met his demise in Auschwitz after filming a propaganda "documentary" on Theresienstadt for the Nazis? So much was known and yet so much obliterated, even scenes cut from popular film. Obsessively I researched his past, and each missing detail struck me slowly as something familiar, something vaguely to do with my own history. But I could not find the connection.

Why was I so interested in a single person when the emphasis has always been in the popular discussion on the enormity of the numbers? Yet in 2019 when I was awarded the Rubinlicht Award for a publication in Yiddish, I didn't give the speech that had been expected of me, about the necessity of revival of that language. Instead I translated a poem of the unknown initiator of the Leyb Rubinlicht prize:

SNOW IN AUSCHWITZ

That night a downy snow fell
And covered the site with a veil of white
Through the barred barrack windows.
We stare at its whiteness by the glare of the fire.

The Auschwitz chimneys spew out their flames
To faraway heavens in the quiet of night
The red and snow-white colors mingle together
And shimmer in the pastoral symphonic cover.

See how the symphony from that wintery night,
When flames from the crematoria united
With heaven-sent white snowy glory—
Distracted the king of demons from augmenting the agony.²

It was the first and only poem the distinguished audience had ever heard by Leyb Rubinlicht, whose works are in public domain, and for some the only poem encountered about the individual experience of watching a crematorium in operation.

I know it is necessary to discover much more about Leyb Rubinlicht, a man who left a fund for Yiddish poetry because he had no heirs and apparently hoped that someone, somewhere, would try to make some kind of contact with the heritage in his poetry. His was a voice that cried out to be heard sometime in the future.

At that point, it began to occur to me that my research into the history of Kurt Gerron's portrait and that translation of Leyb Rubinlicht's poem was far more than curiosity or whim. There was something of myself buried there—the history of my own relatives in the Holocaust, a history of my own that had been erased.

The jovial face masked a terrifying past. I watched Gerron's films that had not been destroyed and most of them featured a Jewish "type"; either wicked, or greedy, or a fool. Gerron was the obese magician and pimp of *The Blue Angel*, the crooked banker, the swindling lawyer. Why were films like these available when the equally classic films of his had cut him out? Why had his name been besmirched in the only film publicly available at festivals?

Prisoner of Paradise (2002), a film about Gerron's alleged pact with the devil, suggested that the movie he made for the Nazis in 1944 was to him a trade, a piece of propaganda to which he contributed in exchange for his own life. I watched it again and again, and each time he seemed a more and more pathetic character—I was almost tempted to follow the film's argument and blame Gerron for agreeing to be forced into making it, even though he did not escape a shameful destruction in Auschwitz. That was when I recognized the feeling—the guilt my parents must have felt for attempting to survive. The blame that was attributed to Gerron may have been shared by them, too.

Although my father kept silent, my mother would occasionally refer to fragments of terrible events as if I knew the entire story of her life, and all her family. Sometimes my father's sisters, who spent the war years in Stutthof concentration camp, would supply miniature anecdotes, often with no chronological context. Much of what they told me had been forgotten but details began to emerge in my memory—details that would be fleshed out in unexpected moments.

I began to search libraries and archives for verification of these details. Sometimes the stories led to dead ends but sometimes they could be traced more fully, in all their complexity and horror. In one case, my Aunt Chasia mentioned one officer at Stutthof who would choose one woman from the lineup he'd order in the middle of the night, and implied that she would be beaten and raped. Chasia referred to him as Max. Years after her death, I discovered he was Max Pauly, and was in charge of the 5,150 prisoners at that camp.³ He had been executed for war crimes, but not for the rapes and murders he committed at Stuthoff. The English translation of the trials notes: "None of the commandants of the Stutthof camp stood before a Polish court. SS-Sturmbannführer Max Pauly, from September 1942 commandant of KL Neuengamme, was tried together with other members of the staff of this camp in Hamburg . . . Pauly, sentenced to death for the crimes committed in KL Neuengamme, was executed on October 6, 1946."4 I quote this sentence in Chasia's memory, in the hope that this information that made her shudder at the recollection of his name never reached her.

The conflation of the fate of my family with facts and erasures in Gerron's life and death drew me ever deeper into the question of facts—what was not available to survivors? What has since been discovered and written down? What has been distorted by memory or witnesses or censors or even a computer glitch? What can be recovered? I found myself writing poems about the images from my family's past as they emerged. Some of them came in Yiddish, a language in which I had first heard the stories of my mother and her family, a language in which I had experienced encounters with refugees my parents were obsessed with rescuing, a language in which I could imagine my lost relatives speaking. I translated them into Hebrew and then later into English:

There are no photos not of grandma, nor of grandpa I've never even seen a word they wrote. I never met my mother's brothers and sisters, I've never even heard their voices. But sometimes a few words a few sentences, return to me, reminders from my past that they are still here. And they are seeking a way to tell their stories to show their faces to have their voices heard.5

It was not something over which I felt I had control.

