

RETURNING

Yael Shahar

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DEDICATION

OVADYA

For my sister Miri, who taught me responsibility.
For my mother, who predicted I would come to a bad end,
and was right.
And for my teacher, Rav David,
whose footprints I've followed on the road to my becoming.
This is his story as much as it is mine.

Yael

To my mother, who knew how to garden in difficult soils.
To Don, without whom there would be no telling.
And to Molly, Cecelia, and Gabrielle,
who brought me into their lives and made me want to stay.

RETURNING

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This work is based on a true story — more precisely, on two true stories. Names and identifying details have been changed in some cases. As far as possible, I have preserved Ovadya's testimony just as originally told in his journals and correspondence. These things, while painful to read, are too important to leave out. I have taken greater liberties in conveying my part of the story — sometimes straying from the strict chronological order of events — in order to better convey the inner reality as it was lived.

The resulting book has been a group effort, in much the same way as an archaeological dig is a group effort. It has fallen to me to coordinate the work, and to do much of the digging. But the story we've dug up and tried to make sense of by our joint efforts does not belong to any one of us. I have dug, Don has tried to identify the fragments as they come to light. Friends along the way have lent a hand and encouragement when the project seemed to have struck solid rock and could proceed no further. And finally, Rav Ish-Shalom has taken the pieces and gently, with a firm and confident hand, glued them together again into a whole.

I think we were all astonished at the result.

— *Yael Shabar*

Note: This book includes a number of Hebrew and Aramaic terms. For the reader's convenience, any terms not defined in the text can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

BOOK I

ADRIFT

*Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.*

*Al andar se hace camino
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.*

*Caminante no hay camino
sino estelas en la mar...*

Traveller, it's your footprints
that are the path, nothing more;
Traveller, there is no path,
the path is made by walking.

By walking the path is made
and looking back
you see the trail
you will never tread again.

Traveller, there is no path,
only the wake upon the sea...

— Antonio Machado, *Campos de Castilla*

PROLOGUE

FRAGMENTS

The museum and its associated facilities sprawled across a rugged hillside clad in pine trees. A handful of modest white buildings nestled among white limestone boulders that protruded from the earth like old bones. The image stayed with me as I walked the last few hundred meters from the bus stop to the back entrance of the library: old bones.

It had taken me months to work up my courage to come here. I had made inquiries with friends as to the proximity of the library to the museum, planning out my route. Was it possible to reach the archives without going through the museum? Did the library have its own separate entrance? I was relieved to find that I need not brave the exhibits to reach the archives. I'm not sure what I would have done had it been otherwise.

The scent of pines followed me through the door and stayed with me as I tried to explain my quest to the archivist behind the desk. Pine trees . . . I know this scent. Is it familiar to me from that place? Perhaps from before? Such questions had become the constant backdrop of my search for my vanished past.

I had been in Israel for more than four months now. From the moment I boarded the plane, the feeling had been growing in me that I had no idea who I really was.

My life was reflected back to me only in the shattered fragments of memory. Some things came back clearly; some not at all. And the things I remembered most clearly were those that I would have given almost anything to forget. Almost. But difficult or not, they were clues to who I was.

But did I really want to know who I was? Much of my early life was simply no longer accessible. Its passing had taken with it much

of what I had been. But I did remember where I had lost it. More to the point, I knew *when* I had lost it. I knew the exact date, and that was what had brought me to the archives of Yad Vashem.

"All right, let's have that date again," the archivist said. "Is this a deportation date or an arrival date? The more information you have, the easier it will be to track down."

"Date of arrival: March 25th, 1943." A wave of dizziness washed over me. I pushed it back with the ease of long practice. I had been fighting such reactions for years.

What seemed like an age to me as I grappled with time and memory was only a few moments in the objective now.

"Well, I think we're going to have a problem with this one," she said, pushing a microfiche reader back into place under the screen. "There are only a few hundred major transport dates on microfiche, and this is not one of them. Do you have anything else to go on?"

"I have a number," I said.

The silence seemed to stretch out for many minutes.

"All right . . . Family name?"

"No. Only the number." I was suddenly embarrassed and ashamed. Only a number.

"I don't think that's going to be very helpful," she said.

No, I had not found it to be very helpful.

In the end, I did the search the hard way. I sat down at a desk with four large volumes of transport records in front of me. On one page was the German original and on the next the translation into English. Oddly, the German pages were crisper and less blurred than the type-written English translations, so I ignored the English ones. Pages and pages of photocopied records: town, date of deportation, date of arrival . . . number of deportees.

This was not going to be easy.

I don't know how many days I searched. I settled into a routine, arriving each morning to retrieve the remaining books from behind the archivist's desk. I could go through only so many pages before my

mind went numb and I stopped noticing anything at all. The lines of print blurred and became indistinguishable. I could no longer see them as individual transports. They were all the same — a steady stream of trains snaking across Europe toward a single destination. A tree with branching roots spread across the continent, ending in a barren stump.

March 25th, 1943 — a needle in a haystack; the records were organized by town, not by date, and the towns were not in any discernible order. There were thousands of them. The enormity was familiar to me. The numbness triggered by this enormity was familiar too.

There is a place of silence. It is a refuge, a hiding place, and sometimes a pit that I cannot escape. There are no words in that place, no sound of human laughter or tears, no expression of any kind, not even thought. There seems to be no time there, but perhaps it is only that no means exist there to mark the passage of time.

