

WEEKEND

Warsaw was the most beautiful city ...

In a heart-wrenching novel, Gwen Edelman sends an aging couple who escaped the ghetto four decades earlier back to the Polish capital for a visit. Their emotional sojourn raises questions about collective guilt and the meaning of 'home'

The Train to Warsaw, by Gwen Edelman. Grove Press, 195 pages, \$24

Gerald Sorin

The spare and intimate language in "The Train to Warsaw" is deceptively simple. It creatively disguises a compelling tale told by two lovers, whose stunning, sometimes shocking dialogue ultimately becomes an exploration of the enduring wounds of the Holocaust, the mystery of memory, and the irresolvable trauma of lived experience. In her first novel, "War Story," Gwen Edelman, through the bitter words of a master playwright and Holocaust survivor, had similarly plumbed the depths of psychic and spiritual scars left by history. "The Train to Warsaw" is a richer work still. Her protagonists are more fully developed and are deftly woven into a sensual and haunting narrative, crisscrossing more than four decades of despair and secrecy, exposing the multiple tragedies of 1940s Warsaw.

After escaping the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, Jascha, carrying with him the nagging realization that he has left other Jews behind to die, settles in London. Here he achieves success with a critically acclaimed fictionalized memoir of his wartime experience. Yet neither he nor his wife, Lilka, also a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, where they met, feels fully transplanted. They simply cannot call London "home." Even after 40 years, Lilka says, "London is as alien to me as the other side of the moon."

Invited back to Warsaw to do a reading, sometime in the 1980s before the fall of Communism, Jascha is stubbornly resistant to going "Back There." But he begrudgingly gives in to Lilka, who, like so many exiles, even Jews driven from countries in which they were born and nurtured, considers their return to Warsaw a homecoming. Throughout their dream-like, vodka-saturated journey by train through Eastern Europe, Jascha, filled with repressed rage, says again and again in one way or

another, "God knows why we are going... didn't we have enough?" His remarks, sometimes delivered softly, but more often with the belligerence of a man who has something to hide, reveal unrelenting bitterness toward the Polish perpetrators of crimes against the Jews, as well as a nearly equal contempt for the victims who "didn't fly off when they still could."

Jascha and Lilka engage in a dialectical dance, struggling between and within themselves to maintain patience, even something resembling hope, as they take turns at being sensitive, sometimes overly so, to perceived insolence and the sublimi-



Edelman. Gifted creator. Daphne Youre

nal anti-Semitism of the Poles. Even the well-intentioned host of Jascha's reading tells the blonde, blue-eyed and pale-skinned Lilka, "You look Polish. And speak such good Polish too." "I am Polish," she says, which elicits a hasty, "Of course, of course."

Lilka's anticipation about seeing Warsaw again is colored by visions of the pre-war city, "our beloved Warsaw." But eagerness gives way, temporarily, to episodes of nightmare and panic as the train moves

toward the Polish capital. On arrival, Lilka suffers spasmodic shivers, and asks, "Can this be Warsaw? So ugly? So soulless?" Jascha intimates that she is seeing the city in a relentless, glaring Communist light, where nothing can be hidden. "It's another place entirely," he tells her, "certainly not home." Indeed, Jascha demands that the name and memory of Warsaw be forever erased. But anger turns out not to be the whole truth about his emotions and his experiences, which are more complex, multilayered and, finally, ungraspable.

For his reading, Jascha determines to be provocative. "Why should I go easy on them?" he asks; "why shouldn't they suffer?" His words prompt walkouts from an audience whose members are still unable to face the past. "Why must we listen to this? cried out a man with white hair. Wasn't it the Germans who were responsible? It's more than forty years, said a woman in the front row. Most of us were not born. A man shouted angrily - did we not suffer too?" Here Edelman touches on issues still hotly debated in the historical literature and in international political circles. But she wisely stays with her novel instead of leaving its compelling, twisting path to write a short essay on Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

Here as elsewhere in "The Train to Warsaw," Edelman, who moved from New York to Paris to "make" herself a writer, joins the ranks of those few gifted creators of Holocaust fiction who were neither survivors nor children of survivors, such as Anne Michaels ("Fugitive Pieces") and Cynthia Ozick ("The Shawl").