When they tell you to remember they mean there is a possibility you might forget. But in me there are brothers and sisters who were never born it has nothing to do with memory.⁶

The Association of Yiddish Writers, Beit Leyvik, together with the Foundation for Yiddish Culture, encouraged me in my writings in that language, and Rivka Bassman, the wonderful Yiddish poet, helped me polish them. Even though she had been in Bergen-Belsen, and had suffered terribly herself, her assistance was focused on helping me make poems from memories, no matter how sentimental and grisly. These poems appeared in Hebrew and Yiddish (Yerusha, 2019) and have now been published in Yiddish and English (Inheritance, 2021)

I had known Rivka Bassman for at least forty years when my parents asked me to drive to Kibbutz Hamaapil, where I met Rivka's husband, Mula Ben-Haim. "I babysat for him!" my mother exclaimed. Since my father's family had lived next door to my mother's family, and Mula had lived across the marketplace from them, it was a real reunion. It was probably the first time they had reconnected since their youth, when my father found his siblings after they were released from the camps. But while my parents were

musing over the past with Mula, I wasn't listening—I was only the driver and much more interested in the kibbutz than their reminiscences. I didn't even know about Mula's heroism in a movement called the *Bricha*, "The Escape," which saved countless refugees, perhaps even some of my relatives. Only as I write this do I begin to understand that they had all been involved in some kind of united effort, and that my parents' escape had also been engineered by some sort of organization.

At the request of the publisher, I translated *Yerusha* from Yiddish into Hebrew, but after it was published I felt I had just begun, that with each sentence I understood just a bit more about what had been going on around me. I found myself writing more poems, this time in English. I had written many before, but they were never conscious attempts to recreate the past. Sabine Huynh, friend and writer in French, translated the poems, connecting with them through her own exile from Vietnam, and she began to urge me to write more of my experiences. Without this encouragement, I could never have imagined the poetic value of digging into my own past. Only when *Survivre a Son Histoire/ Surviving Her Story* was published did a flood of memories begin to emerge; the dialogue between them and the stark lists and articles published on the internet brought forth further facts, further stories of individuals that suddenly stood out from the vast history of numbers.

This is what became my goal: Reconstructing the lives of individuals, from the forgotten star of stage and screen (Kurt Gerron), to the benefactor who created my prize (Leyb Rubinlicht), to my parents' escape on the night of Hitler's invasion, to my partisan aunt (Malcah Kravitz).

Silence

I grew up with the gesture of silencing. Someone begins to speak about their experience in the Holocaust; someone else whispers their name, and all become quiet. I grew up surrounded by people who shushed one another. Even as they built new lives and new families, many of them had pasts that needed to remain hidden, not just forgotten.

As soon as we were ensconced in a home of our own, a year after our immigration to the United States in 1948, we began to house refugees. Sometimes an entire family would move in for a few months—gaunt parents and a confused child, always with no luggage. My brother and I would be in charge of helping the child acclimatize to America and teaching them some English. Sometimes it would be a man who would hold secretive conversations with my parents after we'd been sent to our rooms. Or sisters from somewhere so foreign their very odor was suspect, because they used strange ingredients like garlic. Or a boy with teeth that rotted as they emerged from the gums. Or a couple whose children had disappeared and we were meant

THE PARTY OF THE P

WHERE DID THOSE PEOPLE GO?

to help substitute for them. Or a friend's seamstress mother who spoke of her past as we sat by the machine pedal and threaded needles. But always there would be sudden breaks in the conversations, sometimes a sudden awareness that children should not be exposed to such tales, that it was difficult to thread needles while being told about children wrenched from their mothers' breasts and thrown again a wall.

But it was not only a question of inappropriate subjects for children. There were also dangers in the McCarthy era—real or imagined. When my brother brought home a new journal entitled "U.S.S.R.," my father exploded. "They watch the newsstands!" he shouted, and we had no idea who was watching or what they were looking for. Only after my father's death did I learn of his imprisonment as a teenager in Lithuania for socialist activities. Only as an adult did I learn of his later persecution and imprisonment in Danzig and the escape engineered by my mother and her sister from Danzig to England days before Hitler's invasion on September 1, 1939. My own reaction was to release the information as soon as I could in this poem:

Night Travel

On that night in Danzig the trains did not run. You sat in the bus station till almost dawn knowing that if you could not get out, the invaders would find you, grind you among the first under their heels.