I had been staring off into space for so long that my muscles had cramped up. I stretched, and heard an audible “crack” as my back un-kinked. I surreptitiously looked around to see if I had attracted any attention.

Looking down, I saw my empty cup in front of me — something to do. I got up and poured hot water from the kettle in the librarians’ kitchen over the twice-used tea bag. Should be good for at least one more cup.

As I sat down again, my gaze fell on the open book of transport records. “City of origin: Saloniki, Greece; Date of Departure: March 17th, 1943; Date of Arrival: March 25th, 1943. Destination: Birkenau; 1,901 deportees of whom 695 were registered on arrival.”

City of Origin: Saloniki, Greece . . .

THE BUSINESS CARD

The business card was faded and tattered around the edges. For over a year, it had sat all but forgotten in her desk drawer. She turned it over a few times, as if the answer to a dilemma 65 years old might suddenly pop out of it. “Rabbi David Ish-Shalom. Weddings, counseling, religious services.” Nowhere did it say: “Judge and jury for a people betrayed by one of its own.” But that was seemingly what was needed — a formal rabbinic judgment with all its finality. She didn’t envy any rabbi who had to deal with this particular case.

Well, she didn’t envy anyone who had to deal with it, full stop. Including herself. By what right was she about to dump this problem onto someone she had never met? She wasn’t exactly on speaking terms with rabbis. Or with God, for that matter.

Yael heard a click as someone picked up the phone on the other end. A deep, rather mellow voice said, “Good evening.”

“May I speak with Rav Ish-Shalom?”

“Speaking.”

Is having a soothing voice a prerequisite for being a rabbi?

“My name is Yael.” There was an awkward pause as she fished around for something else to say. “I’m not sure what the procedure is for this, but... I need to request a *psak din*. It has to do with a question of *y’hareg v’al ya’avor*...”

Did his ears perk up? *Y’hareg v’al ya’avor* means “to be killed rather than transgress”, and refers to extreme situations in which one should not transgress a commandment even to save one’s own life.

“It’s about something that happened around 65 years ago.” Would he make the correct inference? “I don’t want to try to explain on the phone. It’s complicated... Would it be all right if I explain it to you in writing? Send you a file via email?”

“Yes. That will be fine,” he said, and then, with audible sadness: “I look forward with trepidation to reading that file.”

Yes, he had understood.

She sat in stunned bemusement for a while after closing the connection.

“Well, I’ve done it,” she said. “You’ll get your *psak din*.”

Silence.

“Are you relieved?” she asked.

“I am resigned,” he said.

Understandable. And yet, was there a note of relief in there too? Perhaps she only wanted it to be there. *Who am I doing this for*, she wondered, *you or me*? Nothing new there; she had been asking herself that question for years. She wondered whether the process that she had just set in motion would bring him closure or only open old wounds. And which outcome was he hoping for? Was it closure he sought, or self-punishment? Did he even know?

“I need you to find a rav,” he had said. “My only stipulation is that it be someone who knows the law inside and out, who will not be blinded by my tears — someone who will judge fairly, applying the law, not an emotional interpretation of it. I need to see the sources and how they are interpreted. Otherwise it will not help. I do not believe in miracles.”

She sighed as she sat down to write a letter introducing Alex to the judge who would in all likelihood find him guilty of treason.

ALEX

AT SEA

You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood...back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.

— Thomas Wolfe,
You Can't Go Home Again

TO PRESERVE MEMORY

Let me begin by saying that “Alex” is not my real name. It is a nickname by which the Greek Jews were inevitably called by the Polish and Hungarian Jews. Names were not important to us, for the simple but paradoxical reason that they were *too* important. They were a connection to what we had been, which had been forcibly taken from us. Why keep the reminder? Why grasp at a nostalgic memory that brings only pain? Far easier to make do with nicknames. Nicknames have an air of impermanence, just as we do. They are empty of any pretense, just as we are.

In any case, we had some trouble pronouncing one another’s names.

I will tell what I am able. I am done with hiding. What I will not do is soften the reality. I will not compromise the truth as I have lived it. I will not make it more palatable for the reader. Yes, I am a difficult person. I freely admit it. I will not make myself more congenial or easier to take. You don’t like what I have to say? Fine, don’t read further. My retelling brings nightmares? Welcome to my world. I will not accommodate myself, any more than the world has accommodated itself to me.

I was not always like this. I don’t know where he has gone, that young poet who wrote love songs to God and was in love with all the world. There was nothing that he could not accomplish. He trusted. He knew his place in the world and was content. He was at home in his tradition; it was the air he breathed. He was a son of Israel and lived to serve the God of Israel, and could hope for no greater glory. He would eventually marry a virtuous and loving woman of Saloniki, and would raise his children to love their heritage and to live wholly in the present for the sake of the future, just as he did.

Perhaps someday he would visit the Land of Israel... maybe even live there. For now, that was a dream to be set beside the dreams of

shipping out on a freighter to visit foreign lands. One day his dreams of adventure on foreign shores would be put in their place — fond memories of youth. For now, he was content to dream, knowing that dreams were the stuff of which his songs were made

But I am not that youth. He is dead and I have neither the strength nor the leisure to mourn his passing. It is with me, Alex, that you deal now, and you will have to accept me as I am, or stop reading now. I will not forget and I will not spare you the details. If you want to open this buried jar of memory and read its contents, you will have to face what I have seen.

