

The Perished

I think my grandmother was called...I think I don't know what she was called. Her surname was Katan. Rifka Katan? Her husband, my grandfather, was called Solomon. No, that was my father's name, and everyone called him only by his nickname, Moni. My grandfather was called Mojsije. Some told me he had been a rabbi, others a butcher. Father rarely spoke of him. He mentioned his brother more frequently, the brother who had left home, changed religion, surname, moved to another town, where someone had recognised him during the war, blackmailed him first and then, after he had run out of money, turned him over to the local Gestapo. The only thing said of grandmother was that she had been small, had cooked four meals a day, made the best *pastel*, the like of which cannot be found anymore...Not much more was said about grandfather. When he was mentioned around the house he would only be called father. The story stuck in my memory of how my father wanted to chop some wood once but hit himself with the axe, so he spent days hiding as to avoid grandfather's quick temper. "He once slapped a neighbour's child, thinking it was his". Upon hearing father had "fallen in with the communists", grandfather shook his head suspiciously: "You won't go to them from a good home...". That was what he said to the cops, and father was not arrested. Father, later, could neither write in his biography that he was from a "working class" nor from a "progressive" family, therefore, his past had suddenly disappeared. "I will tell you about your grandfather", Aunt Zlata told me, "He was a good man...". "He lived up in Logavina", Bego told me. "I would light the fire for him on Saturdays." Father told me grandfather would drink wine on Sabbath, mother that "he was tall", aunt that "he had many children", Mister Ašer, the community treasurer, that my grandfather "was a rabbi, shame on you, never to be found in the Synagogue...". I formed some kind of a picture, although I don't know who of. It could all be a picture of someone else.

I recall my father taking me to the kindergarten. One day we took a different route, up the street. Father stopped, releasing my hand. "We haven't reached the kindergarten yet", I said. He did not hear me. "We haven't...". He

pointed his finger at two walls of yellowish brick: "That's where granddad and grandma lived..." I did not dare ask more about grandfather. In our home, grandfather was that painful emptiness in which the pain fills the emptiness.

I thought, dejectedly, about the inevitability of what had happened, I fantasised about Golem in Auschwitz, fantasised about a different reality, one that is a repeated and improved one, a world which would not allow bad people, such as Hitler and his evil-doers, ever to be born. I still do not feel the morbid curiosity of wanting to know which members of my family had been killed. But why? I gave myself the answer: "Because they were Jews", as if there existed an innate guilt in being Jewish, and somewhat agreed with the older aunt who would shudder each time someone knocked on the door more loudly than was usual, insomuch that Jews were forever being "attacked by beasts". I heard that my grandfather had been killed on the first day of the pogrom, in 1941, with a hammer, by the road. He must have been a rabbi then. Others claimed that he had been taken further, to Croatia, yet others even further, to Poland. That is why I keep on asking around, I stop the passers-by, but they shake their heads, they cannot tell me where the ghetto had been, until an older man, with a big nose, points his finger towards the newer part of Warsaw: "There's only a memorial there now." Surrounding it are new buildings, in them people preoccupied by everyday problems. Who lives in the high-rise next to the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, a memorial more notable for Brandt's moral gesture than its artistic value? I walk around the memorial with a feeling of muted resistance towards the elements of its soc-realism like triumphalism in the middle of the ghetto, which is no more. And then a woman comes along, an American, she asks me whether I was in Auschwitz. "I wasn't", I say, "My grandfather was killed there." I am one of those who had not even been born then. One of those who were supposed never to be born. If I had been born somewhat earlier, it might have happened to me. If my father had not gone into the forests, to Tito's partisans ("We fought the Crouts and the horde", he would say vengefully), I would not have been born. If all Jews had been killed, maybe no one would have heard of them. I see those I have never seen before. And I try to recall that which I never remembered, an event that took place but which I did not witness. The past proves my existence. It may be unknown to me, but never fictitious. My grandfather is a person without a face, a personification of a

negative theology. My grandfather is my destroyed ancestry, a Freudian forefather, an indescribable face I keep on trying to put into words, a person substituted by painful emptiness, a sign whose meaning is unmarked, an existence which has been forced into transcendency, an inhabitant of a razed house from which no one emerges. Vulnerability and consciousness of loss cannot be quelled by the conformation of loss. Transcendency is, here, finally described as the emptiness in which the mute deified being of the lost one has been inscribed. I cannot visualise the picture of my grandfather, or his death. Can we raise life from the ashes, return it to a body, to a being which had walked down the street, worked, slept, loved, hoped...Not until my grandfather comes back from the dead into a world in which camps are no longer possible, will I stop bearing Holocaust as a wound. I know that that hope is futile, that it can hardly belong even to fantasy anymore, but I also know that where there exists a trace, exists a being as well, and I know that the dead can be summoned through remembrance, through Word be returned, through letters exist again, although only as lost beings, as beings of the lost and irretrievable, as the irretrievably lost. As the burnt to the ground.

Translated by Neda Lončarić, from *The Art of the Destroyed*, 2005.

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