Bernard Wasserstein

A SMALL TOWN IN UKRAINE

The place we came from, the place we went back to

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A Small Town in Ukraine

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BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

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For Charlotte and Tomer

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Preface

Krakowiec (*Krah-KOV-yets*) – the place we came from, the place we went back to. I first heard of it from my mother in the mid-1950s when I was about nine years old. She told me Krakowiec was the town in Poland from which my father's family hailed.

Actually, the name rang a curious bell in my childhood memory. Two or three years earlier, a visitor from the past had come to our home. His name was Majus. No doubt he had a forename but my father, if he mentioned him at all, always referred to him *tout court* by his surname, without 'Mr' or any other handle. I had the impression he did not welcome his arrival.

Majus (his forename, I later learned, was Pinkas, or more familiarly Pincze) was one of the few Jews from Krakowiec who had survived the Second World War. He talked with my father about his experiences. Then and later, I asked what he had said but for a long time my father would not reply. Perhaps he wanted to shield a child from dark shadows. Or maybe the reason was that he didn't altogether approve of Majus (who was later found guilty of operating an illegal still for the production of moonshine in the basement of his house in London). At any event, I discovered nothing of what our visitor related. I had to make do with the puppet glove monkey that he gave me, a creature whose inside felt warm and soft but whose exterior glared at me with a menacing grimace.

My mother had never been to Krakowiec and knew very little of the place. What with her relative ignorance and my father's stern reticence, I grew up knowing almost nothing about it. Yet throughout my youth I dreamt of this almost unmentionable, and therefore all the more mysterious, almost mythic, ancestral hearth.

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Where exactly was Krakowiec? It was so small that it did not rate an appearance in our home atlas. Even when, years later, I consulted the largest-scale maps available, the answer was unclear, since it appeared to be smack on the border between Poland and the Soviet Union.

Suddenly, in 1989, the Iron Curtain was raised. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later, Krakowiec emerged, as from a cloud, just inside the newly independent republic of Ukraine. Not long afterwards, in the company of my brother, I visited the town for the first time. It was an eerie, eye-opening experience, described later in this book, that insinuated into my mind a compulsive ambition: I would compensate for a lifetime of unrelieved curiosity about our origins by finding out everything that could be ascertained about Krakowiec and its connections with my family.

Pardonable genealogical curiosity burgeoned into an obsession. I spent the next three decades digging ever deeper into what turned out to be an immense historical quarry. I visited archives and libraries on several continents, consulted experts and struggled to acquire new languages. I had spent my life as a professional historian but now I penetrated further into the past than I had ever previously ventured. In the course of my research I built up vast data banks of official records, newspaper dispatches, census materials, registers of births, marriages and deaths, electoral results, medical reports, maps and photographs, as well as meteorological, geological, ecological, ornithological, architectural, judicial, military, ecclesiastical and every other category of information I could find. Soon I had assembled a veritable encyclopaedia of statistics and documentation, illuminating every aspect of a place that had once seemed unknowable. But all that was just the beginning.

Like the inhuman pedant Edward Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, with his project for the 'key to all mythologies', I conceived a crazily impossible aspiration: I would assemble a biographical dictionary of every single person in recorded history who had ever lived in Krakowiec. This would be no telephone directory but the life story of each inhabitant, a kind of Namierite super-prosopography. Sir Lewis Namier was the Polish-born English historian whose monumental *History of Parliament*, continued after his death, contains lives of

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MPs (21,420 *so far*) and surveys of their constituencies (2,831 *so far*). More than sixty years after his death, the publication has reached only the year 1832. Namier's name will reappear in the story I have to tell.

