

**SHOSHANA RONEN****In Pursuit of the Void: Poland in Contemporary Israeli Literature**

A journey to Poland, in Israeli literature, is not a typical one. A person who decides to travel to Poland is not simply a tourist who wants to explore unknown places, climates, habits, works of art etc. The decision is not a change one, like in the case when, for example, one hesitates whether to spend their time by the beach in Greece or visit museums in Paris.

A journey to Poland in Israeli literature is a very loaded one. The narrator is not an ignorant traveler who is going to a place he does not know anything about, or to a place he has not seen before. The narrator who travels to Poland was there before, even if not physically, he was there psychologically. Even if he was born in Israel and has never been to Poland before, he comes to Poland full with knowledge, stories, stereotypes, prejudices, beliefs, pictures, smells, memories, nostalgia, pain and horror. In this respect, even for those who were not born in Poland, the journey to Poland is a return.

In some cases the narrator comes back to the familiar, and he has/gets his previous picture of the place confirmed. Or he sees only what he was looking for in the first place, and does not allow the reality to change that picture. In other cases, facing the familiar, the narrator creates his images, his memories, his consciousness, and, actually, his past anew. Sometimes, the traveler returns in order to see a concrete picture and to go through the expected experiences, but comes across other unexpected scenes and experiences.

Poland for the Israeli traveler is a combination of visible and invisible cities. But even the visible cities, whose names are written on signposts, crossroads, or at railway stations, had turned into memorial sites and graveyards for real Jewish lives. Therefore, the core of the journey to Poland is remembering and imagining, the visualization of what was silenced and wiped out.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I will examine four different journeys to Poland in Israeli literature of the past 15 years. I'll try to show what those journeys, or returns, of completely different individuals, have in common, but also how they differ from one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Naveh, *Men and Women Travellers: Travel Narratives in Modern Hebrew Literature*, Ministry of Defence – Publishing House, Israel 2002 (Hebrew), pp. 251–252.

### Looking for ghost towns

Yehudit H e n d e l was born in Warsaw to a rabbinical family. She immigrated to Eretz Israel as a one-year-old baby in 1930 and grew up in Haifa. In her book *Near Quiet Places*<sup>2</sup> she returns to Poland. In five lyrical chapters she describes her 12-day journey to Poland, the first one after she had left the country, during late autumn 1986. The Poland she has in mind is the Jewish Poland, the land where Jews lived and flourished for almost thousand years, and the land where they were exterminated. She returns to Poland as a representative Jew who is looking for traces of her nation's existence, as well as Yehudit H e n d e l, who is looking for her individual history.

H e n d e l tells us that her journey was not planned, but accidental. She was asked to prepare a radio broadcast about a place, to portray a journey, and without thinking about it earlier, she replied, "I could go to Poland", but then she became frightened. On the one hand she felt that she had to go, but on the other hand she had an enormous fear, because of "what we carry with us from Poland, because I don't know a word in Polish". Her anxiety causes different kinds of postponements in the journey: she fell and was injured, she got ill, and all that made it clear to her that she had to go in spite of everything. The plans for the journey were made in summer, and after all the delays, she finally arrives in Poland in late autumn, in the grayest, gloomiest, and the most melancholy time of the year, especially in communist Poland of the eighties – as if her subconscious had chosen the most suitable scenery for her state of mind, for the feelings she came with to this country. There is no better month than November, with its naked forests and frost, to visit the biggest Jewish cemetery in the world, for instance, in Kałuszyn, where her mother was born, and where today the Jewish cemetery is a potato field. A stranger from Jaffa told her about that and added; "what do you have to look for in Kałuszyn? There were ten thousand Jews in Kałuszyn and only one survived. After the war he came back there, he was running like madman along the railway, and a Pole that was passing by shot him, and he is the last dead of Kałuszyn, after the war"(p. 16).