Toward morning an announcement came of a bus, and without knowing where it would go you raced to the stop.
But the Nazis were there first, and you watched as they finished their search — checking each traveller for papers, jewellery, a Jewish nose.

Among the passengers you recognized a familiar face—a German woman—sitting with someone else you'd seen in the neighborhood.

They winked a greeting, waited for the soldiers to leave, and jumped out—pushing you up in their place.

Thus you escaped to Berlin, remaining alive by keeping silent through the long train ride from Berlin to Cologne in a car filled with staring German soldiers—

And arrived the next day in Holland, black with fear and transportation.⁷

But the true history of that trip, the physical feeling of the voyage of escape, did not reach me until the existence of the internet. I had traced Gerron's journey from Berlin to Paris to Holland, to Westerbrook and then Theresienstadt, in my attempt to understand the experience of repeated escapes. It had helped me understand why Gerron let himself be easily discovered—wandering the streets in confusion when the Nazis invaded. Now with the help of Google Maps, I could gain an appreciation of that dangerous journey my parents took through Germany during the invasion of Poland, could see how many stops, how many busses, the duration. I could begin to understand why my mother described my father's face then as "black."

Having traveled day and night, my parents arrived in Vlissengen in the Netherlands and from there took a ferry to Harwich, England, where they were granted leave to land on the condition that they leave the country when their "training" was finished. They were "safe" this time. Their journey to Palestine several weeks before had failed, and they were returned to Danzig. But the trauma of that journey through Germany to safety must have dwarfed all the others, despite many future travels.

One example: When they left England for the United States on the Queen Elizabeth II, I was just recovering from whooping cough, and there was a terrible fear I would not make it through Ellis Island—I was kept in our tiny cabin for most of the journey and warned many times not to cough. Apparently the warning succeeded, because I remember that after long consultations with the doctor at Ellis Island, my father and I were allowed to join my brother and mother on the mainland. And my father was trembling.

My mother mentioned a key detail of the trip from Danzig—that they couldn't speak during the trip, or even buy food, lest their Yiddish accents give them away. Their constant feeling of safety being only transient may also have contributed to their later unwillingness to speak.

But there was also a real and constant danger in speaking. Not all secrets were safe to voice. Some were shameful and some dangerous. My father's youthful political involvement got him into trouble in Poland/Lithuania, and had to be kept from his chatterbox daughter, especially when she began writing stories and publishing them in the Yiddish newspaper, The Forward. Knowledge of his socialist past during the McCarthy era would have been sufficient to deny him citizenship and have us all deported.

I now realize that one of the women we helped must have been a kapo (a prisoner who acted as a guard). I am not sure, but her twin sister hinted that

TO THE RESIDENCE OF THE PARTY O

to me when I asked her why she didn't speak with her closest sibling. She wept that her sister had betrayed her people. I was not old enough to enquire further, and now cannot even remember her name, but because both women were childless and showered me with attention, their faces remain clear to me.

Another close cousin used to shush his wife whenever she would begin to speak of their partisan past, because (I later learned online) he had led a revenge battalion and knew the time of retribution would come some day. Many of the internet sites that reveal he was a sergeant major in the partisans are now missing post-war details that had been published in the 1970s and 80s. The information I first saw online has been erased too—I assume to protect future generations, and even today I respect his silence. He was long gone when the Belorussian government announced a list of traitors and asked for information of their whereabouts, but his silence had come at the cost of his son's disdain for his father's supposed cowardice. His wife, on the other hand, was always praised for her partisan background and her escape from the Warsaw sewers. Sometimes what we don't know skews relationships for the next generation.

My mother's anecdotes usually focused on pre-war days and her many brothers and sisters. Although she wept at their loss, she did not explain where they and their families had disappeared to. Perhaps she never knew.

She found testimony in Yad Vashem—the World Holocaust Remembrance Center—that one of her sisters, Basya Berenzyk, born 1910, had perished in Auschwitz, but there is no mention of her in the Arolsen Archive of the camp's prisoners. But given that the wrong birthday has been attributed to her in Yad Vashem suggests that the sister-in-law who wrote the testimony may not have been an accurate source. And Batya's husband and three or four children seem to have vanished—whether in the crematoriums or into orphanages, I do not know.