When Jascha replies to Lilka's list of accusations against the Poles by saying, "Not all of them," we are reminded of a historical irony. Poland had the lowest Jewish survival rate of any country in World War II; but grouped by nationality, Poles represent the largest number of people who rescued Jews during the Shoah. (Six thousand, four hundred Polish names are listed among the Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem). But this, too,



Eagerness gives way to episodes of nightmare and panic as the train moves toward the Polish capital.

Getty Images

Throughout their dream-like, vodka-saturated journey by train through Eastern Europe, Jascha, filled with repressed rage, says again and again in one way or another, "God knows why we are going... didn't we have enough?"

Edelman rightly avoids, citing no statistics.

After Jascha's reading, the couple continue to re-explore the city, and all the while, just as on the train and at their hotel, they trade stories, including some about their clandestine love-making in the ghetto, which afforded them a joyful respite from the sadness and horror of daily life there. But mostly they talk about those who were more brutalized than they had been, like the young boy who in desperation cried out, "I want to steal. I want to kill. I want to eat. I want to be a German." And Lilka tells Jascha

about an "ancient woman... tiny, skin and bones, covered in layers of rags" who approached her one evening. "From her throat came a weak croak and she said my name. I stared at her and could not understand how she knew me. The stench was terrible. It's Pani Rozen, she said hoarsely. I pulled back in disbelief. My old piano teacher. She had been pink and plump, with lively dark eyes and white teeth. Only a few years older than I. She was in love with Schubert. I've changed, she croaked sadly. She bent close to me, and I forced myself not to recoil. I'm no longer human, she murmured."

As these searing incidents are recalled, Jascha and Lilka urge each other not to think about such things now. "Another time. Only not now." Still, they go on remembering and talking, all the while working backward into their own past lives in the ghetto until their own stories meet. Through their dark and perhaps cathartic tales they learn new breathtaking truths, and rehearse old ones that retain the power, even after 40 years, to shock. Among other riveting episodes and reflections in this irresistible novel, Edelman has written an achingly affecting meditation on

how difficult it is, at bottom, to know another person. Still, Lilka and Jascha learn that love, though marked by conflict, secrecy, despair and even betrayal, may be the only "home" to which one can ever hope to return.

On the journey back to London, Lilka says, haltingly, "I wanted... I hoped..." Yes, Jascha tells her sympathetically, "like all of us." The visit appears to have been a kind of exorcism or purge, but Lilka is left with a residue of troubling memories and questions. "Warsaw was the most beautiful city," she says, as their train speeds along westward. Lilka stares out her window at the snow-covered fields, and continues speaking, as if transfixed, "Warsaw... do you remember?... Warsaw... were we not loyal to you? Did we not love you more than any other city?... What had we done to deserve this?... Warsaw, answer me." Like God and the universe, Warsaw remains silent.

Gerald Sorin is a professor of American and Jewish studies at the State University of New York, New Paltz. His most recent book, "Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane" (Indiana University Press), won a National Jewish Book Award.

Yoval Shaked, 32, and Inbal Wolff, 32; living in Tel Aviv; flying to Tokyo

Hello, can I ask where you're flying to and why?

Inbal: We're going for about four months - we'll be three weeks in Tokyo and three months in India.

Yoval: We've never been to the East. Inbal: The purpose of the trip is fun. Is it a post-army trip? Post-degree? What?

Yoval: It's a post-army trip at age 32, at a time when it makes more sense to take a break from life.

Inbal: But that's my reason to worry, because we quit our jobs so we could do this.

Yoval: I was actually asked to resign, but Inbal had to quit, and there's this fear that you won't find yourself afterward.

What kind of work did you do? Inbal: I managed Facebook pages for advertisers. Actually, I've quit being on Facebook all day.

Yoval: I was a product manager in high-tech.

Inbal: I also abandoned my stand-up group, which was only formed four months ago.

What does the group do? Inbal: There are six of us, and each person does his own thing. We're known as "The Original Stand-up Evening."

What kind of stand-up do you do? Inbal: Here's a sample: "Another thing I hate, besides getting up in the morning, is rape. One of the things women are most afraid of - and me, too - is being raped. And somewhere inside, all women prepare themselves for that day. They think, 'What will I wear? What will he wear?' I'm also preparing myself for that special day" - the rest is on YouTube.

So there's a message? Inbal: I try to talk about things that can make a statement... It's not all rape and femininity and feminism; there are plenty of things to use that have to do with our crazy world. But it's true that rape became a hot subject in our group.