No wonder, then, that on the first day in Warsaw, looking at the empty, sad, gray and frozen streets of Warsaw, H e n d e l tells Artur S a n d a u e r that Warsaw looks like a ghost town. In her journey H e n d e l took with her the dead and consequently she perceives Warsaw as a dead city. She carried with her the well-known stories about the dreadful history of the Jews in Poland, and the tales about Polish anti-Semitism. And, like a symbolic confirmation of those stories, on the next morning, the second day of her stay, she experiences Polish anti-Semitism talking to a taxi driver, who is convinced that Jews dominate Poland. The past and the present are one identical succession.

As a child, H e n d e l imagined Poland almost as a Jewish state, with many relatives, neighbours, friends, and with a long and rich history of Jewish life and culture. As an adult she knew, of course, that there were no more Jews in Poland, nevertheless, that fact was like a shock for her, "a blow on the head"(p. 32). The Jews who were so

<sup>2</sup> Yehudit H e n d e l, *Near Quiet Places*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel-Aviv 1987 (Hebrew).



deeply rooted in Poland were uprooted, “didn’t leave behind a street, a road, not even one ruined street, as if they had never been there”(p. 32). The only place that survived was the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. No wonder, then, that though she had some moving and shocking meetings with the few Jews in Warsaw, “the modern *marranos* (*marrani*) of Poland”, as she defines them, at the end of her journey, Jewish Warsaw for her is only a Jewish cemetery (p. 102). Warsaw that she was visiting was Warsaw of the dead, Warsaw of a black hole, of absence, therefore, the chapter in which she describes her visit to the city, portrays mainly three places: The first place is the Jewish cemetery; the second is Janusz Korczak’s house in Krochmalna street 92, which she was looking for a long time, only to find out that the street ends at number 16. After finding the house, which is still an orphanage, but in a different street, she cannot find in the building even one word about the murdered Jewish children, about Treblinka. The third place is the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. Judaism is alive in Poland only in the cemetery and in the archives, she concludes.

On the way to Treblinka, on a beautiful autumn day, she feels that she knows the strange view like a childhood before childhood, the parents’ childhood, the grandparents’ childhood. Trees and lilacs, mushrooms, blackberries, raspberries, all this exists in her subconscious, familiar and close, although she left Poland as a baby, and that is the only moment of intimacy in her journey.

In Treblinka, another huge cemetery of the Jews, while reading the figures and other details, she concludes in banal words: “no one can talk about Treblinka. If we talk for thousands of years, and thousands of years we tell, we’ll never finish to describe Treblinka, there are no words in a human language to describe Treblinka” (p. 52). Hence, after the visit to Treblinka she relinquishes her former plan to go to see Kałuszyn, her mother’s town. As if she wanted to say that she doesn’t need to keep on traveling – what for? – There is nothing there apart from death. The journey loses its sense, and comes to a dead end. There is nothing to return to, there is nothing to see. After her visit at Majdanek she gives up her plan to see Krasnystaw, the hometown of her favorite poet Avot Yesurun, and after her visit to Auschwitz she abandons her plan to visit her husband’s hometown, Krosno. It seems as if her encounter with the catastrophe has made her underestimate life, and the rich and colourful world of her loved ones before the Holocaust. After all, no one was born in Treblinka, Majdanek or Auschwitz.

Hendel’s aim was to confront the emptiness, the nothingness, the absence, and the silence after the catastrophe, because nothing was left. She came to Poland in order to see the void. Her book is called *Near Quiet Places* because, as she writes: “then, in Poland, there were 30 million Poles, and 3.5 million Jews. 3.5 million Jews that were killed near quiet places” (p.86). That murder didn’t leave any sound, as if it had never occurred, as if nothing was there before. What Hendel actually implies is that the Holocaust wiped out the whole Jewish world that had existed before it.

If the purpose of a journey is to see and to learn something new, to discover something about the world, or people, or oneself, to open oneself to other possibilities and perspectives, to create memories, to overcome banalities, then Hendel’s journey was a failure. All the



effort that each journey demands was in vain, nothing changed in her perception, she learned nothing from the trip, she found exactly what she had expected to see – ghost towns.