Of course, my enterprise, like Casaubon's and Namier's, could never be completed. Yet driven by some inner need, I pursued it until it now encompasses entries for over seventeen thousand persons. At its peak, Krakowiec had a population of around two thousand. What I accumulated was thus an appreciable proportion of the total number of residents over the past six centuries. This Who's Who of Krakowiec includes Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, an Armenian (though I don't know his name), a French landscape designer and an infant girl born out of wedlock, the daughter of a Hungarian soldier garrisoned in the town. Some of my entries are merely half-faded names carved on tombstones in Latin, Cyrillic or Hebrew letters. Others are life histories that can be reconstructed in minute detail. Among them are serfs, aristocrats, craftsmen, merchants, rabbis, Christian clerics of the Roman and Greek Catholic rites, an eighteenth-century music-master, a nineteenth-century lady of leisure and a twentieth-century mass murderer revered today as a national hero. Most were humble folk but there were also a few prominent persons whose names and deeds reverberate down to our time. All these ghost-like figures, by dint of a gradual accretion of evidence, slowly acquired something close to flesh and blood, at any rate in my mind, so that I felt I had come to know and form indissoluble bonds with many of the people of the town.

No doubt to the relief of my readers, I have consigned the greater part of this heap of data to the dark side of my electronic retrieval system. In what follows there remains only alluvial sediment, historical gold dust relevant to my narrative. Out of the thousands of individuals I have come to know, sometimes as if they were intimates, just a handful are briefly recalled to life here as actors or witnesses.

In this autobiography of the period before I was born, I tell the story of Krakowiec, more particularly that of the Jews of this typical east European shtetl (small town), and most of all that of my family and our relationship with the place. By peering through this keyhole, I want to observe and understand how some of the great forces that determined the history of our time could affect ordinary people.

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A central character in this narrative bears my name, though he is not me. I never met my grandfather Bernhard (known as Berl) Wasserstein, so this book is in part an account of my search for him and for those fragments of him that I find in myself.

In the course of my scholarly training, I was taught to eschew the first person in writing, to strain for impersonal objectivity and to address the past, *sine ira et studio*, as from an Olympian height. But such constraints collapsed as I investigated the history of my own family and explored its twists and turns. Above all, I wanted to understand how they – we – I – reacted to those events, always in our own way.

My goal has been to balance a filiopietistic reverence for my forebears with the historian's duty to respect the rules of evidence. Yet in spite of all my assiduous data-gathering, there was one area – the most important – that I could barely penetrate: my grandfather's head. That is because he left little in the way of diaries, letters and so on – what the Dutch-Jewish historian of the Shoah Jacques Presser called 'ego-documents'. The English writer Craig Brown has expressed the difficulty well: 'The real life of anyone takes place largely in the mind, yet it is only the secondary, external stuff – people met, places visited, opinions expressed, and so forth – that is accessible to the biographer. Unless they are spoken or written down, an individual's thoughts evaporate into nothing. The subject's head is, you might say, a closed book.'[1]

Until recently I never had much time for the school of historians who simulate the ability to enter other people's inner life, as in 'What must have been the thoughts of Napoleon and Kutuzov as they contemplated their forces at Borodino . . .?' Yes, I admit Leo Tolstoy essayed exactly that in *War and Peace*, with triumphant results both for fiction and perhaps for an understanding of history. I have hardly dared to follow in his footsteps. There are no facts or quotations here that cannot be substantiated from the sources given at the back of the book. I have nevertheless felt driven, at certain points, to speculate about the interior workings of the mind of my grandfather and others. Where I have taken that imaginative leap, I have done my best to make it clear that I am doing so. Often this was on the basis of glimmers of human insight derived from interviews with elderly survivors of the events I describe. One may stand for many: my father, in several

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recorded conversations near the end of his life, finally shared with me early memories of his youth and of Krakowiec. These have been my most vital and inspiring sources for this book.

My purpose has not been to extract lessons from this slice of the past. Each of my readers may choose whether and how to do that. I want rather to explore Krakowiec, 'a little place, you won't have heard of it', as my father used to say, and its people, with my family at its – and my – heart.

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A Note on Place Names

One of the bugbears of writing about the history of eastern Europe is that many places have had more than one name. For example, the city known today by its Ukrainian name of Lviv was called Lwów by the Poles who ruled it before 1772 and again in the interwar period. The Austrians who governed it from 1772 to 1918 called it Lemberg, as did its German occupiers between 1941 and 1944. In official documents during much of its history, the name appears in its Latin form, Leopolis. Similarly, Krakowiec to Poles was Krakovets to Ukrainians and Krakowitz to Jews. To simplify matters, I have generally used the Polish forms for the period up to the end of the Second World War. For the more recent period, however, it seems more appropriate to employ the Ukrainian names in common usage for places now within the borders of Ukraine. Of course, all rules have exceptions: in cases where there are well-established English names, such as Warsaw or Cracow, I have preferred those over their Polish equivalents.