So it's an all-woman group? Inbal: There are both men and women in the group, but we meet in order to jab at one another. It's mostly people with dubious levels of self-confidence. Our last performance was really good. It was harder for me to leave them than to

Departures | Arrivals



abandon my job. Yoval is a bassist and is in a band, and he had to leave, too.

Yoval: Yes. Inbal: And also... Yoval: Yes... What? Don't drive me crazy.

Yoval: What Inbal is trying to get me to talk about is that a year ago I quit my job in order to make music, and I have just finished working on a debut album. It only needs a few last touches - I even managed to give a performance before the trip.

What's the album title? "46 Is Missing." Meaning what?

It's a play on a hard-to-find shoe size, and anyway, I have to say I don't know how much I like it. But it's definitely a little weird to leave things right at the start.

Did you compose the music? Yes, it's my music. It's the first time that making music was genuinely my self-definition. There was a momentum to the process, which came from places of crisis. For me, at least. You have to make choices. This trip is also a choice.

To have fun?

We won't have time again in the future for a four-month trip. In the end, people need to find a career and make a living from it. If you want to have children, you have to plan, so you can have a certain income level. My settling down will be something I can accept. We both had the intelligence not to do something we didn't like, because doing something you don't like carries a very high price. It's like prostituting yourself. You can't live for money.

What kind of music do you play? Electronic, even though that's the most useless sort of categorization there is. There's a song at <http://46-is-missing.bandcamp.com>.

Give me two lines from a song. It feels very aggressive for me to say: 'Okay, here are two good lines.' It's also hard for me to choose something. It's the self-confidence thing.

So try to choose something. Inbal: "In Ramat Gan you can rent a flat without being a musician or a deejay, / You can buy good sabih without knowing anything about a derby."

Liat Elkayam, Photos by Tomer Appelbaum



Evgenii Trufanov, 35, lives in Moscow; arriving from New Delhi (via Tashkent)

Hello, can I ask you what you're carrying?

A stick made of rosewood. Is it for walking?

And contemplation. What are you doing in Israel?

A good friend is getting married on a kibbutz. He lives here and in Moscow, and we've been friends a long time. He's my only friend from my former life.

What did you do in your former life? I worked for the government. I have two academic degrees. For 16 years I had a career, but no happiness. Then I started doing yoga and felt I was becoming fulfilled. I left Moscow and didn't talk to anyone. I lived in the forest, and when I returned, I couldn't find a job, despite all my experience and education. That was a sign to make a change. I went to India. That was two years ago.

What about your family?

I had a wife and a child, but it didn't work. I hope one day my son will know the whole story and come to me. But this is my life now... I didn't want to go, but I felt that India was truly calling me. I was in India for a month, and made a terrible mistake by buying a return ticket. I tried to change the flight, but it didn't work. I realized I would have to be flexible, so I came back. Since then I've gone a lot.

How many times? This is my fourth or fifth time, but it was a four-month stay. I feel such great inspiration every minute I am in India, it's so beautiful there. I was very sad yesterday when I left the ashram. It's spring in the Himalayas and everything is in bloom. There's a big new year's festival, with ceremonies, singing, mantras. People come from all over to Babaji's ashram in Haidakhan.

What kind of things do they do? There is a ceremony every day when coconuts and trees and fruit are burned as an offering to the gods. Coconut symbolizes the ego. That's how you prepare your ego to disappear.

The first time I saw the ceremony, I thought, 'This is so dumb - hungry people could eat all this.' It took me time to grasp the deep meaning.

What else do you do in the ashram? Spiritual things. You take a bath in the morning and smear paint on your forehead. It calms the brain... We do yoga and afterward everyone comes to the temple to sing beautiful songs.

What kind of yoga do you do? Raja yoga, where you work with the mind. But the best thing is to learn from Babaji.

Who is Babaji? Babaji is not a person. He is beyond human understanding. He is a spirit that helps us in our spiritual journey, which can also be realized in the body.

In the West, Babaji is known mainly from Swami Yogananda's book "Autobiography of a Yogi." He teaches the deepest lesson, from which all traditions were derived: truth, simplicity, love.

Was there such a person? In 1920, there was a reincarnation in Babaji's body. He is not an ordinary person, he was not born of a woman, he created his body himself. He appeared in the light to many people, and when he was done he went to the middle of the river and left in a body of light... Only fingernails and hair remained...

In 1970, Babaji did in fact return, in the body of a very young boy. He appeared on a small mountain called Adi Kailash. He went down into a cave and sat there, in meditation. People recognized him and went to him to pray. He raised his hand occasionally to bless someone, and then very slowly he started to move and built an ashram on the banks of the Gautama Ganga.