I will be writing from a very sketchy memory. Well, it is a very clear and precise memory in some cases. Trouble is, there isn't a lot of it. Things happened, and I said, "I will never forget this." But then the next thing happened, and the next So I have forgotten many things, though they come up again under the odd stimulus. Little things. They come up again and if I write them down or tell someone, then the memory remains. But if not, then it's all gone again as quickly as it came.

So my writing will be not only *from* memory, but *about* memory — about how it was formed by experience, and how it was obliterated by that same experience. But above all, my task is to preserve memory.

So I will start with a memory

Our city, Saloniki, was built around the port, where ships of almost any size can be accommodated either by solid berths or by portable ones that can be moved about by towing vessels. The ships bring trade, a potpourri of cultures and languages, and a colorful assortment of perceptions to ponder. To a child, it is an environment rich in stimulation.

The marketplace is all of this and more, but condensed into a smaller space. Someone recently asked me to describe my city and I found myself once more among those colorful market stalls. But it wasn't the weekly shopping that I recalled — the sights, the smells, and the sounds. Rather, I saw myself as a small boy running among the stalls

with friends, hiding between the legs of the adults; attempting to steal a date from the cart without getting caught. I felt again the panic as the feared Turkish shopkeeper grabbed hold of my wrist when I didn't move fast enough. I recalled how he scolded me with the voice of a lion whose den has been invaded . . . before pressing a date into my hand.

A child's memory. The bright fabrics of youth, now overlaid by the fine dust of old age.

A child's memory? A strange thing that. I was nineteen years old when that colorful and vibrant world came to an end, but it is the childhood memories that remain — colorful fabrics, the fragrance of spices and rich foods. And the music . . . We made songs of everything.

I remember the little *bet kneset* in our neighborhood, whose lovely stained glass windows were decorated with birds and flowers from floor to ceiling. The Torah was chanted from a circular reading stand in the middle of the room, reached by three stairs. The reader's melodious voice would fill that small building and lift everyone who heard it up to a level where song became pure being. On Shabbat and holidays, that place became a gateway into the other world and our prayers opened all doors.

We had lived in a bubble of safety for five hundred years, since the Expulsion from Spain. Our language reflected our origins — ironic that those who were most faithful in preserving the language and music of Renaissance Spain were the Jews who had been sent into exile by that same culture with nothing more than the clothes on their backs.

Saloniki had long been part of the Ottoman Empire, but became part of Greece in 1912. And, as is usual in such cases, a population exchange followed: many of the Muslims moved out, to be replaced by Greek Christians. While the Muslims were culturally very close to us, the Christian newcomers were not.

All that was before I was born, of course. But it was still a society in transition. A city that had hosted three great cultures for generations had changed its character almost overnight, but the change had not

yet been assimilated. If you had told us that we were living in the last days of Saloniki's glory, we would have said you were crazy.

Did I say I was nineteen? No, that is incorrect. It is what I told the German officer, who let me live on the basis of that lie. I was seventeen.

I drift in a haze of fever. The door at the end of the building is propped open to let in some air — an attempt to combat the smell of hundreds of sick and dying men stacked, sometimes eight deep, on the wooden bunks. In my delirium, the open door takes on the shape of the windows of the bet kneset with their colorful designs and fanciful scrollwork. As I watch, the colors begin to fade. A harsh network of black lines begins to creep over the glass, forming the shape of a thorn bush with long spikes. The thorns snake upwards, crawling slowly over the glass to consume the colorful birds and flowers. Soon only the thorns remain — black lines over empty space.

So has my past vanished into the hole in the world that is Birkenau.

MASHA

I have never been able to speak of what I have seen. There just doesn't seem to be much to say, or any way to say it. I remember, but nothing emerges into the light of day. It rattles around in the darkness of my soul, making a hollow sound. But outside, there is only silence. What is there to say?

Words are inadequate, so we give up trying to express. Tears are inadequate, so we cease to weep. Our humanity itself is inadequate to respond. We lapse into numbed silence.

The things I need to say can only be written furtively on scraps of smuggled paper, in moments of time stolen from the dead for the sake of their memory. They can only be hidden away in tins and jars, carefully sealed with scraps of cloth and hidden with great fear and greater longing amid fragmented bones — buried in the uncaring ground soaked with our blood. We bury them as we could not bury our loved ones. These things can never be told.

By the time I met Masha, the silence had become my constant companion, both refuge and prison: a constant reminder of what I refused to face.

She was about my age when she was deported to the same place. A delicate beauty with the body of a dancer and a soul made for music, Masha was sent to the main camp to work in a brothel set up for the German soldiers and the privileged Polish prisoners. She had managed to hide the fact that she was Jewish, but her survival was to cost her dearly. Years later, she still wrestled with guilt, though she had faced an existence of continual rape day in and day out for many months in that place, knowing that she was the sole survivor of her family. And yet, in her own mind, she was a whore. Is it any wonder that it was to her, and only to her, that I could tell my story? I too sold out to the enemy.

Had I not met Masha when I did, I would not now be writing this. For so long, I was simply . . . continuing. There was nothing behind my eyes but memory. But Masha saw something else there.



Dear Alex,

I think we have more in common than you think. We both made a wrong choice. I would have been hurt less if I had refused. I would have died then.

What you've said, that you saw God standing behind the enemy, you are like a gangster about God But I think you met your match when you met God in that place.

