

Preface

Pinsk: A Novelist in the *Blottes*

Mark Jay Mirsky

Pinsk was a place that I absorbed with my first spoonfuls of cereal. It was a town I caught sight of in my grandfather's ice blue eyes, as an infant before I began to speak. When I knocked myself unconscious at three and a half and he rushed to the house, I touched it in the affectionate rub of his nose against mine. Even as I learned English he taught me the songs of Pinsk in Yiddish; the place echoed at the edge of his speech and in his proud bearing as the reader of Torah, and shammos in our synagogue. After his death, when I was four and a half, Pinsk lived in the stories my father would tell of his own childhood and tales he had heard as a boy. I still recall the one about my great-grandfather, Moses (or Maishe, as his name was pronounced in the Yiddish of the city). As Maishe was marking timber in the thick forests that surrounded Pinsk, he lost his way. Going round and round, day after day, threatened with cold and starvation, he found wolves dogging his heels. Suddenly he recognized his own axe strokes in the birch bark and found his way home.

I was born in 1939. My father, Wilfred, and his sisters in the aftermath of the Nazi exterminations in Belarus, or "White Russia," were not anxious to undertake a sentimental journey—even in memory—to a Jewish world now extinct. My grandfather, Israel, had come to America in 1910, but his wife and children were not able to leave Pinsk until the end of 1919. My aunts, like my father (who was thirteen when he left), rarely mentioned what they had suffered during World War I. Nor did they allude to the nightmare of their crossing the Atlantic, apart from a few wry remarks, turning it all into a joke. Still, now and then, something would flash in my father's speech.

Going on in my father's footsteps to Harvard College from the Boston Public Latin School, I began to write fiction. The faint timbre of Yiddish in the speech of Boston's Jewish neighborhoods—Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury—through the 1940s tickled my dialogue. I asked my father to repeat his stories of Pinsk. I still have the fading manila sheets on which I typed as quickly as I could as my father began to reminisce, trying to catch Wilfred Mirsky living in his childhood again. Caught up in my curiosity, he even sat down and wrote a few pages about the house of his mother's father, Joseph or "Yossel" Lieberman, in which Wilfred grew up after his father (my grandfather, Israel Mirsky) fled to America in 1910, without a word to Yossel, his father-in-law, in whose house after a business debacle Israel took up residence. It was not clear whether Israel's wife knew that he was leaving. I doubt it. In our interviews, my father broke off as this painful moment surfaced.

A long silence followed those pages, though now and again at family meetings my father and his sisters, the few surviving cousins from the large family in Pinsk, and some in Canada, Israel, and another branch in Argentina would reminisce with him. I would take up a pen and begin trying to write down details on napkins or whatever scraps of paper were on hand.

My father liked to boast about his maternal grandfather, Joseph Lieberman, known, in the family and down the thoroughfare of Lahishinergasse, for his irascible temper as Yossel *Mubzik* (*uh* pronounced like the *u* in "humbug," meaning Yossel the peasant in Russian or Yossel the ox that gores in Hebrew), his nickname a wry pun. My father insisted, "He was the second richest man in Pinsk."

Delving into the Nadav and Shohet histories of Pinsk, I found this to be a tall tale. My great-grandfather, I realized, even though well off was small potatoes. He owned a slew of shops in the marketplace and like many small businessmen in the town dealt in real estate and timber. Yossel did own lots on which the circus and traveling theaters pitched. His comfortable house was opposite the Russian marshal's, and that gave my father, Velvel or Wolf (in America, Wilfred), a first-hand view of World War I when the German armies marched into the city. From behind the front yard fence, or the cellar windows, Velvel at nine or ten years old watched battles between Cossacks on horse-

back and the bicycle-mounted Germans. He suffered the starvation of the following years, dodged shells in the street, and witnessed the inroads of Bolshevik and Polish armies from 1915 to 1919, events catalogued in the second of the Pinsk histories in Azriel Shoheit's volume, *The History of the Jewish Community of Pinsk, 1881–1941 (Toledot Kehillat Pinsk: 1881–1941)*. My father's maternal grandfather, Yossel, however, played but an obscure part next to the major figures of the town, men and women from the Levin and Luria families. These plutocrats of Pinsk, "Pinsker Gevirim," rescued their small city from the slow extinction toward which it was heading. Pinsk was in danger of being marginalized as the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth, by the exchange of Polesie, the south central district of Belarus in which Pinsk sits. Minsk became the administrative capital of Belarus. As the latter territory passed from Poland to Russia, Pinsk, Polesie's natural capital, would be developed as a key terminus in its rivers' traffic of lumber and grain.