### Where do I come from?

Nurith Gertz, a literary scholar, travels to Poland with her mother Deborah who was born there.<sup>3</sup> That journey becomes a personal expedition into her own family history, her own identity. Throughout the whole book she combines descriptions of the current trip to Poland with stories from the past, stories of her mother, grandfather, and even great-grandfather. The journey results in a deep internal revelation. Similar things can be said about the journey of Eleonora Lev, which I'll discuss later. Both are going through an internal discovery and adventure during their visits to Poland, and are not just observers or distant reporters, like Hendel.

Deborah Gertz came to Eretz Israel in 1933 at the age of 27. That was the first journey she portrays in her memoir; the second journey, in the opposite direction, is made by her at the age of 90. She comes back to Poland with her daughter in order to try to bring back to life what had vanished. She was born in Suwałki, but she didn't want to visit the town; neither did she want to see Warsaw, where she had moved in 1918. "I don't want to see again Stalowa Street and Praga", she told her daughter repeatedly, and Nurith Gertz finally understood, "O.K. mother, we'll go to Poland" (p. 104). Again, we can see how the journey there is not a simple or banal tourist experience, but something that attracts and repels at the same time.

In Suwałki they meet the last local Jew, Nahum Edelson, who is ready to show them the cemetery, but they don't want to see it; "we don't want to visit the cemetery we want to see the house and the courtyard" (p.105), they want to relive what was there before, they are tracing life, not death.

Naturally, they don't find the house and the courtyard, even after the great efforts to find the street that 80 years ago was called Rynkowa, and today bears the name of Sejnewska. "Among heavy and gray blocks that are situated on both sides of the street we are looking for a small house... facing a garden. Do you recognize the street? No. Not really. We walked the street once from one side, then from the other side. Not even a flash of a memory. Nothing. The place was wiped out" (p. 125). After walking in the street for a while Nurith Gertz found a wall and behind it a house with a garden. She was sure that it was the place, so she showed her mother the wall and said that here they are: the house and the garden, and even the palace of the landowner. But Deborah replied, "what are you talking about?...This is not the house". Nurith's reaction is fascinating as she tries to convince her mother to be satisfied with what they have found; after all, they won't find anything better than that. It looks as if Nurith Gertz feels that if we want to ascribe any kind of real existence to the past, then we have to create it all over again. If we want to

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<sup>3</sup> Nurith Gertz with Deborah Gertz, *Not From Here*, Am Oved, Tel-Aviv 1997 (Hebrew).



revive a vanishing memory, we have to create a new memory, because it's better to have a new memory, namely, a real past, than not to have it at all. Her mother has her past and memories, but Nurith Gertz wants to have her own past as well, a past that is combined and interwoven with her mother's history. She travels with her mother to Poland not only for her mother's sake, as a nostalgic journey, to trace the past as it was, but to recreate the past in order to have her own part in her mother's history, in order to have a common story with her mother. And yet, her mother is stubborn, and refuses to play the game, she clings to her old memories, letting the past vanish. Nurith Gertz gives up. "The house is gone. It does not exist in whatever reality, only in my mother's head, and in a little while it won't be there either" (p. 126).

Nurith Gertz loses the past and the memory before she has gained them. As a matter of fact, she loses something that she has never had; however, it is not less painful. The loss is tormenting. "There is no house. There is no garden. We have to go back to the hotel. And what did we, in fact, want? To bring them all back to life. In order to gain time" (p. 127).

The house is gone, and the garden is gone, so they go to Warsaw, the city of Deborah Gertz's youth. Her family moved there in 1918, when she was twelve, but today's Warsaw is not the same city as it was before the war.

Indeed, if the house is gone, and the garden is gone, and even the whole city is gone, then what does it mean to come back home? The narrator tells us that returning home means returning to the language of childhood, to mother tongue. Nurith Gertz describes her mother's condition in Warsaw as a state of hysteria. Deborah talks with everyone and everywhere in Polish. "She talks with all the Poles, with everyone: With a woman standing in a line, with a postcards seller, with a taxi driver, and they do not notice that she hasn't been here for sixty years... it seems that deep deep, in her memories, her language is Polish once more" (p. 128).