For me it was different. I also tried to see God in the enemy, and I know that we all had to surrender to God when we surrendered to the Germans. I tried to see each of those men as if they were lovers that had been sent to me from God, and I tried to love them the best I could. Some of them were not so hard to like. Others were not good people but I still tried to see that God had sent them to me. Maybe other people would say that they weren't worth loving. I said no, it does not all depend on what a man does. It also depends on what a woman does. Even if all she can do is make a choice between hating and loving. So I tried to love them. I didn't want it all to depend on them. I don't think it worked so well but maybe it did work a bit.

Maybe you did the same kind of thing. You did not just give in to them. I tried to love them, and you tried to be stronger than them, even though I knew I did not love them and you knew you were not stronger. But you and I had the same reason for doing those things. It is sort of the same thing.

Masha



Dear Masha,

I can see that it's perhaps the same thing. But you held out better than I did; you did not let them convince you that you deserved all that befell you. You knew that you were changing your reality by seeing something to love in those men. But you see? By doing that you really did gain some control. Even if there was nothing to love in them, you shone some of your own light onto them in order that there be something to love.

I think that it did work, perhaps better than you thought. It kept them from breaking you. You didn't have to do violence to yourself or anyone else to use such a ploy, and in the end, it lessened their power over you. You showed the strength of someone who can bend and let the storm pass over. And you know, I think it's even a moral solution. If any of them gained anything from it, it could only work for the good. Perhaps it may even have left them momentarily less disposed to take out their frustrations on the next helpless prisoner that crossed their path. To love is no small thing!

— Alex



I am not sure, Alex, I am not sure. I think it is the only thing I can do. I think there should be a lot more that I can do. Sometimes I don't want to remember too much about what happened. I have forgotten a lot of the pain. So all I can do is love. Maybe that makes my love smaller, I don't know.

But I don't know about the men I tried to love, whether it did anything

good or not. Sometimes it is even still difficult to love a man, or anybody. But I think it is the only thing I can do, so maybe my love is not really worth anything anyway. But still I have to do it, I can't just stop. Maybe that is why I was just a whore. Maybe I still am.



Masha, I stand by what I said about love. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of inner strength to love — especially to love an enemy or a potential enemy. I couldn't do it. In fact I have been too afraid to love at all. Even my own family. But with you, love is part of your essence, which is why it remains when so much else has gone.

Love is never worthless. Never believe that your love makes no difference. Even if you can't see its impact, the impact is there, if only in the way that it affects your own soul.

If being able to love in the face of adversity makes you a whore, then every great religious teacher of all the generations was a whore as well, and should be proud of it.

DEPORTATION

When the Germans first came, no one knew what to expect. It all happened in a matter of months. They began drafting Jewish men of a certain age for forced labor. I was just under age. Many never came back. Those who did come back told horrible stories. They did not draft our Christian neighbors. Soon we were not allowed to go out after dark, or own radios, or use the telephone. Well, I suppose it's obvious what came next. I think it was then that we really understood how bad it was for us that Saloniki had come under Christian rule. Had we remained under Turkish rule, it would not have been allowed to happen. But anyway, it did happen.

In late winter, we were told that we were to be “resettled” to some unknown location in the north. We had waited too long; we were trapped.

We were forced to move out of our houses into temporary accommodations — barracks near the old railway station. We had become refugees in our own city, only a few blocks from our own homes. From there we could see our houses being looted by our Christian neighbors.

There was a pervasive air of desperation. We saw how we had been progressively hemmed in as the options open to us were gradually narrowed down. Now no option remained to us. But still, you look for some way out. In our culture, one does not just give up. In that way we are different from our Muslim neighbors — we cannot just ascribe misfortune to the will of Allah and take refuge in resignation. So we continue to throw ourselves against the bars of the cage long after the door slams shut. The desperation got into everything. Everyone's nerves were on edge and tempers flared at the slightest provocation. We have always been a fairly hot-headed people, where slights to one's honor can end in violence. But now there was no one

to fight. The real culprits remained inaccessible and untouchable.

Worst of all was the uncertainty. No one understood what any of it meant. It isn't the kind of thing that one can make sense of, why anyone would want to do this — to remove us from our homes and destroy a society that had lived and worked productively for centuries, and doubtless would have continued to do so.

I don't think it really sank in until we saw how they proposed for us to travel to that supposed "resettlement".

It took us about nine days to reach that place of death, and we were more dead than alive when we got there. They did not tell us how much food to bring. They also did not tell us to bring water. They said bring everything we had, so people sold off everything that they still owned (our houses and property had already been taken) in order to take valuables along.

So it wasn't people they were transporting, but merchandise. The fact that it was still attached to living bodies was not important. Whether we survived the trip or not wasn't important either. That train was not meant to hold living creatures at all.

There were 100 people in each wagon, all crushed against one another. No room to sit or lie down. No water and no toilet. No air to breathe. No food but what we had packed: *la'afa* and salted olives, of the kind you take to sea — they cause a terrible thirst. But there was no water.

I remember that journey.

I remember how one morning early on they opened the doors to take out the body of an elderly woman — the first of many to come — and the only thought in my head at the time was, "How will her loved ones know where she is buried?" Respect for the dead is very important for us. That woman's grave should have become a place for her descendants to come and remember her, to ask her intercession or just to talk to her about what troubled them. But probably she left no descendants. Very few of us would leave anyone at all behind to mourn.

Our water ran out completely on the fourth day.

