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I

Introduction

Their eyes—I must tell you about their eyes. I must begin with that, for their eyes precede all else, and everything is comprehended within them. The rest can wait. It will only confirm what you already know. But their eyes—their eyes flame with a kind of irreducible truth, which burns and is not consumed. Shamed into silence before them, you can only bow your head and accept the judgment. Your only wish now is to see the world as they do. A grown man, a man of wisdom and experience, you are suddenly impotent and terribly impoverished. Those eyes remind you of your childhood, your orphan state, cause you to lose all faith in the power of language. Those eyes negate the value of words; they dispose of the need for speech.

Since my return I have often been asked what I saw in the Soviet Union, what it was I found there. My answer is always the same: eyes. Only eyes, nothing else. Kolkhozi, steel works, museums,

• Singular, Kolkhoz: Soviet collective farm. Translator's Note.

theaters . . . nothing. Only eyes. Is that all? That is enough. I visited many cities, was shown what a tourist is shown, and have forgotten it all. But still the eyes which I cannot forget pursue me; there is no escaping them. Everything I have I would give them, as ransom for my soul.

I saw thousands, tens of thousands of eyes: in streets and hotels, subways, concert halls, in synagogues—especially in synagogues. Wherever I went they were waiting for me. At times it seemed as though the entire country was filled with nothing but eyes, as if somehow they had assembled there from every corner of the Diaspora, and out of ancient scrolls of agony.

All kinds of eyes, all shades and ages. Wide and narrow, lambent and piercing, somber, harassed. Jewish eyes, reflecting a strange unmediated reality, beyond the bounds of time and farther than the farthest distance. Past or future, nothing eludes them; their gaze seems to apprehend the end of every living generation. God himself must surely possess eyes like these. Like them, He too awaits redemption.

If they could only speak . . . but they do speak. They cry out in a language of their own that compels understanding. What did I learn in Russia? A new language. That is all, and that is enough. It is a language easily learned in a day, at a single meeting, a single visit to a place where Jews assemble, a synagogue. The same eyes accost you in Moscow and Kiev, in Leningrad, Vilna and Minsk, and in Tbilisi, the capital of the Georgian Republic. They all speak the same language, and the

story they tell echoes in your mind like a horrible folk tale from days gone by.

For years I refused to believe it. Like many people, I was alive to the reports of Jewish suffering in Russia. I read all the books and articles and heard the testimony given at public meetings or behind closed doors. Yet I was unwilling, or unable, to believe it. I had too many questions, too many doubts and misgivings—not about the fact of Jewish suffering in the Soviet Union but about its scope. I was sure the reports were exaggerated. How else arouse public opinion; how else stir people from their apathy? I relied on my Jewish instinct, telling myself that if the situation were really so black I would of necessity believe it, without demanding proof. My own doubt was sign enough that the reports were exaggerated.

I was mindful, too, of the danger in drawing facile historical analogies between communist Russia and Europe under the Nazis. Even with regard to the Jewish problem, one is forbidden to make such comparisons. An abyss of blood separates Moscow from Berlin. The distance between them is not only one of geography and ideology; it is the distance between life and death.

If synagogues are being closed in Russia, I reasoned, Jews will simply go on praying in the ones that remain open. Are families prevented from reuniting? A new regime will soon come to power, and policy will change. Does the press conduct a campaign of anti-Semitism? Does it portray Jews as black marketeers, swindlers, drunkards? Does

it disparage the state of Israel and malign the Zionist movement? This, too, will pass. Jews are accustomed to living in an unfriendly atmosphere. They have cultivated patience and humor, and they possess to a remarkable degree an understanding of their oppressors. Everything will pass; one must wait. The essential thing is that they be permitted to live, that their existence itself not be endangered, that there be no pogroms. And in Russia there are no pogroms; no one will dispute that. There are no detention camps. The situation, in other words, is not so unbearable.

Of course it could be better. Of course Jews in the free world are obliged to do everything in their power—to move heaven and earth—to see it improved. And of course one must exert pressure on the Kremlin to end discrimination and abolish the economic trials, whose victims were Jews. It is our duty to protest—and I too was among those who protested. But in several instances I was not at all certain whether the charges being leveled against the Soviets were not much too extreme and radical to be true.

I did not believe, for example, that the Russian government had embarked on a clear and relentless policy of "spiritual destruction." Despite, or because of what had happened in the recent past, I shrank from this idea, which for me will always remain in the exclusive domain of the German people. The Russians had fought against Hitler and in that fight had sacrificed twenty million lives. Of all people, they must know how impossible it is to "destroy" the spirit of a people—of

any people. The very thought that they, or anyone, might even be attracted to such an idea struck me as anachronistic and absurd. One must, after all, learn something from history.

So I decided to go behind the Iron Curtain to examine the situation with my own eyes. It was no longer possible for me to remain in New York or Tel Aviv and content myself with gestures of solidarity. The problem was too serious for compromises. If the protests were justified, they were in no way strong enough; if not, they had been much too strong. There was no other alternative. One is forbidden to play games with human lives.

In August I made my decision and set the departure date for early in September. I told my travel agent that I meant to spend the High Holy Days and Sukkot^{*} in Russia, and gave him a list of the cities I intended to visit. It was necessary to make advance reservations for hotel rooms and flights between cities, but altogether the technical arrangements took no more than ten days, a minimum of bureaucratic activity. No red tape. Everything went simply and smoothly. The Russian government appears to welcome tourist dollars.