In Warsaw they look for a house in Smocza street, the meeting place of *Hashomer Hatzair* in Długa street, and while searching those places, of course without success, Nurith Gertz remembers her mother's and grandfather's accounts of Poland before the War. She describes their ambivalent love-hate attitude and their stories about Polish anti-Semitism. Nurith Gertz, in contrast to the typical attitude, doesn't accept the stories about hostility and hate as an axiom. She refuses to believe that everything was so bad. After all, there were also good things, they traveled, they had contacts with neighbors etc. Nurith, questioning and investigating her mother, doubting her stories, feels as if her mother made a "negative idealization" of the past. "Why is it so hard for me to believe? Because anti-Semitism in Poland was always abstract for me, while anti-Polonism was a real and a living thing in our home" (p. 131). She tries to understand where her mother's fears and hate stemmed from, and she asks herself; "I don't know why I'm so stubborn about Poland which does not exist for my mother. After all, there were pogroms, Jews were beaten and murdered... in short, in which kind of Poland should one believe?" (p. 137-138).

At least they had found a real thing: In Stalowa St., which is in Praga, the part that was not destroyed by the Germans. Maybe, at last, they have something to hang on to, to believe in. They found the house, the staircase, the courtyard, but those who live in

the apartment don't let them in, no matter how Deborah Gertz tries to convince them, telling them the story of 65 years ago: "it's a pity. I only wanted to see my room," she says (p. 141). Nurith Gertz watches her mother, Deborah, questioning people. No one in the neighbourhood remembers her or her family. She is struggling to gain her past, it looks as if she fails, when, like in a miracle, the neighbour's daughter calls them, she wants to meet them, in the old house, in the neighbours' apartment, and there Nurith Gertz hears a story, completely different from her mother's. She is told a story, which her mother denies, about real friendship and close contacts, and a story about the war, and about the family helping Jews, hiding them in their place. At that moment even that petrified image of Deborah Gertz's has to change, it cannot remain the one-sided story of distance and hate. Her reaction is: "In my time they were just Gentiles, but it looks as if all the Gentiles have changed with time" (p. 147). If the past has not changed, at least the present has.

The journey ends in Ostrów Mazowiecka. Deborah Gertz remembers that place, because she used to visit her grandfather there. The story goes back in time to the childhood of Deborah's mother, and the forests and the wooden houses of today are a suitable background for that journey into the far-off past, the end of the 19th century. Nurith Gertz, who is there for the first time in her life, feels that she actually remembers that place; she can recognize the house of Rabbi Wolf-Ber, her mother's grandfather. Her memories, as if she had known the place, and was already there, came to life in her out of her grandmother's longing. Nurith doesn't need here her mother's mediation; she is so deep in the distant past, where she can find herself. Through her grandmother's yearning she has found her own memories in Ostrów Mazowiecka. The journey ends with her regaining the identity out of the refined past.

### A journey into the consciousness:

In *A Certain Kind of Orphanhood*, by Eleonora Lev,<sup>4</sup> coming back home is, first and foremost, coming back to language. Although, unlike Deborah Gertz, she could visit her hometown Szczecin and her house where she lived as a child, the first shocking and exciting encounter for her is with the language.

Eleonora Lev went to Poland in 1983. In that year, because of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Warsaw ghetto uprising, it became possible for Israelis to visit the country, the first time after 1967 (when Poland broke the diplomatic relations with Israel). Like Yehudit Hendel, she came to communist Poland, but she managed to see more than sadness, grayness and death. The journey itself, became, as Lev admits, a continuous adventure in time and consciousness, a journey that changes consciousness and creates it all over again. A journey to the past that not only reveals but also gives birth to new memories, and new identity. She asks to deconstruct the reality she met with, and fabricate it anew

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<sup>4</sup> Eleonora Lev, *A Certain Kind of Orphanhood*, N.B. Books, Tel-Aviv 1999 (Hebrew).



in order to gain a better understanding. Consequently, her journey to the land in which she was born, and left when she was 6 years old, is both geographical and real, as well as metaphorical – a journey to her consciousness and memory.

Lev travelled to several places in Poland, each one of a different significance. I'll portray only her journey to her hometown, Szczecin.