I lost track of time. By the sixth day, we were in the mountains. There was still snow on the ground, visible when they opened the door, but we were forbidden to get out and scoop up the snow to quench our thirst. We stopped for a long time, and had to gaze at that snow-covered ground all the while. We saw people walking along the platform and we begged them for water, but they were afraid of the German rifles and stayed away.

Children and elderly people were the first to die. I remember the way they threw out the bodies of those who died of thirst. At one point I thought, *Now there is more room to lie down*, and I cried when I realized what that meant. That was when I saw that I was becoming less than human. We started as part of a living community — scholars and grandmothers, doctors and lawyers and schoolchildren and shopkeepers, all thrown in together. We ended up as just so many warm bodies trying to hold onto consciousness. We were drinking our own urine by the end of it.

It is so hard for me to write about this. I cannot stop the tears now, and all I can think of is the waste of water in tears. It is too much to remember. And this is the last time I was together with my family.

I could feel the motion of the train through the wooden floor on which I was lying. I was exhausted, insane with thirst, and very frightened. I was face to face with my fear of death. It is hard to face such a shameful death when you are still young and strong. The thought of dying of thirst in that rolling prison was hard to bear. I didn't understand why they were doing this to us. So many had already died in the past few days that it was clear to everyone that they intended for us to die. They probably would just keep us in there until we were all dead. But in the end, it was only the lucky ones who died then.

Consciousness became fleeting and vague. I drifted in and out. There were some hallucinations. I managed to bring water once to my family but I don't know from where I got the water. Did it even happen?

A journey of nine days. How difficult would it have been for the Germans to tell us to bring water? What would it have cost them to tell people to bring water?

I can't write any more now. But I have told something of how it was. Writing this down has taken most of the night. Now it is nearly morning and I hope that I will not remember any more. I would give anything not to ever remember any more. But I will not betray the memory of the dead.



Masha, I am troubled by memory tonight. Afraid to sleep.

Not sure why I write to you except that I have been able to talk to you. Not able to talk to anyone else living. Not good that I am silent with those who care about me, who want to help. Just can't speak of any of it. I can write what I can't speak of.

I would like to tell you about something. Whenever I've tried to tell this, I've been silenced by tears. I think it's because it was the first time I thought of my family after the shock of arrival. The memory is still imbued with that sadness. But maybe this time I will finally be able to tell it to the end.

I was working with a large number of others in the outside working squads. We were digging a long straight trench beside the road that went to the *lager*. The place where the trench was to go was on a rise a little bit above the road. The land there is very flat, so even a little rise like that gives you a good view around.

As we worked, I heard a train coming. There was a place nearby where the tracks cross the road and this long train passed not far from us. I can see that place now, where the trains stopped. This was the old ramp, before the tracks went into the camp. The place where we were working was only about 700 meters from the

unloading ramp. So from that low rise, I saw it all. I don't need to describe the scene to you. You experienced something similar. So did I.

Now I saw it from a distance. I saw all those exhausted, hungry people chased from the trains, looking around bewildered and afraid. Parents were calling for their children and everyone was searching desperately for their loved ones in that chaos. I saw how the Germans made everyone line up in two rows — men on one side, women and children on the other, so that husbands were separated from wives and sons and daughters separated from parents and siblings.

It happened so fast that those people never had the chance to say goodbye. They had no idea that they would never see each other again. They had no chance even to reach out a hand to touch those they loved one last time. Whole families just ripped apart with no chance to touch or say goodbye. I can't even type this without the tears starting again. Because this is what happened to my own family and yours. No chance to say goodbye.

But there was more to it than what I've told so far. We continued working while all this was going on. We weren't allowed to stop even for a moment. But we could still see the ramp and the road, all the way to the *lager*, off in the distance. Within an hour, the ramp was empty. The trucks had all driven off and those selected for work had been marched off down the road. The carriages had been emptied and all of the worldly goods brought by those people had been loaded up on trucks and driven away in the opposite direction from that in which their owners had gone. They would not be needing those things again.

We continued working for some time. Suddenly, the man next to me began very softly saying Kaddish. He whispered the words, very slowly and distinctly, as he hacked at the hard ground with

a pickaxe. But his eyes were on the north-western horizon. I looked that way too and saw three distinct columns of dark smoke rising from the *lager*.

Something in my heart snapped. I had the urge to take the shovel I was using and raise it against that man next to me; I wanted to kill him. I wanted to still the Kaddish that he was repeating under his breath, and never hear it again. Because his Kaddish affirmed that those people were dead. And that our families, who had traveled that road before them, were also dead.

All the things that I had been trying so hard not to believe were clothed in reality by that man's Kaddish. I wanted to deny that knowledge. Because I had not said goodbye to them. And I had never mourned them.

I didn't even say goodbye. I didn't go with them and I couldn't save them. And I never even said goodbye. Until that moment, I didn't even remember them or think of them. I couldn't even remember their faces. But I could tell where they were in my memory because of the absences, the places where my thoughts just slid away to the side, never penetrating, the things I was trying not to remember. My mother and my little sister. To whom I never said goodbye. For whom I have never said Kaddish.

I don't think that I ever really mourned them. At first, I was caught up in staying alive. Later I learned exactly, in unbearable detail, what their last moments were like. I cut myself off from them in that moment. To call to mind that image — to see them there in that place — brings a terrible upwelling of grief. I don't have any context for such grief — I don't know how to handle it, what to do with it....