Other preparations proved more difficult. From everything I had read and heard, I knew that this was not to be a normal trip abroad. Over the years I had met more than a few people who had come back shattered by the experience. Something happens to the man whose travels bring him into contact with the Jews of Russia. Whether he goes on

^{*}Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16, 13-16), an eight-day harvest festival celebrated in early fall. T.N.

business or to see the Bolshoi Ballet, he soon forgets his original purpose and joins the stream. His life changes; the tourist becomes an apostle. And he leaves something of himself behind.

I was aware, then, that something would happen to me, but I did not know what; simply, I depended on its occurrence. I made no plans, I sought no contacts, I refused to arm myself with letters of introduction. I planned to wander about alone, and alone I would meet those I had come to see. I decided not to request personal interviews. I would stay away from official institutions and official spokesmen, visit neither the Foreign Ministry nor the Ministry of Religions. Political manifestoes and worn-out promises did not interest me. I would not appear at the editorial offices of Sovietish Heimland.^{*} Whatever Aron Vergelis^{**} and his comrades were prepared to tell me they had already repeated countless times before to visitors from the United States, France, and Israel. Nor did I intend to interview the rabbis or lay leaders of the various communities. Why place them in a difficult position? Why confuse them? I could observe their actions from afar.

I would approach Jews who held no position in society, who had never been placed in the Soviet show window by Soviet authorities. I was interested only in them and in what they had to say. They alone, in their anonymity, could describe the conditions under which they live; they alone

* "Soviet Homeland"; a Yiddish magazine established in 1961, now a monthly. T.N.

** Editor of Sovietish Heimland. T.N.

could tell whether the reports I had heard were true or false—and whether their children and their grandchildren, despite everything, still wish to remain Jews. From them I would learn what we must do to help . . . or if they want our help at all. They alone, I told myself, have the right to speak, to advise, to demand. Theirs is the only voice to which one is obliged to listen. My journey to Russia would be a journey to find them.

I met one of them on my first evening in Moscow, a few hours after my arrival from New York and Paris. Actually, it was he who found me, standing on the sidewalk in front of the synagogue. From my clothes he could tell I was foreign, and he asked me if I spoke Yiddish. The darkness concealed his face. To this day I have no idea whether the first Jew who happened across my path on Russian soil was a young rebel, impelled by stubborn bravado and a Jewish conscience to risk serving as a public spokesman, or an old man glutted with fear who had finally decided, no matter what the consequences, to break his silence. I do not even know whether he was addressing himself to me alone or through me to someone strange, abstract, and distant, who lived as a free man in a land drenched with sunlight and sea.

Why did he refuse to show his face? Perhaps he had none. Perhaps he had left it behind him somewhere in Siberia or, his crime unremembered, in the interrogation cell of a nameless prison. Perhaps he had given it away as a present

to his enemies or to God. "Here, take it, I no longer need it. I have another, and it numbers three million."

Perhaps that was the reason he approached me stealthily and in shadow, while all around us thousands of shadows like his stood in the street and waited, powerless to say for whom or for what. Anxious lest I reveal him as a man without a face, he came wrapped in darkness, a simple Jew with no name and no particular destiny, a Jew identical to every other Jew in every city throughout that formidable land.

I heard only his voice, choked and fearful, a few tattered sentences whispered quickly in my ear, the simple gray words used by generations of Jews to describe their condition and fate: "Do you know what is happening to us?" He spoke for a few seconds. He wanted me to know. Finally came a request to remember everything and tell it all. "There is no time. We are nearing the end. Impossible to give you details. You must understand. If I am being watched, I will pay for this conversation. Do not forget."

I was excited and confused. It was too quick and unexpected. Yesterday I sat in New York joking with my friends. We laughed aloud. The transition was too sudden.

He continued to speak, alternating accusation with confession, demanding both justice and mercy at once. I wanted to press his hand, to promise him everything. I didn't dare. Maybe they were really watching us. A handshake could be

costly. And so, unconsciously, I slipped into the reality of Jewish fear in Russia.

Suddenly he left me in the middle of a sentence, without saying good-by or waiting for my reaction. He disappeared into the living mass that crowded around the entrance to the synagogue.

I was to meet this Jew again, in Moscow and elsewhere. He always gave some sign by which I could recognize his presence. Once he thrust a note into my pocket; once he touched my arm without saying a word. Once I caught a secret wink of his eye. Each time I saw him he had changed his appearance. In Kiev I thought he was a construction worker, in Leningrad a civil engineer, in Tbilisi a university professor. But it was always he, for his story was the same and his request never varied. Do not forget; tell it all.

I left something of myself in that country, perhaps as a kind of collateral. Perhaps it was my eyes.

II

Fear

What are they afraid of? I don't know. Perhaps, afraid to ask, neither do they. I wasn't afraid to ask, but I never got an answer. Official government guides abruptly denied the existence of any such phenomenon, and the Western diplomatic observers whom I consulted simply said that the whole matter was an enigma to them. As for Jews, they smiled at me sadly. "You're an outsider. You wouldn't understand."

I cannot say, then, whether their fear is justified, but I know for a fact that it exists, and that its depths are greater than I had imagined possible. In city after city it confronted me like an impenetrable wall; on the other side, peering out of its own interstices, lurked only the final unknown.

Time after time, people with whom I had been talking slipped away without saying good-by or left me in the middle of a sentence. A person who had conversed with me one day denied knowing me the next. Once a technician who had arranged