I recognized some family names in the 450-odd years of Pinsk's history, but in particular the Shostakofsky family into which my grandfather Israel Mirsky's sister, Tsirrel, married. Still, in the network of related families, Mirskys, Liebermans, Shostakofskys, only one person from the hours of my father's memories that I taped plays any significant part in these two histories. My great-uncle, Menahem Lieberman, Yossel's son, appears in Shoheit's volume. A clerk in one of the Luria factories, Menahem was murdered by Polish troops. His execution with those of thirty-four other Jewish men, many from the educated elite of the city, in 1919 almost stopped the Versailles conference. This massacre also briefly brought Pinsk into the consciousness of an international community.

The story rang out as my father's throat and cheeks flushed red. He remembered a Polish soldier pushing him away from his uncle with the butt of a gun as his uncle was herded from the Jewish Community House to the monastery wall in the marketplace. Lined up with the other leaders of the Pinsk Jewish community, Menahem was shot without benefit of trial. The screams of the women, the cries of his grandparents as they huddled behind the doors of the family house, the sound of wagons trundling the dead to the graveyard—all were still vivid to my father forty, fifty, sixty years later. Menahem Lieberman

had served as a father to Velvel and his sisters for nine years, in the absence of their own father.

As a writer of fiction, an editor of a magazine of fiction, and an English professor, I wonder at this point in my Preface why I devoted so many years to combing, with my coeditor and translators, over these historical monographs.

In these books I found a lost family that was mine, its joys, its sadness, its memories. And beyond these two volumes lies another important part of the history of this Jewish town: the Nazi destruction of Pinsk. It motivated the men and women in Israel, the United States, and across the world in South America, Canada, and Africa who were part of the Pinsk Association to commission these monographs and assure their publication. Certainly these survivors of the last generation to live in Pinsk, to whom this was not merely history but family history, knew why they were interested in the longer story of their streets, the marketplaces, and the personalities and events that had come before them. Why should anyone beyond the descendants of those who left or fled from Pinsk, however, find the small city's history a compelling document?

Ben-Zion Gold, the rabbi at Harvard Hillel, gave me an answer before I thought to ask the question. It is the reason I embarked on this project. Ben remains an elder brother to me, a role he has played since my days at college. Fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, English, he possesses both scholarly and rabbinic learning, while being enthusiastic about the literary culture of America and Europe. As a young Jew in Poland, Ben was also interned in the Nazi death camps. I brought the Pinsk or Yizkor histories to him a few months after learning about them. There were English sketches of the history of Pinsk in the volumes, but they whetted my appetite to know more. My Hebrew was too fragmentary to ascertain whether the dense pages (whose English condensation was obviously a cruel abridgment) were crucial. Did I need to know what was in them to understand the world from which my father and grandfather emigrated? Ben-Zion asked me to leave the histories with him for a few days. When I returned to his door a week later, he met me and said with uncharacteristic sternness, "You have a duty to perform. You must bring these books into English." In a slightly gentler voice, he continued: "They show what was lost in the Holocaust. Not one generation of Jews, but a whole world, four and a half centuries of Jewish

culture, torn out of the heart of Europe.” His hand touched his own chest. I found the importance of these volumes echoed by Zvi Gitelman in a remark about Pinsk: “Because the city included every social, political, and cultural movement, it is almost a paradigmatic case of that culture which was destroyed by the Holocaust.”