QUESTIONS

“I look forward with trepidation to reading that file,” the rabbi had said. It was nothing compared to the trepidation with which Yael approached the whole thing. Caught in the middle, trapped in someone else’s nightmare, she could only wish it all away. But having seen it through this far, she needed the answers as much as Alex did.

And yet, she knew that Alex was his own worst enemy. He wasn’t likely to win over this rabbi with his charm.

But no, she hoped it wouldn’t come to that; most likely the rav would be able to judge the case based on written testimony, without ever meeting Alex. That was the usual way of these things. A busy man like him was unlikely to have the time or the patience to do more than write out a response.

And if he did want to talk to Alex? Well then, she would see to it that he had his day in court. He had asked for it, after all, and she owed him that much.

Owed him? She didn’t owe the crusty old bastard a bloody thing, unless you consider uncounted nights full of nightmares a debt.

She wasn’t being entirely fair to him, though, and she knew it. Perhaps she simply didn’t like thinking about how much his experiences had become entangled with her own. And truthfully, she did owe him something; he had helped her to make sense of her life in more ways that she could count. Without him everything would have been different.

Alex’s struggle for forgiveness had become part of the landscape of her life. It sometimes seemed as if she had always known where Alex had been, and how it had affected him. For years, her life had been bound up with his need to tell what he had seen. She was obsessed with making sure that nothing of it be lost, not a single detail. She could not rest until his story was told.

Yes, she knew where Alex had been . . . but what he had done, no. Only Alex knew that, and he wasn't talking. True, he had told some of it to her husband, Don, and even more to Masha. But Yael suspected there were things in his past that he had told no one — not even himself.

Well, he was going to have to tell it all now, if he wanted a fair hearing. But was a fair hearing what he really wanted?

Less than a week after she had contacted him, the rav wrote back:

Shalom, Yael,

Thank you for your letter. I have read your "Introduction" carefully, twice. Now I will set my flood of tears aside, and get to work. I do have many thoughts on the matter, and many questions. I do not want to rush this, so I will ask my questions and work out my thoughts a little at a time.

Of course, I will have to meet Alex personally, and probably several times. But not yet.

This is a very difficult question, from several perspectives. I enjoy solving difficult questions, in unconventional ways if necessary, using our sources as my teachers taught me.

To my dismay, from experience I fear that those of my colleagues and our contemporary great authorities who know the law inside and out may be too busy to give Alex the full personal attention that is appropriate and necessary. I have many faults; one is that I will probably be willing to give Alex and his question(s) ample time and attention, at the expense of other things I should be doing. Please do not tell him that; I don't want him ever to feel guilty of "taking my time"; I will give it of my free choice, gladly. And please tell Alex he has nothing to fear from me.

Now a few initial questions

So, this was really going to happen — Alex was going to get his day in court. And what then?

Yael copied the rav's questions into a separate email and turned Alex loose on the keyboard. He sat for some time, staring at the screen, visibly moved. Then, with a kind of grim determination, he set to work. He was still typing away the next morning.

BURIED JARS

Rav Ish-Shalom,

I will answer the questions you asked as I can. First though, I want to thank you for your willingness to help, regardless of the outcome. It is not an easy thing, to help someone like me. It is an act of *Hessed shel Emet*^{*}, because I cannot repay your kindness in any way, save with my gratitude.

I will answer any question you ask with truthfulness and as much clarity as I can. I am done with hiding. I have begun to put into writing everything I remember in every detail. I feel I have been given a second chance to tell, and in the past few years I have finally begun putting it down. You see, I am like one of those jars hidden in the ground, as yet unopened, and all that I have seen still untold. Why am I here now, if not to tell?

But like those buried jars, the contents of memory have been altered by time and by the frailty of the material on which it is written. Sometimes it is not easy for me to answer because I have to answer from inside the memory. It pulls me back, to relive. Then a lot will come out all at once beyond my control to stop. My answers are not always coherent, or I repeat the same thing many times. Sometimes I lose the thread of conversation for a while and the one who asks must pull me back to the present to continue. Sometimes I have to rest.

For these reasons and others, to write is easier than to speak directly. I must also say that I don't remember all details. And what I do remember, I am not always able to speak of. I can answer almost any question that concerns technical details — could

* Kindness to the dead. Literally “true kindness” to those who cannot give anything in return.

probably draw you a map of where all the light switches were where I worked...but what was really happening and what it meant, that is harder. But I will not refuse to answer anything you ask. If I don't answer, it is neither refusal nor an attempt at defiance, but only weakness. I ask you to forgive my weakness.

Some of what I say will probably incriminate me still further. I will not hide anything regardless. I trust this process to bring me what my soul needs.

I answer below what you asked. You wrote:

I understand Alex grew up in Saloniki until 17. What was his family like? What kind of Jewish education did he receive? Saloniki is famous as a genuinely Shabbat observant, traditional community — what about Alex's family? Is Alex what is usually called "religious" in Israel? Shabbat, kashrut, bet kneset, family life including mikveh, Torah study? Is he learned or simple? Knowledgeable and experienced with classic and contemporary Jewish halakhic and other sources? Will it be difficult or easy to explain complex, sophisticated sources and interpretations?