The first thing she encounters in Poland is not her hometown, but her mother tongue. Human beings are born into words, intonation, nuances, like into a landscape and climate. Eleonora came to Israel when she was approximately 6 years old and for this reason, below the Hebrew surface she has a Polish one. "I'm an undercover Pole", she writes (p. 49). She doesn't use Polish for communication, she doesn't read or write in Polish, but she feels that language in the "invisible background". She admits that for her, Polish words, as her mother tongue, are more real and more naturally related to their meanings. "Butter will never have the wonderful taste... that 'masło' has... and if cream was asked for its name it would be, without any hesitation, 'śmietana' " (p. 50). The long years in Israel, and in Hebrew, haven't changed the fact that the sensual words, those we learn in childhood, smells, colours, tastes, are in her mind Polish words, while her abstract language is already Hebrew. About politics, sex, literature she thinks in Hebrew (p. 50).

At Warsaw airport, when she sees a poster advertising Coca-Cola, at the beginning she cannot understand the title *to jest to*. Is this broken English, she asks herself? But suddenly she grasps the meaning – this is it – in Polish, and from that moment on it no longer is a typical foreign country. "I have already been here, I know how to manage here". Now she knows she's in the country where she was born, and butter, after so many years, tastes like *masło*.

Like in the former two journeys, Poland was not a typical tourist target. It was hard for her to explain why she was going to Poland. People expressed their disapproval, telling her about Jaruzelski's regime, and the low standard of living in Poland, and even mentioned the concept of "national pride", as if the journey to Poland would harm it. Still, contrary to Hendel, for Lev it was clear and obvious why she was going to Poland. "Where to, if not to Poland? I went to a country in which no one has any difficulties in spelling or pronouncing 'Eleonora'... I stood fascinated by the intelligent clerks and operators in Poland who understood immediately, and who didn't make a mistake even once in spelling the name" (p. 52). Lev writes with a sense of humor, maybe the first report of a journey to Poland in Hebrew that is not just severe and gloomy, but also funny, flavoured with irony. Finally in Szczecin, she is impressed by the beauty of the city, compares it to Paris, she buys a map and finds on it her former street, talks to strangers in Polish, and when she is asked how come she speaks that language, she answers that she was born there. People indeed showed polite interest, she writes, but she admits that she was a little disappointed that no one was thrilled with joy at her return, no one declared a national holiday, no red carpets were waiting for her, in fact, "no one really missed me," she concludes (p. 59).

Back again to the question 'why to Poland?' Lev gives more explanations. Poland was like unfinished business for her. She was torn away from there when she was a young child, and up from then Poland became an irritating thing in her consciousness, an annoyance,



something that, in time, lost its actuality, like an internal flickering lantern; therefore, she had to go back in order to turn that lantern off. No matter where she lived in Israel, she always felt that her “real” address was; “flat no. 8, Kołłątaja 23 St., Szczecin, Poland, north-eastern Europe, earth, the universe... That address had for all those years a magical sound in my ears... I know that such a place existed, I know that I was there, only that I wasn’t definitely sure whether it actually was true, and this is the real reason why I had to go back” (pp. 55–56). In fact, she returns in order to check out if indeed it was true and not only a dream. However, her return as an adult, with an adult consciousness and knowledge (on politics, history, war etc.) shapes, as a matter of fact, her memory anew. Lev doesn’t come back to Poland to trace the past as it was, but to create and narrate once again her memory, her past, and actually her identity, using past memories mixed with the contents of her consciousness’ in the present. The journey builds its course and sites while it continues.

Standing in Kołłątaja St. Lev identifies her house immediately, the balcony, and the park. Now, naturally, it is smaller, but still the same. The first thing she does is to go and sit in the sandbox, where she played as a child. She calculates the time that passed, the changes that her body went through, with what she left the place and with what she returns. She does the heart-searching in order to evaluate her life and character.