The minutiae of leases; court cases; bills of lading; battles for control among Poles, Swedes, and Ukrainian Cossacks; and struggles between rabbis as they unfolded in the pages the translators forwarded gave me a sense of Pinsk’s real and teeming life. Ben was right. I had lost not just one generation but a birthright that went back five hundred years, not just the world of my fathers but of half a millennium of Jewish life.

Just a year ago, at a moment when I was especially frustrated in grappling with the sea of details to be mastered in editing these monographs, I asked my wife, “Why am I doing this?” The answer she gave is also part of the riddle: “For your father.”

When it became obvious, after his heart attack, that my father was extremely frail, I tried earnestly to tape his memoirs and those of surviving family members from Pinsk. The Pinsk histories, as I read the translations in English, set these fragmentary notes in context.

All great drama, one of my fellow novelists once remarked to me, “is about the family.” Readers will find here not just my forebears or those descended from the inhabitants of Pinsk (among whom are Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman and the poet Alan Ginsberg) but their own. Pinsk was not only a Jewish center. It was a town where Poles, Belarussians, Russians, and Ukrainians lived. It was a true European community in its diversity of languages. The Jews, who came to represent a majority of its citizens, often spoke some or all of these tongues in addition to Yiddish, Hebrew, and German. Seen from the perspective of a future world in which a wealth of traditions may be the boast of any urban center, the extinction of Jewish Pinsk and places like it by the Nazis was a singular disaster. The morning after the massacre of thirty-five Jews, teachers, young activists in the political parties, some of whom had gathered to distribute Passover supplies to the needy, in 1919 (among whom was my great-uncle, Menahem), a Polish priest in the city and its Polish mayor protested. The latter was “deposed and placed in a detention camp” for defending Jews. It was a testimony to a social compact that was possible among what at times seemed irrec-

oncilable worlds, even as it is an indictment of the Polish military that captured the city.

At the root of all civilized existence is the story of a family, however diverse, trying to create a way of life that in persisting can share a set of values beyond each individual's particular gain. I understand this as the quiet message of the Biblical book of Genesis. The Pinsk volumes are chronicle and more: the tale of a far-flung family that, reaching back into antiquity, assembled itself into a coherent community over the span of almost five hundred years at the crossroads of a city deep in the swamps of Eastern Europe. Pinsk was not a community isolated by distance from the larger centers of trade and intellectual life but rather linked to their intellectual and economic trends. As a professor of English at the City College of New York, I know that the family histories of my students are always where the "shock of recognition" begins—the understanding of how important writing is. The memory of Pinsk as a Jewish place and its preservation in history has a Biblical echo for me, like the writing down of the texts that were carried as oral documents in the wake of historical catastrophe.

As a young man, I often wondered why my father brought up Pinsk with some pride as his birthplace. For those who have heard of the town, it is largely the terminus for a series of shaggy dog stories, about the train from Pinsk to Minsk, known as much for its rhyme as its riddle. My father coming to America as a child mastered English in a single year. He entered Boston Public Latin, the oldest public school in the United States, and won its prestigious classical prize when (as he used to scold his less talented son) "I had an English dictionary in my back pocket." Going on to Harvard College and the Harvard Law School, elected to the Massachusetts state legislature, as a fluent Hebrew speaker, and author of a bill that expressed the Commonwealth's support for the fledgling state of Israel, he was delegated to greet its first prime minister, David Ben Gurion. As chairman of the state House of Representatives' Committee of Education, in the early 1950s, he helped build the University of Massachusetts into a prestigious school and wrote some of the most important legislation of the state's Democratic Party. Why would his ironic boast be that he was a "Pinsker," a place whose economic situation was so desperate at the moment of my grandfather's departure (as I learned from the histories) that 10 percent of its population every year was fleeing abroad?