Traditional education, though the school taught secular subjects. Member of Zionist youth group and a sport club (also Zionist/Socialist). Shomer Shabbat, but not "religious" in the Israeli sense. In Saloniki, there was not the very strict separation of boys from girls as there is in religious schools here, nor did we dress differently from our neighbors. There was more a focus on just living as Jews than in keeping very strict rules. But most everyone was Shabbat observant and kept kashrut and holidays, and all businesses were closed on Shabbat. For us, keeping the tradition was the most natural thing in the world. It was the air we breathed.

Loaded ships during school vacations.... Got into fights, wrote songs, sang and danced, fell in love with girls I was afraid to talk to...the usual things.

Family: Lived with my mother and sister. Never knew my father at all. My mother worked as a seamstress and was quite strict. Her name was Malka, may her memory be a blessing. My sister's name was Miryam, of blessed memory.

Studied Mishnah and Talmud after school, so there is a great respect for the sources, but not so much knowledge. A basic grounding which has been added to only a little since then. A great respect for men of learning and for Torah. But a lot of ignorance on my side. Would like to know more than I do.

For many years, I refused to have anything to do with our tradition. Not because I had ceased to believe, but because I would not seek solace from a tradition that I had betrayed. I did not wish to be on speaking terms with God. I was angry, and the anger was directed at both myself and at God. Sometimes I wasn't sure who I hated more.

Did Alex ever give information to Yad Vashem? To Spielberg's Visual History project?

No testimony. Have written to Yad Vashem with a question, and was directed to Professor Gideon Greif, who understands more than I would have thought possible about things. He could not answer my question, but I was able to answer one of his. Could not speak more and did not give him my name. At that time, I could not have spoken. Now perhaps I could.

There was a time when I could neither write nor speak and would leave the room if the subject came up in conversation, but now it is slowly coming out.

Trouble is, I have no control over memory. It's fair to say that mostly it controls me. There are behaviors that I am ashamed of but over which I have no control. Mostly attitudes toward necessities. Food, water. There is a lot of fear in me. I react strongly to anything unexpected. I am also suspicious of people when I should not

be. Sometimes I need to tell something and I can't tell. If it goes on too long, I become short of temper. I am not easy to live with. Sometimes I cry out in my sleep.

I tell you things that are very shameful. I have said that I won't refuse to answer any question. Not always easy to answer things I'm not comfortable with.



Shalom, Alex,

I have read your responses to some of my questions, and look forward to our continued correspondence. After some more exchanges, I hope you will be willing to meet with me face to face.

You asked for someone who will “tell it to you like it is”, without mercy, but for someone with compassion and understanding. Nothing is of my own, as I will show you, it is all from our sources, in their full depth and complexity.

If you will be up to it, you will find that I will be simultaneously both less merciful and more merciful, both less consoling and more consoling, than others have been. I believe this will help you in ways no one has been able to help you yet. I hope to be fully honest in all directions, to the best of my abilities. As I wrote Yael, you will have nothing to fear from me. But that does not mean I will not be fully honest with you, avoiding what I believe may be inadequate — or only partially adequate and partially false — consolations.

Stick with me. I will not abandon you.

David Ish-Shalom



Rav Ish-Shalom,

I appreciate more than I can say your willingness to be honest with me. You are right, there is a need for that. Those closest to me are not able to speak to this need in me because they see me as fragile. They move softly around me. Well, I suppose I am fragile, simply because I have been broken. One doesn't recover. At the same time, I will be up to anything that I need to be up to. You needn't pull any punches with me. I was always a rather tough little *mamzer*. Still am.

What you said about telling me like it is, from our sources, is exactly what I need to hear. But I think that you should not diminish your own input either. It seems to me that every interpreter of the sources adds something to our common memory by the very act of transferring that interpretation to another. People like you create the *halakhah* anew for each generation. So I believe. Future generations will have that pool of wisdom to dip into at need. Such a role must not be diminished.

At the same time, please understand that I will challenge you. I respect your learning immensely, and I respect the wisdom of your heart even more. But I will not accept anything without proof. You will find me to be a tough case. I am not a push-over. But I will follow where you lead me if I see that your navigation is sure. I have run aground often enough to know that my own compass is not to be trusted. I know well that I am in need of guidance. But I will need to see what stars you steer by.

Keep in mind too that you may be in for a rough ride. What I have to say may challenge you in more than the intellectual way of a problem to be solved. If you wish to dig up and open this long-buried jar of memory to read its contents, then you will have to see what I have seen. You will show me God as you have known Him. But I will show you God as I have encountered Him.

In a moment of delirium I once saw the contents of my memory as a *mezuzah*-shaped cylinder of metal, which would be left behind on the grating when my body was disposed of. The memory of what I have seen would pass unscathed through fires hot enough to melt iron and reduce human bone to ash. If that mezuzah containing my memory is now to be passed on to you, you must take care that you will not be scorched by the contact.

I come to you in order to face my past, and if possible bring things to some kind of resolution so that I can move on. I welcome your honesty. It isn't consolation that I need, but resolution. No, I don't fear you, though the process itself has awakened a great deal of fear already and will bring up more as things progress. No matter. That is my problem, not yours.



No, Alex, not anymore. This is no longer your problem alone. As for being “in for a rough ride”, it has already begun. At the moment, I aim to help you in facing the past. As for resolution, we will discuss what is possible.

David Ish-Shalom

P.S. In Saloniki, the port was closed on Shabbat. In truth, the port of memories of misery should be closed on Shabbat, too. If you are able, it would be desirable for you to put aside your worst memories on Shabbat — let them run free six days of the week, but not on Shabbat. Only if you are able.