Although I myself drove my parents to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem that day, my mother never mentioned that she herself had recorded an entry for Batya, or one for her elder brother, Moshe Sharon, as having been shot in Lida together with his wife and the children, and for her second brother, Motel, who died in Majdanek. Their wives and children were also not recorded. Further queries yielded no additional information.

But she could not keep silent when it came to her youngest sister, Malcah. The poem I wrote about her a few years ago has been reproduced many times, in the hope that someone might be able to help me to add to the story, but to date no more information has been found.

Her Story

I have never been able to tell her story
Sometimes it escapes me, sometimes I am not sure
it could really have happened, sometimes I read

different accounts of her demise, or a paragraph from some testimony jogs my memory and the terrible days when I first heard what happened to her return.

This much is in my blood:
I was conceived on the day she died.
This much is in my blood.
She blew up trains.
The courage came from her uplifted chin and the two infants she watched dashed against the wall of their home.
Avram twelve months old and Masha two years. my first cousins.
They too—in my blood—all that is left.

If I can write of these babies,
I can manage the rest—
following her path as she escaped
the prison camp with her husband
And joined the Otrianski Otriade
Lenin Brigade, Lipinskana Forest.

I can feel her mouth, her narrow lips clamped as she bends over the delicate mines, solemn as in the photo when as a child she sat with the rest of the choir unsmiling amid the festive singers unwilling perhaps to feel poetic joy perhaps destined for so much more.

There are at least three accounts of her death: the partisan Abba Kovner told me she was caught in a mission and hung. He looked away when he spoke, not piercing me as always with his tragic eyes, and I knew there was more he would not say.

Another book states she lagged behind the platoon escaping an attack, perhaps pregnant, and was imprisoned in Zhetl.

The jail was ignited, perhaps by accident, and she was just one of the victims.

When Mother first told me the story she had just heard at the hairdresser's,

WHERE DID THOSE PEOPLE GO?

I was only a child, and outraged that she was weeping, tears rolling down her face. She knew all I cared for was my own life, and her latest discovery of the fate of her youngest sister a disruption.

But who else could she tell?

The loft in the barn, she said,
Partisans were hiding there—three women,
her husband and her. They came
and set the barn afire. He helped
the women first, and his wife came last.
But she didn't come, was burnt alive.

Malcah Malcah who saved all our lives
Malcah who was waiting for them
when the ship brought them back to Danzig
after they were barred from the Holy Land,
who found them the agricultural visas to England
and saw them off the night that Hitler invaded.

But there is no real story.
All that remains is a faded snapshot a few sentences in unread memorial tomes, and me, who cannot tell any story for sure.8

How can I know anything about Malcah for sure? Even her appearance is a mystery. Perhaps she can be identified in the photograph of a group of partisans frequently reprinted, but not mentioned even in the Zhetel book.

Could the woman pointed to here be the same sister? All I have to identify her are baby pictures, in which she, the youngest of eleven children, was not central to the family. Even in an illustrated diagram of the early resistance in Zhetel, hers is one of the names that appears, but her photographs are absent. Since I accessed the site itself, in 2021, the site itself has been blocked as well.

In addition to what I wrote in the poem, there are other confusing elements. In testimonies from the Zhetel Memorial Book Years ago, when I first looked for her on the web, I found three entries. The book has now been translated into English and the spelling is different for two of them She is listed as a partisan hero under the name Malka Kravetz, but the entries are vague. One witness writes:

At four o'clock in the morning we crossed the Podyavark small river and approached the old, former camp near Karshuk. 25 partisans died that day including the girls from Zhetel: Henie Gertzovsky, Miriam Levenbuk and Maliye Kravetz.¹⁰

Another witness testifies:

The third platoon leaves on an assignment. Maliye Kravietz, Mirke Levenbuk and Lyuba Inderstheyn decide to join them. It is not a good time to separate from the platoon . . . They walked into a German ambush. The men managed to escape. The women fell into the hands of the murderers. ¹¹

But what happened after that? My mother wrote in Yad Vashem first in 1967, and then again in 1978 after the details had been given to her by a witness she met at a beauty parlor. When I first found it, I was so excited I couldn't work out how to download the actual document. But even on my small screen I could see my mother's pain. Circumstances of death, the form said in Hebrew. "Burnt alive," she wrote in Hebrew, in the Otrianski Otriad, Lenin Brigade, Puscha Lipinitsianska, she added in Polish, the Lipinskana Forest. Her own name was in Yiddish, and her handwriting was unusual in its irregularity. From my experience with her I recognized it as emotional. The first time I found this document, in the 1970s, it was under Malcah's married name, Kravetz, but when I looked for it again in the 80s, the name was not there. Looking at the document more closely, I realized that parts had been removed and overwritten. The date given is January 1978, marked over what looks like 1965. 1965 was the year of my mother's first visit to Israel, before she knew the details of the passive role of Malcah's husband, Wolf, in her death. In 1978, Malcah's married name disappeared. His name was tippexed out, and although the last name was mentioned further down between the lines, his first name was omitted. Between 1965 and 1978, Wolf Kravetz was erased by my mother because she discovered he had helped other women to safety but left Malcah for last, too late to be rescued.