In the wake of my father's heart attack—the melancholy that descended on my father, aware of the sword hanging over his head—his memories of Pinsk became a lifeline between us. More and more of the truth—which my father had been careful to avoid telling me: the terror of war and starvation in Pinsk, the nightmare transit to the United States and Boston in 1919—began to filter into my consciousness. I sat down with a tape recorder and with the help of a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities recorded what he remembered. When Ben-Zion Gold made the importance of the Pinsk histories clear, I applied again to the National Endowment for the Humanities for translation funds. An assistant there suggested that I ask for a matching grant. For more than half a year I collected small contributions. One was from the Pinsk Burial Society, which, I discovered, though founded at the turn of the century still existed; another was from a friend, the novelist and theologian Arthur Cohen. A former graduate student, who the previous year volunteered to type up transcripts of tapes I had made of my father's sisters about their childhood in Pinsk, sent me a news clipping. It mentioned a philanthropist in Florida who had just given a large contribution to a Catholic cause. The article mentioned that he came from Pinsk. On the odd chance that he might be interested, I sent him a letter describing the project.

Three days later I got a call.

"Is this Mark Mirsky?"

"Yes?"

"Are you the son of Velvel Mirsky?"

"Yes," I answered, startled at the sound of my father's name in Yiddish.

"Did he go to Zev Boshes's school?"

After attending David Levin's class (one of those murdered with my great-uncle, Menahem), my father had indeed studied with a teacher called Boshes.

"Yes."

"I remember your father. How much do you need?"

I told him the matching sum that we were required to raise, and detailed the limited amount we had raised so far. "Why chase nickels?" Shepherd Broad replied. "I'll send you a check for the rest."

Broad was a source for valuable information about the massacre of the

thirty-five. Polish soldiers had kicked him away from an older friend who was marched to the wall and shot. Broad witnessed the arrival in Pinsk of Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, whom President Woodrow Wilson dispatched to investigate the massacres in the city. To hear Morgenthau's speech attended by the elders of the city, the boy climbed onto the roof of the synagogue and listened through the skylight. He was outraged by the ambassador's remarks. Broad cried out again as he recounted it to me: "We were all very much shaken by the fact that he *blamed* the Jewish community for its problems and troubles, inclusive of the massacre. We had no business *holding* gatherings. . . ." It was a very different portrait from the one Morgenthau painted of himself as the soul of compassion in his trip to the starving city. (His nephew, Arthur Goodhart, in *Poland and the Minority Races*, gives a more realistic picture of Morgenthau's attitude toward the troubles of Pinsk and the Jews in Poland.)

Broad entertained me with insights into the men who had provided funds for publication of Yizkor histories in Hebrew. In my contacts with the Pinskens in Israel, I had already begun to grasp the reason for my father's ironic boasting. I called on the Pinsker Association in my second trip to that country. They insisted that I meet the "old man," Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch, in Haifa. I can still recall his beaming face as he received me in his study, and we talked about this world of forgotten ancestors.

One of the Pinsk Association members, Nachman Tamir Mirski, immediately sought me out. Were we related? Although he remembered a branch of my family in Pinsk vividly, we could never work out a genealogical link. No matter; he became my uncle and comrade. Despite a heart condition, he traveled with me through Israel, to give me a sense of Pinsk. I met the heads of the association: Barzilai; former cabinet ministers such as Moishe Kol; and the former head of the *Histadrut*, the all-powerful trade union association, Yeruham Meshel. They sat with me and recalled the nightmares of 1918 and 1919, moments indelibly stamped in the memories of my father and his sisters. To their own children, Pinsk was often a subject best forgotten. Though like Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president (born in Motele or Motol, a small town near Pinsk), these men were the founders of a state, the memory of their childhood city was important. I was the scribe of a holy place. As a Jewish boy from Dorchester, Mattapan, Boston's "ghetto," at Harvard College I had felt the amused condescension of my classmates, the

Yankee aristocracy. In Israel as a “Pinsker,” I was from a town that was the Zionists’ Mayflower. Nachman was a fount of songs and stories and loved to retell Chaim Weizmann’s joke: “Why does a ‘Pinsker’ have a crooked little finger? Because every time he starts a speech, he puts his forefinger over the crook of his little finger, and says, *‘Erster, ich bin a Pinsker’*” (First of all, I am a Pinsker). Tales of Weizmann’s pride in his native city poured out of Nachman: How the first president of Israel embraced every immigrant from Pinsk, eager for news, taking a personal interest in the fate of the new arrival. Golda Meir too used to laugh, according to Nachman, looking around her cabinet and seeing so many Pinskers and children of Pinskers.