Entering the old apartment itself was not easy. The new owners are not too eager to let her in, however, not because of anti-Semitism or fear that someone came to reclaim their house, but because one of them is active in “Solidarity” and therefore he is suspicious. The moment she enters the flat everything becomes normal and focused, all the mystery vanishes: the place remained as it was, only renovated. The stories of the owners interweave, in her mind, with her own stories from the past, episodes and relations with her parents, her brother and her sister. Afterwards, she visits the *działka*<sup>5</sup> they had and is disappointed to see that the great well she remembers is only a half-barrel. She visits also the park *Jasne Błonie*, where she recalls how once, during hypnosis, she came back to that park, there was snow and chilled air, and when she was asked to wake up she obeyed, but felt as if she had hangover, she was angry, she felt “they took my Poland away again against my will” (p. 66). That perception reveals a certain kind of orphanhood that Lev feels. All of a sudden, when she was about six years old, they took the country from her against her will. And maybe against her parents’ will as well. The latter were not Zionists, but they had to leave Poland in 1957 when Gomulka came to power, and her father heard at work “That’s it. Now we’re over with the Jewish ways here” (p. 65).

Lev describes her immigration to Israel as being born again, as a great falling in love. She fell in love with the “land of oranges”, with the *Hamsin*, with freedom and misbehavior of children. Becoming Israeli automatically made her hate Poles, Jewish Poles, of course.<sup>6</sup> “I’m an Israeli”, means, “I’m not a Pole”, like a thesis and anti-thesis. How to be Israeli? First and foremost don’t be a Pole (pp. 71–72). At present, as an adult, Lev tries to

<sup>5</sup> Polish. A small parcel of land for individual use in a town or beyond it = an allotment.

<sup>6</sup> Here Poles are, actually, Jews from Polish origin.



understand that hatred towards Poles, to find out where it came from. She thinks that much more than the image of Poles as the ultimate bourgeoisie, to be a Pole, in the Israeli consciousness, is to be soap, to be a victim, to be humiliated. After all, the Holocaust took place in Poland (p. 79). After 26 years she travels to Poland with, on the one hand, Poland as a myth, an abstract concept of hypocrisy and humiliation and, on the other hand, with her personal Poland, as a painful place she was turned out of, and longed for all those years. Poland was left in her as a scar, and the Polish language as a shame and delight simultaneously. In contrast to the Zionist ethos, also in Israeli literature,<sup>7</sup> that the immigrants to Israel have no roots and no past, Lev emphasizes the black hole that was opened in her, after Poland and Polish language were taken away from her. The irritating void that was left in her, the painful absence, is a form of orphanhood.

She didn't travel as a *tabula rasa*; she was equipped with associations and memories and that is the reason why while meeting people and landscapes she actually met herself (p. 87). That "self" could have been different and she does examine all kinds of possibilities. What would have become of her if she had stayed in Poland: a journalist, an activist in Solidarity, a party member, a tired housewife? Or if her family had immigrated to America or Italy, what then would have become of her? Lev claims that there is only one certain thing. All those different "I's", from different places in the world, even from New Zealand, would have missed Szczecin. Szczecin is the source and the juncture which all her possible "I's" have stemmed from. Longing for Szczecin is the fulcrum of her identity. That does not change even when, on departure, inside the airplane, she understands that Poland as her lost paradise was a simple and unavoidable loss of her childhood, as it happens to all.

### **I'm not going to Auschwitz:**

The forth journey that I would like to portray, by Benjamin Shvili, is the most peculiar one. The author was not born in Poland and his family is not of Polish origin. And yet his perspective<sup>8</sup> is unique and original and for this reason I've chosen to write about him. He writes that for him, it is very clear what he is not looking for in Poland. He is not looking for roots, lost identity, nostalgia or memories, and he is not going to the places where Jews were killed, his journey is not a "Holocaust journey". Thus, why does he travel to Poland, and why does he write about that journey?

In the first chapter the narrator is still on the ferry that left Haifa for Limasol, on his way to Poland. Why with a ferry to Poland? This very fact is strange enough. Why doesn't he take the plane, only 3.5 hours to Warsaw, why does he choose such a long trip, unconventional, tiresome? Maybe he is looking for a special adventure, or maybe his journey is not a real one, but only in his mind? At any rate, in the first essay, he didn't reach

<sup>7</sup> See: Shaked Gershon, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980 vol. IV*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad & Keter, Tel-Aviv 1993 (Hebrew), pp. 14-36.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Shvili, *Po Lin Halya*, Schocken, Tel-Aviv 2002 (Hebrew).