Is that your ashram? At present, Babaji is not with us bodily, but he is always in the ashram. To this day he invites people to come, in his way - in dreams, too. When I was in the ashram, a Japanese boy arrived who was not even from a Hindi family. He had seen Babaji in a dream. He then told his mother that a kindly man had come to him in a dream and told him to go to a certain place in India. The family checked this online and saw that the place indeed exists, and then they came to us. It was absolutely delightful to see him happy in the ashram. He played and ran around the whole time, like a little Shiva.

Postcards from the edge

The lovely cards that Max Lichtwitz sent to his son, from February 1939 until the outbreak of World War II, encapsulate a large-small human story about a father's love for a son he would never see again

Benny Mer

"Postcards to a Little Boy," by Henry Foner (Heinz Lichtwitz), Yad Vashem Publications, 124 pp., 2013, \$36 (Hebrew edition, Yad Vashem, 2014, translated from the German and the English by Danit Dotan and Bruriya Ben-Baruch, 166 pp., 111 shekels)

Uri Avnery's memory as portrayed in his newly published memoir "Optimist" makes an imposing impression. His life is a novel teeming with deeds and heroes, not a short story or a novella, like the tale of most of our lives, and it's hard to believe that a 90-year-old wrote it. (See "Ever the optimist," Haaretz English Edition, April 25.)

For example, the chapter on the Nazis' ascension to power is constructed from first-person stories and real-time interpretation. Avnery remembers what the history books tell us: the unemployment in Germany, the adulation of the armed forces in the Weimar Republic – which was allowed to have only a small army ("Children in Germany of the time loved uniforms. They saw countless pictures of the German army in previous centuries") – the last democratic elections, the burning of the Reichstag, and so on.

He remembers well the teacher who began greeting his students with "Heil Hitler," the boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, and the day on which the class celebrated some historical German victory, when "all the students stood up and, making the Nazi salute, sang two anthems: the national anthem, 'Germany Über Alles,' and the Nazi anthem, 'The Flag on High'... What should I do? I stood up, like everyone. But I did not raise my arm and I did not sing the Nazi anthem." Afterward, his classmates warned Avnery: "If that happens again, we'll break your bones!"

"Optimist" will probably be one of the last memoirs written like this – from the perspective of a conscious witness – about that era. The chapter on the Nazis' accession to power joins a long list of works written by people who took an active part in history-making, such as Prof. Israel Gutman, the Holocaust researcher who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and survived Majdanek and Auschwitz.

Gutman, who died last October, was also one of the last surviving witnesses to appear at the Eichmann trial, where testimony was also given by fighters such as Abba Kovner and Zivia Lubetkin, and by public figures such as Mark Dvorzhetski from Vilna,



Sein Leibgericht

Front of the final postcard, from August 31, 1939, a day before the war's outbreak.

Images from "Postcards to a Little Boy"

Beno Cohen from Berlin, Adolf Bernman from Warsaw and many others.

We will no longer hear living witnesses like these, but to their towering stories new, previously archived material is now being added. An example is the testimony of Benjamin Murlstein, the head of the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt, in Claude Lanzmann's most recent film, "The Last of the Unjust," which consists largely of footage shot by Lanzmann nearly 40

survivors who were children during the Holocaust, and it is their memories that fill most of the books containing first-hand accounts that have appeared in recent years. They have been prompted to speak by the fact that they remain sole witnesses – a development that is interconnected with larger sociological and psychological processes. And, as it happens, their small testimonies jibe with the current tendency to research and

Heinz Lichtwitz from his family, mainly from his father Max, after the son was sent from Germany to Britain in the wake of Kristallnacht, the massive pogroms perpetrated across Germany in November 1938. From then until the outbreak of the war, in September 1939, Max Lichtwitz sent his son charming colorful postcards, which are reproduced in the book in all their glory.

In the past, a book like this might not have been considered a "Holocaust book." After all, Heinz (afterward Henry Foner; his adoptive parents in Wales were Morris and Winifred Foner) spent the war years in Britain, and the postcards obviously survived. Nevertheless, this book (and others like it) is like light on the edges of a dark cloud. It tells a self-contained story, with a beginning and a sad – or sad-happy – ending, and it is certainly moving.