One of my adventures was to seek an interview with the scholar Saul Lieberman, whose work is considered seminal by both the religious and nonreligious to contemporary study of the Talmud. During supper at Lucjan Dobroszycki’s with Lieberman’s colleague at the Jewish Theological Seminary, David Weiss Ha-Livni, and his wife, I asked if Lieberman, notoriously short-tempered and intolerant of the ill-prepared, would talk to me about Pinsk and its satellite village Motele, his birthplace.

“Motele,” laughed Mrs. Weiss. “Talk of Motele? He talks of nothing but Motele.” When I finally tracked Lieberman down in New York, he agreed to meet me, but in Jerusalem. There, while dismissing my inept questions about rabbinic sages, he spoke for hours in loving detail about Motele—the awe that he felt before the sages in its small synagogue when he returned there after World War I, and his pride in being related to the great rabbinical figures in Pinsk, who included Rabbi Elazar Moses Horowitz.

Pinsk had a vivid presence in Israel. Shrugging off severe medical problems, Simha Ziv, whom Tamir insisted I must meet, rode several buses to take me to a kibbutz founded in memory of the 1919 massacre. A few weeks before I stood on the brow of a hill by the cemetery, in northern Israel at Simha’s kibbutz, Ayyelet ha-Shahar, as he laconically pointed out where a handful of men swapped six or seven rifles among themselves and a few hand grenades but stopped two thousand Syrian troops and their tanks in the 1948 War. Nachman Tamir once told me with a twinkle in his eye, “David Ben Gurion said, ‘Two more Simha Zivs, and we could have gone to the Euphrates.’”

In the enthusiasm these men showed for my questions, the way they bowed before one of their old teachers now in his nineties who inspired them to come to Israel, I discovered a world I had misunderstood. As a boy I saw only its chauvinism, its limitations; but now the bitter taste of Hebrew school was wiped away, the aftermath of its bored, uninspired teachers breathing irritation. I felt the spirit of the dream that stirred these pioneers in the Pinsker *blottes*, the damp swamps. My grandfather, Israel Mirsky, died when I was four and a half, but his tall and imposing presence is still as vivid to me as it was when he came to our house with his pockets full of candy, or when he took me up to a seat among the velvet-clad Torah scrolls on the bema at the Fowler Street synagogue. Searching for clues to my grandfather's education in Pinsk after my father's death, an aunt suggested that I ask Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the outstanding rabbinic figures of the last century. "He was really quite close to Rabbi Soloveitchik," my aunt remarked. Emboldened by this, I asked the Rav (or "Teacher," as he was affectionately known) for an interview. Although he was crippled by Parkinson's disease and subject to a demanding schedule, on hearing that I was Israel Mirsky's grandson he spent an hour recalling his friend to me:

Your grandfather was the shammos at the Fowler Street shul. But he was the only shammos I ever knew who was not a shammos but a rav. . . . He was a good-humored man, always smiling—it would give you a good feeling to meet him. He was full of stories of Pinsk and Karlin, those two twin cities, of Rabbi Dohvid Karliner and Rabbi Maishe Elazar Horowitz. He had a real background in learning. He didn't talk much about himself. Always in a wonderful mood. Never let people know if he was in distress. He was a revolutionary.

Here Rav Soloveitchik paused, and beamed: "He was a revolutionary—a shining face."

I saw that face again and again, among the Pinskers. Mordechai Nadav, the author of this first volume of the Pinsk histories, is happily still active as this book goes to press. Over a period of almost twenty-five years since I first met him, he became both a friend and a mentor. He explained several of the mysteries of my family's wanderings, in particular why the Mirskys, who were originally from Slonim to the north, would settle in Pinsk during the mid-nineteenth century (many more opportunities!). I visited Azriel Shohet in his home several times. He

urged me to send him my notes about the additional material I gathered from family members and others who were witness to the massacre of the thirty-five in 1919 so that he could include them in a revision of his history. Sadly, he passed away before I completed my work. I hope, however, in an introduction to the book *Shohet* authored on the history of Pinsk from 1881 to 1941, to speak further as his disciple on this subject.