Poland yet, but describes the journey on the ferry, as if Poland were an imaginary place that cannot be reached. The way to Poland is the issue, and not yet the encounter with the real place. In addition, what makes his story more surrealistic is the description of a Polish group on the ferry, a group of pilgrims that do not look like religious pilgrims, and who dance polka in the bar.

On his way, he reads about the history, the geography, and the climate of Poland. He also meets a son of a Holocaust survivor who tells him his family story and adds that he doesn't understand why, for goodness' sake, he is going to Poland. Like it was shown before, in the case of Hendel and Lev, the traveller meets people who disapprove of his journey. That man tells him: "They hate Jews more than any other nation". The narrator does not understand him, and only thinks; "It isn't possible that I'm traveling for hatred", hatred is not what he is looking for. Trying to explain why he is going, he writes: "I'm going to Poland neither for the sake of Auschwitz nor for the sake of Treblinka, I'm not going for the sake of evil, because I cannot understand evil. It is said that evil is void and absence. I'm going for the sake of a different absence, the absence of Israel Baal Shem-Tov, the Seer from Lublin, Menahem Mendel from Kock, Elimelech from Leżajsk. I'm going for the sake of tzaddikim, and for the sake of the Black Madonna, because I understand black". Black is not evil then.

He is not going to Auschwitz, but Auschwitz is going with him. When he reads in a guide book that in Poland there are 420 different kinds of birds, the first thing that comes to his mind is: "What kind of air were those 420 kinds of birds breathing when they were flying above the crematorium?"

When he tells someone on the ferry that he is going to Poland, and this person knows that our traveler is an Israeli, he asks him: "Are you going to Auschwitz?" As though for an Israeli there is no other reason to go to Poland. For a Jew there is no way out, he must go to Auschwitz. All the way on the ferry, he writes about fears, stress, and anxiety. He doesn't know where these feelings have come from; he describes them as strange and incomprehensible. He opens the Book of Psalms, reads, and hopes that God will give him strength. He tries to fill the void in his heart with faith and love. The romantic and adventurous journey by the sea to Poland becomes a nightmare.

In the chapter named *Pink Madonna with dark eyes* he is already in Poland. From Warsaw on the way to Płock, he sees different signs to all sorts of places: Łódź, Katowice (at once he remembers that Auschwitz is nearby), Sochaczew; all those names are interwoven with Jewish history, a Jew cannot read those names indifferently. In all those journeys, the narrators repeat the names of cities and villages as if they had magic power. Our traveller – we learn from his writing that once he was teaching Hasidic stories – feels closest to the *shtetlakh*<sup>9</sup> of the *Hassidim*, each name reminds him of a different Hassidic story, Kutno, Izbica Kujawska, Gostynin, Żychlin, Stryków, Kock. Personally he is connected to Poland through those *shtetlakh* and the rich and lively Jewish-Hasidic world that was there before the war. In that respect, his journey to Poland is much more connected to

<sup>9</sup> A small Jewish town.



life than to death. However, he cannot ignore what was afterwards. He tries to identify with other stories, other biographies of people that were born in Poland and survived. He met one of them on the ferry; the other is his father-in-law. Because of him he went to Płock, which is on the way to Włocławek, the place where his father-in-law was born. He feels forced to go there, as if by the necessity of a natural law. He cannot do otherwise; he is compelled as the Wisła is compelled to flow to the Baltic Sea.

And what kind of encounter did he have with real Poland, with real Poles? He admits that this encounter is indirect: "I looked around and I saw garbage and flowers, fascinated by life as it is, without tourists and tourist sites, I saw Poland as an ordinary and gray place enfolded by memories of others". He is entirely an outsider, he is only an observer, he just wants to look, and not to have real contact. On a bus he sees a very beautiful girl, and he cannot take his eyes off her, he sees village people with baskets full of mushrooms. He sees a waitress slap a Gypsy girl, and people pray in church. Then he thinks that if after prayer they slap a little child, it'll be as if they tell the child that the church isn't worth a thing. For this reason, he tells those people, only in his heart, to remember what Jesus said about the poor and the miserable.