Henry himself makes do with two pages; perhaps the sum total of his memories from this period need no more. But the story is backed up by a comprehensive historical afterword by Israeli scholar Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz about the children of the Kindertransport. This, for example, is one of the contributions made by the children's testimonies, since not many people are acquainted with

this successful and crucial rescue agreement of His Majesty's Government to accept the young refugees (one reason: so they would not go to Palestine). Baumel-Schwartz takes note of the debate that took place within the British Jewish community about whether to allow the children to be taken in by non-Jewish families, and she does not hide embarrassing details, such as that the foster families preferred the young, light-skinned boys and the good-looking girls, or the restrictions placed on some of the children during the war as "enemy nationals." Still, the Kindertransport project is one of the successes in the rescue of Jews in that dark time.

Heinz Lichtwitz/Henry Foner is one of those children. Born in 1932, he spent his early years in Berlin, where he was raised by his father and his grandmother after the death of his mother, when he was five. On February 3, 1939, at the age of 6 and a half, he arrived at the Foners' home in Wales, and it was to their address that his father sent the postcards that make up the central section of the book.

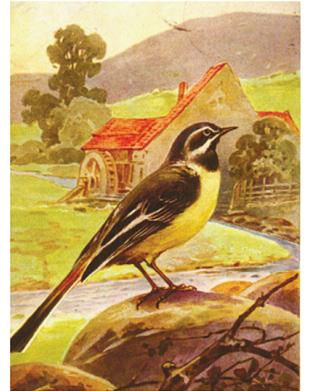
Writing in large letters, his father sent him regards every few days, wished him well on Passover and Easter, and related domestic news from Berlin. There are also veiled references to more "important" matters, such as in a postcard that was sent from Hamburg, where his father helped Jews escape from Germany.

Time's passage is keenly felt, and not only through the reports about the weather in Germany. On June 30, 1939, Max began to write his son in English and addressed the postcards to Heinz in his new name: Henry Foner. He thus seems to come to terms with his son's new identity, as an English boy (and he too is transformed from the German "Vati" into its English equivalent: "Daddy"). The father does not remark on the implications of this change, but the reader, able to surmise what happened in the end, can fill in the blanks: for example, what goes through the mind of a father who parts from his only child, knowing that he might never see him again. Indeed, in the last postcard received by Henry, dated August 31, 1939, his father wrote, in his imperfect English, "I'm glad that you are well and happy. I hope war will not come. If he is coming although, God bless you and uncle and aunty."

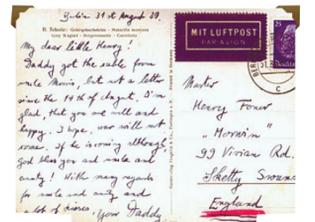
That was the last illustrated postcard, but a letter reached Henry in August 1942, through the Red Cross, in which his father wrote, "I'm glad about your health and progress. Remain further healthy! Our destiny is uncertain. Write more frequently. Lots of kisses, Daddy."

Years later, a letter that Henry's father wrote to a friend – a "kind of farewell letter," he called it – dated November 5, 1941, also reached the boy, in which the recipient is asked to convey to the Foners "my deepest gratitude for making it possible for my child to escape the fate that will soon overtake me... Please tell him one day that it was only out of deep love and concern for his future that I have let him go, but that on the other hand I miss him most painfully day by day and that my life would lose all meaning if there were not at least the possibility of seeing him again someday."

Max Lichtwitz, Heinz-Henry's father, was deported to Auschwitz on December 9, 1942, and murdered there a week later.



The first card, dated February 3, 1939. Max sent regards every few days.



Heinz/Henry, February 1939. "I'm glad that you are well and happy!"

SunBurn



Daniel Tchetchik

This series is a dream – a journey into an unknown realm, into a haven, into a lost season, with post-human landscapes interlaced with real, immediate surroundings. The partial metamorphosis here leads the viewer astray; it wavers on the line between the physical and the metaphysical, between what exists and what has been foretold. Intangible qualities cloak the familiar, evoking memories and fears.

In the day of rage sometime past the circle of time
The touch of light will wilt and scatter
The wind will blow, warm and dark
As sands will move, crystal sharp
Leaf by leaf, stone by stone
Year after year,
stone after stone.



Daniel Tchetchik has been a Haaretz staff photographer since 2003 and photography blog editor since 2013. His work has been exhibited in leading museums and galleries in Israel, and at group shows and fairs abroad. He is represented by the Ermanno Tedeschi gallery.