In 1993, I found myself, as the editor of the literary magazine *Fiction*, invited to a conference in Berlin. The distance on the map by rail between Berlin and Pinsk seemed minimal, a day's trip if measured by the time it would take to travel west from Germany. With a leap of faith (though the travel agent in Berlin could only sell me a ticket as far as Brest-Litovsk), I took a train. My adventures in reaching my father's city, the unexpected hospitality I found there (due in part to Zvi Gitelman, who had carried news of my project to Rita Margolin, a director at the museum there), are detailed in an abridged account I published in the magazine *Another Chicago*. The family house on Lahishinergasse no longer existed, and Sonya's shul, the house of prayer where my great-grandfather, Maishe Mirsky, served as cantor, rabbi, and shammos had also disappeared. There were few remnants of the Jewish Pinsk my father recalled. The Great Synagogue was gone, although my guide, Rita Margolin, pointed out the place where it had stood. The monastery wall, where my father's cousin Reuben, the son of the murdered Menahem Lieberman, told me he had seen his father's blood as he walked to school in the late 1920s, had also been razed. The Jewish cemetery where I might have searched for family gravestones was erased, its stones used as building materials by the Soviets after World War II.

Pinsk as a town, however, was caught in a time trap. Its industry was negligible, its waterfront deserted. It had lapsed into a literal backwater—and so retained in its back streets many houses and buildings from before World War I. Churches had been lovingly reconstructed to resemble the structures of that era, though the synagogue was gone, and the monastery wall where my uncle was shot no longer existed. It was closer than I could have hoped to the place my father recalled, though in fact it was much diminished. As Moshe Rosman remarks, "It was more of a backwater than when your father lived there." Taking a bus from Brest-Litovsk to Pinsk, I passed through a green, wet world like a northern Everglades, the blottes or swamps that Weizmann, my

father, and others remembered. Rita would arrange for me to go deep into the blottes, where storks still nestled on roofs of thatch and clothes hung on crucifixes at the crossroads like tribal fetishes. Seeing a low clay box like a radiator snake out of the kitchen through doors from room to room in our hosts' cottage, I understood my father's stories of sleeping on top of a warm oven in his bedroom. On many small streets in Pinsk, cords of wood, the principal means of heating in the bitterly cold winter, were stacked up to the roofs of hay thatch. Fruit trees and vegetable gardens crowded the front yards of most houses, a constituent of urban subsistence farming. Even the narrow strip between the sidewalk and the road was cultivated. As we walked about, Rita talked about Chernobyl and the radiation that rained down on her city. There were signs of it in the trees—and in the illness that was measurable, particularly in children. In the house deep in the blottes where I was received with overwhelming generosity, cheese, vodka, bread, yogurts, fish, pressed upon me, I asked if the milk was safe. "You will drink it this one time," Rita remarked. "We have to drink it all year 'round."

To my surprise, some Jews had continued in Pinsk and the outlying villages. I was introduced to several, some of them quite old. My Yiddish was too paltry, and Rita's English too limited, for me to learn much. The Stoliner Rebbe, whose Hasidic dynasty once flourished in Pinsk, had sent a young rabbi to search out surviving Jews and organize a new congregation. He traveled back and forth from Pinsk to Brooklyn, but he boasted that he had assembled more people for the High Holiday services in Pinsk than Minsk could muster. Although I spent less than two days in the city, I felt its melancholy charm. Staring across the Pina from the Orthodox monastery, one saw the lazy river landscape of a lost eighteenth-century world, broad wet meadow rolling on and on. As horsedrawn wagons piled two stories high with hay trundled over its bridge, the sense of a sleeping town, which one or two enterprising souls could awaken, touched me. I sensed the possibilities that must have drawn Jewish entrepreneurs in past centuries. In the eager, open faces of my Belarussian hosts, the good-natured young women at the museum, the couple farming in the blottes, there seemed to be an invitation to return and bring my energies to the town. "Come back," they said, over and over, with a sincerity that was moving.