As a matter of fact, his only encounter with the Poles is through religion, in his several visits in different churches. In his journey there is a pattern that repeats itself, (for instance in Przysucha, p. 118): In different little towns he visits ruins of synagogues and right away he goes to a church, as if only there he could touch sanctity, or escape the void and the absence into the fullness and the abundance. It is not only the result of the fact that the whole Jewish world was wiped away. It is also the outcome of his view, as a religious person, that Christianity has beauty that Judaism does not share. "I visit churches much more than I visit synagogues, I cannot help it. My hunger for beauty is as great as my hunger for God. It might be that God exists with the Jews, but beauty is within the Christians" (p. 167). No wonder, then, that the culmination of the religious aspect of his journey is in Częstochowa during the pilgrim's day; "Tears were shedding from my eyes when I was standing in front of piety that I had been longing for" (p. 187). For this reason he was feeling close to the Poles.

With real people he has a very limited contact and although he has travelled to a real place, he hardly sees it, he is not interested in getting to know the Polish reality. Poland for him, is only a background for a spiritual journey, a journey of reflection and meditation, and because of this he chooses to see only what suits his mood. He states this openly: "I felt closer to neglect and poverty than to the richness and beauty of Warsaw".

Nevertheless, Shvili feels that his journey has changed him (p. 97), that his journey is the best teacher he has ever had. He writes that he has become merciful, that he feels as if he wants to devote himself to the world (p. 97). However, the change, which the reader might observe, is different. Although at the beginning he wrote that his journey is not a "Holocaust" one, and that he is going to look for the Hassidic world which existed before the Shoah, he cannot avoid the stereotypical way of looking on the place as the cursed land, as the land of destruction and murder. It can be seen, for instance, in his thought that Poland is a place that no longer exists, so he is left with Hassidic stories



(p. 47); or his feeling that the past hunts him so he cannot enjoy the park in Przemyśl (p. 75). Yet, as far as the journey continues, and his voyage lasts a few months around the whole country, his way of looking is changing, he begins to see the land itself – the landscapes, the little towns – and he begins to like it. He doesn't come to know the people but he comes to know the landscape, and to love it. Thinking about/of the dryness of the land of Israel, he is marvelled by the green trees and the flora around. In Kazimierz Dolny he goes for a walk on nice shiny day, the sky is blue and the birds are singing. He sees the beauty around him and he feels joy, but he struggles with that feeling, as if it were forbidden to feel happiness in that place. But after a while he admits that it is insanity to oppress the joy because he is in Poland (p. 114)

At the beginning of his journey it was also clear to him what he was *not* looking for: that he was not looking for roots, which, anyway, he didn't have there. This attitude also underwent change. It is true that Poland is not the place of his private individual past, but it is the place of his past as a Jew; "the only past that was left here for me is my Jewish past that they made of him cinema halls, libraries, swimming pools, I was left only with Hassidic stories, fractions of words, fragments of tombstones" (p. 173). Nevertheless, looking at the landscape, Shvili asks himself; "could I come back to live in Poland?" (p. 121), as if he lived there once and considers the possibility to return. Here it is shown how deep down in the Jewish soul the journey to Poland is a return, even for one who was not born there. Poland turns into a memory from the past, a real reminiscence of the individual who has no roots in the place. Thus we can see how the past and the memories of it are created in the present, but that fact doesn't blemish their validity and their genuineness. The author sums up, "don't says that there is nothing to look for in Poland, because all the Jews are dead... I who have lost the key in Jerusalem might find it here" (p. 213). The key for home, for understanding, for illumination, might be found in Poland once more.

Four different journeys to Poland in Israeli literature reveal four different pictures of the country. In some cases the travelers see what they wanted to see, in others they are open to new images. However, in all the cases the journey is not merely a geographical and tourist undertaking, but a voyage into history, memories and stereotypes. A painful journey into what had vanished, but in some cases into oneself, which, in a certain way, has shaped itself anew.