FOR WANT OF A NAME

Shalom Alex,

I like my name, and enjoy that you open your emails with it. I prefer it very much to the common email style of just opening as if in the middle of an ongoing conversation, with not so much as a Shalom, a Hi, a name or anything.

But — I would like to be able to use your name, too. Do you think you can write it at the ends of your emails?

David Ish-Shalom



Rav Ish-Shalom,

I apologize for that. I'm sometimes not exactly on a "first name basis" with myself. Bit of a loaded issue with me.

I have gotten out of the habit of signing anything at all. The trouble is, I really don't have a name to sign with. I have never been able to reclaim my given name. My mother named me Ovadya. For a long time I have not dreamed of using that name. It is like a beautiful garment, which I can't wear because I'm too worn down to fit into it and too filthy to avoid soiling it. One who became a slave to the Germans can't use a name that means "Servant of God".



Shalom, Ovadya (What a beautiful name!)

I understand. You were probably right, then. But you are not living then, you are living now! Now you can wear it again. It is actually a very fitting name, although it may take you a while to see that.

David Ish-Shalom

LOST SONGS

Who was he, this Ovadya, who left me his songs and his memories of the sea? How deep the gulf that separates me, Alex, from that naïve youth! No, the name of my childhood no longer fits me: something beautiful, unsullied by what I have seen and done. Let it remain behind in the sealed railway carriage. Meanwhile I have a life to live, and the past only gets in the way of living. I will carry no baggage with me into this new life.

No, not much is left of those songs of childhood. Sometimes snatches come back to me, but the poet is long gone.

You are my source and my destination,
and the sea on which I sail,
A sea full of light,
into which all rivers of light flow.
You are their source and their destination,
and the world through which they run,
A world full of light, built of light and perfect symmetry.
Built of light and perfect symmetry.

He is long gone, that naïve young poet. But sometimes he comes back to visit me in the lost innocence of a childhood scarcely gone.

REGISTRATION

Perhaps it was the writing to the rav yesterday . . . Names. “Now you can wear it again,” he had said. No, sadly, it isn’t so. A phrase repeats itself in the background of my consciousness over and over again. No, not a phrase, but a concept: “You’re now marked as the property of Birkenau-Auschwitz.”

It cost me nearly an hour of sitting here with shaking hands to write that short sentence. I don’t know if I’ve ever written out the full name of the place before.

But who had said this to me?

At first I thought perhaps it was the man with the needle. It was a cruel thing to say to a *Zugang*, a new arrival not yet over the shock. But actually, I think no one said it to me; I said it to myself. In any case, I don’t think there was any conversation while that was going on. It all happened very fast. It seems one moment I was standing at the door, bedraggled, exhausted, shivering from the cold of the northern spring; the next I was inside, naked, holding a pair of some sort of shoes and a mismatched shirt and trousers. In between, I had been stripped of my citizenship — I was no longer numbered among the human race — but I didn’t know that yet.

I looked at the blue number on my arm. The ink was still sinking in, but the realization of what it meant took a good deal longer to sink in.

I did know that it meant that my life was no longer my own, that I had become property.

But there was no time to reflect; I had to find the official who had brought us in, the one with the clipboard . . . I found him a little way apart, watching the proceedings with a look of profound boredom.

I approached him and poured out my heart to him. I don’t even know what language I used, only that I pleaded in every way I knew

how, telling him that I would do anything, work for him for the rest of my life, if he would spare my family, who had arrived with me.

Not a very impressive bargain coming from someone whose life expectancy was set at less than two months. And clearly he was not impressed. In fact, he looked right through me as if I was a small dog barking at him; the look of boredom never left his face.

I didn't know then that a Jew must never address a German directly, but only answer questions with respect and servility.

There were many things I didn't know then. Mostly I didn't know what had become of my family. It was all I could think of. Thirst, hunger, exhaustion — all of it was pushed aside by anxiety. I don't know how many people I asked in increasing desperation before someone pulled me aside and said, with more gentleness than is usual in that place, "*Himmel*," and pointed out the window at the gray sky.

At three o'clock this morning, all this swirled around in my brain and I found myself praying fervently, "Let it be Krema 1, not the bunkers. Please don't let them go to the bunkers." The wisdom of hindsight trying to alter the past. By the time I knew about the bunkers, the event was long past. I realized this at some point and just lay in the dark, desolation spreading into every corner of my soul.

In the end, I don't know if they died in the more efficient, newly-built crematorium, or if they saw the burning pits outside the bunkers — the farmhouses appointed as gas chambers. I don't know if the other kremas were online by then.

But I remembered something else. I had entered with a couple hundred men from my transport, but I ended up being separated from them. I vaguely remember some conversation and a flurry of activity surrounding this. Then off they went and off I went, in different directions. I ended up in Quarantine and I didn't see them again, but I know where they went. I didn't know it at the time, but I do now; by some fluke — some ironic mercy of the universe — I was spared. The others were selected for the Sonderkommando and put to work that

night.* Their first taste of Birkenau would have been when they fed the bodies of their families to the flames. I have no more explanation as to how I was spared that than I have about anything else.

I know only that from that moment on, nothing would ever be the same again. Nor would I ever again be as I had been.

* The Saloniki Jews from Alex's transport who were selected for the Sonderkommando may have been later sent to clear the rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto. As far as I know, none of them survived.