Pinsk was a small but unique place. I like to think of it as a Jewish

Florence because its influence was far out of proportion to its size. One of the founders of Yiddish literature, Shomer, had his home there. The rabbis of the city, particularly in the late nineteenth century, were among those who helped create the ideology that we call Modern Orthodoxy. They were seeking to reinterpret traditional law so as to fit religious men and women to an active intellectual life in the secular culture that was becoming dominant. The history of Pinsk is also a commentary on Jewish life, and the life of most of us in the United States who are immigrants from other worlds. The elders of the Pinsk Society in Israel urged me to collect further documents, to create a whole shelf to augment the three massive volumes that contain the Nadav and Shohet histories, Rabinowitsch's pages on Lithuanian Hasidism, and a host of short biographical pieces on some of the principal figures in Pinsk, as well as Nahum Boneh's account of the extinction of the Jewish populations at the hands of the Nazis. A number of valuable documents have come to my attention in the past few years, including part of a manuscript by Paul Lurie (his family's spelling of Luria), who emigrated to Western Canada with his family from England after being imprisoned in Vienna by the Nazis in 1938, describing his meeting with Prince Radziwill in the twilight before that extinction. The final chapter on Pinsk as a Jewish place is yet to be written.

As a novelist, and in the tradition of the Talmud—that a little pepper improves the reputation of a sage—I ask myself, What is missing from these volumes? We have little sense of the sexual life of Pinsk's inhabitants, Jewish or Gentile. Did men and women step outside the bounds of marriage? Only here and there do we glimpse the romantic world of Jews and Gentiles in the city. I know from our family history that my great-grandfather, Yossel, chose his bride, Yehudiss, when he was about thirteen years old, and she twelve. Their grandchildren loved to repeat the tales of their courtship and marriage: how her first glance at him was peeking through a keyhole where she saw him smoking, and how he sent back a matrimonial contract to a girl he was previously betrothed to after he saw Yehudiss. The two ran into the street after the marriage ceremony to play with their toys. Even in the meticulous accounts of the Luria and Levin clans, as a storyteller I wish for more anecdote. At the moments of crisis, the expulsion of an unpopular rabbi from the city, mass starvation during World War I, and the horror of

the 1919 massacre, the voices of Pinsk men and women ring out. Nadav documents the cruelty of the Tsar's recruiting policy in Pinsk, which seized on the poor and helpless and took them off for endless military service—and here the chronicle takes fire. According to the text in *Toyzent Yor Pinsk*, the Yiddish history assembled by the Workman's Circle, in which my great-great-grandmother Sulya's picture appears, as a young woman she hid Jewish orphans from the Tsar's recruiters in her shop. I wish there were more moments like those in which Shohet describes the attempt to drive out cholera by paying the dowry of a bride who would agree to hold her wedding in a graveyard. Both historians mention the two rabbis, Maishe (Elazar Moses) Horowitz of Pinsk and Rabbi David Friedman of Karlin, whose scholarship, piety, and enthusiasm for the early Zionist movements enhanced the reputation of the city. My grandfather, Israel, was witness (according to Rabbi Soloveitchik) to a moment in the dispute between these two luminaries. Rabbi Friedman had questioned the kashruth, or legal correctness of the sukkah, the booth of boards and branches that Rabbi Horowitz erected for the harvest festival. As a child sitting with his father and others in the sukkah of Rabbi Friedman, Israel Mirsky saw the elderly Rabbi Horowitz burst in late at night, waving a volume, his finger on the line of proof, exclaiming, "See, I told you. It's kosher."