There remained some evidence clear to me, but unreadable to a translator who could not decipher the handwriting. Malcah's place of death was originally translated as the Loire Valley. It would transpire that more errors had been inserted into the evidence. The English version of this was lacking in all but basic detail, and it was my fault. It followed a complaint I had made about the wrong transcription. When, sometime in the 1990s, I discovered the mistranslation, I wrote to Yad Vashem to correct Malcah's name and place of death, and to include the details my mother added in Hebrew to explain that Malcah had been burnt alive. A warm letter soon came, agreeing with my corrections and promising to correct the errors. It was more than a decade later than I checked those corrections, only to find

WHERE DID THOSE PEOPLE GO?

that they had been replaced by lacunae. I have since attempted to correct the elision, but was told there is a long waiting list for record amendments ahead of me. Perhaps by the time this chapter appears in print, the basic facts will be have been corrected, but in any case, I am certain that connections that might have been made in 1965 from a more accurate document are no longer possible.

These mistakes alone in my aunt's history would have been enough to confuse scholars, but there are more. Her name, Malcah, is sometimes given as Maria, Maliyeh, or even Male. Most of the information sites about partisans that listed her when I first began to look for her, such as http://www.thepartizans.org/member_eng_frame.asp?id=2127&cat=com and http://www.partisans.org.il/, no longer exist. When I downloaded information from them over two decades ago, it never crossed my mind that both would disappear. The first site claimed she was killed in Zhetel, the second that she was hanged in Koprizi. My mother's claim in the Yad Vashem pages was that Malcah was burnt alive in Zhetel and she repeated this often, with great fervency. I have found no other evidence of this, but every other account she gave me has proven true.

Some of the other sites about Malcah and other relatives disappeared soon after I found them, and I have not been able to trace their sources. I had not realized how ephemeral the information would be. It had not occurred to me that the silence some survivors maintained was to avoid some future persecution for murder in Belarus. And who can imagine what a mother who had witnessed the murder of her babies might be capable of? The further away in time, the farther away Malcah—the human being—becomes. All the information I can find now melts her into a mass of victims.

If the data on Malcah proves nothing else, it shows something of the slippery, ever-changing stories of the individuals whose history has yet to be told, and the urgency of pinning down and recording each item of information before it disappears.

Notes

- 1 Karlheintz Gabler, Siegfried Shalom Sebba, Maler und Werkmann: Mit Œuvre-Verzeichnis der Druckgrafik (Berlin: Thiele & Schwarz, 1981).
- 2 Leyb Rubinlikht, A shmues mițn harts: ider (Tel Aviv: Nay-lebn, 1975), 22.
- 3 Grabowska, Janina, "Prisoners", Monography Of Kl Stutthof, https://web.archive.org/web/20090122183745/http://kki.net.pl/~museum/rozdz6.htm (accessed September 29, 2021)
- 4 Grabowska, Janina, "Responsibility For Crimes In Stutthof. Processes" Monography Of Kl Stutthof, https://web.archive.org/web/20090122183745/ http://kki.net.pl/~museum/rozdz13.htm (accessed September 29, 2021)
- 5 Karen Alkalay-Gut, Inheritance/Yerusha (Tel Aviv: Leyvik House Press, 2021).

6 Karen Alkalay-Gut, Inheritance/Yerusha.

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- 7 Karen Alkalay-Gut, Ignorant Armies (New York: Cross-Cultural Press, 1994), 9.
- 8 Karen Alkalay-Gut, Survivre a son histoire/Surviving her story (Paris: Corlevour, with the aid of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, 2020), 26–30.
- 9 Kaplinski, Baruch (ed.), trans. Janie Respitz, *Pinkus Zhetel*, "Partisan Heroes From Zhetel, 440.
- 10 Kaplinski, Baruch (ed.), trans. Janie Respitz, *Pinkus Zhetel* "The Participation of People from Zhetel in the Liptchanska Partisans," 379.
- 11 Kaplinski, Baruch (ed.), trans. Janie Respitz, *Pinkus Zhetel* "The Last Ambush," 379.