The Pinsk histories were the framework, however, in which to understand such anecdotes. My father's stories of starving as a child, told when I complained about having to wait for a meal, were no longer moral tales. They became part of my own experience of Pinsk. Except for my desire to have more, I might have ignored the musty legal binders left in our garage when my father passed away. There in a packet of my grandfather's papers were letters sent from Pinsk on my great-grandfather's death. At a conference on Jewish life, I heard a historian speak about the ancient custom of circling in religious processions. According to a letter written in 1927, my great-grandfather, Maishe, a religious judge or *dayyan* with a reputation for piety, had his coffin carried in *hakoffis*, or circles, through the city, before he was buried. The facts in these two histories often contradict the assertions of broader surveys that speak about Europe's economies and cultures in generalizations. For that reason, both Rosman and myself were not only respectful of the work of Mordechai Nadav and Azriel Shohet; we felt, as Rosman has remarked,

that the sanctity of them was in the details. At times, the guiding inspiration or “agenda” of the Nadav volume, like that of the Yizkor books, may seem obvious, as in this summation: “The study societies [in Pinsk] compounded the socio-cultural influence of residents who succeeded in merging traditional religious education with the moderate Hebrew Haskalah. They created a population that was conscious of a profound connection to the nation and its culture.” Yet the Nadav and Shohet histories render exactly that sense of paradox lived with relish in this small city’s streets. It was a city with a Jewish majority, but also a city that Jews could feel patriotic about. That, in the long, often gloomy history of the Jews in Eastern Europe, is a rare flicker of light. When women burst into the men’s section on Simhas Torah, bringing feminism into the orthodox synagogue, and when the most revered rabbinical scholar of the city sends his grandson to study secular subjects, we are in the presence of moments that justify the historian’s enthusiasm for what was happening in Pinsk during the late nineteenth century.

What was so unique about Pinsk?

At my father’s funeral, I quoted from an article in the Yizkor books that was translated in the same volume in which the Nadav history appears, but that was originally published in the Pinsker *Shtime* in 1930:

One of the hasidic rabbis in Poland had been on a visit to Pinsk. On his return he told his Hasidim that he had found venerable learned men in Pinsk, religious men—may their number increase—but also licentious free-thinkers—may they be damned. “What is so surprising about that,” his Hasidism wanted to know—“after all, one finds such men in every town.”

“What is so astonishing about it, is the fact that in Pinsk these are not two different kinds of Jews. The same Jew is both learned and an atheist, religious man and a free thinker, all in one.”

Or as Aharon Appelfeld, the Israeli novelist, once put it to me, describing the quintessential *Litvak* (Pinsk is in the far south of “Liteh,” Jewish Lithuania, and the Jewish inhabitants of Pinsk have always referred to themselves as Litvaks): “For a *Litvak*, a paradox is everything. A *Litvak* lives for a paradox.”

In his introduction, Moshe Rosman has given me more credit than I perhaps deserve. He began as the translator of these books, but from the beginning he was much more. Working with Moshe has been a

privilege; I have often been his student. I do not think either he or I realized at the outset just how many questions the metamorphosis of these histories into another language would involve. Moshe's co-translator, Faigie Tropper, did endless backbreaking work on the text. This was a labor of love of many people. Among others without whom we could never have reached this point, I have to mention Steve Zipperstein, who oversaw the long and difficult gestation of the final version; my sister, Deanna Mirsky, who spent many days with me carefully going over the translation of the Shohet; and the scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were its readers as I circulated the proposal for the translation. At an early stage of this project, Omeljan Pritsak, director of the Ukrainian Research Center, and Adam B. Ulam of the Harvard University Russian Research Center; David Stern, Shaul Stampfer, Zvi Gitelman; the writers Arthur Cohen and Cynthia Ozick; Beverly Gribetz Greenstein; Edward Kunofsky, of the Pinsk Burial Society; and Mark Pinson and Lucjan Dobroszycki all were critical to its success. Their encouragement and insistence on the importance of the books, despite their daunting bulk, kept me at the task.

For a time, while my father was alive, I had his sympathetic encouragement. As the details of the years of starvation in Pinsk under German occupation during World War I were translated into English and became part of my consciousness, I understood how he understated the swollen belly he carried during that frightening time. I was never able to hug him hard enough.