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1. East Central Europe

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1
The arrest

Berl Wasserstein was arrested one morning, though he had done nothing wrong. A respectable, middle-aged, middle-class businessman, he had always kept on the right side of the law. His ensuing ordeal was no less Kafkaesque than that of the protagonist of *The Trial*; but whereas Joseph K.'s was nightmarish fantasy, Berl's was implacable reality.

In the early hours of Friday 28 October 1938, policemen from the Berlin constabulary arrived at an apartment at 72 Neue Friedrichstrasse, awakened the sleeping occupants with loud knocking and asked for Bernhard (Berl) Wasserstein. They inspected his identity papers and handed him a letter from the Police President of Berlin informing him that he must leave the territory of the German Reich within twenty-four hours. Failure to comply would result in his forcible deportation. His son Abraham (known as Addi), a seventeen-year-old schoolboy, was handed a similar letter and told that he would have to go as well.[1] The two were given a few minutes to pack. They were allowed to take with them one small suitcase each, some food, and no more than ten marks in cash (worth about four US dollars at the time).

About eighteen thousand people, all Jews, were arrested all over Germany in the course of that night. None was accused of any crime. They were all told they must leave the country forthwith. Berl had been thinking of emigrating – but not like this.

Since the Nazi takeover of power in 1933, Jews in Germany had learned from experience that there was little to be gained by refusing to do as they were told by the authorities. Berl in any case was not the sort of person to argue with the police. He had spent his whole adult life building up a small manufacturing business on the basis of

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scrupulous honesty and avoidance of anything that might smack of sharp practice. In spite of ever-worsening Nazi lawlessness, he believed in the *Rechtsstaat* (the rule of law). He was a self-controlled man who knew how to keep his dignity, especially in front of his family. So he and Addi packed their bags and went along quietly.

Berl's wife, Czarna, and his daughter, Charlotte (Lotte), aged thirteen, looked on aghast. Czarna wept as her husband and son were escorted away, first to the local police station, then to the central police headquarters of Berlin. There was no violence, and the policemen behaved with exemplary formality. Although Adolf Hitler had held power for more than five years, the Berlin police, like much of the German capital's population, was not yet completely Nazified. So Berl and Addi, while bewildered and disoriented, were not in fear for their lives – yet.

There was a twisted logic to these events.

Berl's birthplace, Krakowiec, lay within the borders of the Austrian empire until 1918. Upon the fall of the Habsburg monarchy at the end of the First World War, and following a period of upheaval in the region that lasted until 1921, the town found itself in the reborn Republic of Poland. Former residents of the area consequently ceased being Austrians.[2] Berl, by then living in Germany, as well as his children born there, were henceforth Polish citizens.

The mass deportation order of 1938 was not the first manifestation in Germany of hostility to *Ostjuden* (Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe). They had been targets of xenophobic animosity for several decades. In 1885–86 ten thousand Jews had been expelled to Russian Poland on the orders of Otto von Bismarck in his capacity as Minister-President of the Prussian government. Although another twenty thousand gentiles had been deported at the same time, a significant motive behind the order was anti-Jewish and the measure was seen as the 'first tangible success' of the anti-Semitic movement.[3]

The aversion to *Ostjuden* was not limited to anti-Semites. German-born Jews, most of whom were themselves only one or two generations distant from newcomers from the east, feared that a further influx would endanger their own hard-won emancipation. They tended to look down on the immigrants as primitive, dirty and something of an

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embarrassment. Their presence complicated German Jews' efforts to present themselves as just another 'German tribe like the Saxons, Bavarians, or Wends' – as the philosopher and statesman Walther Rathenau termed them.[4] And *Ostjuden* themselves often laboured under something of an inferiority complex – exemplified, for example, by an article in Yiddish protesting, 'We have no reason to feel ashamed.'[5]

The Weimar Republic, established after the German Revolution of November 1918, was founded with a model democratic constitution and a veneer of liberal values. Yet from the outset nationalists were persuaded that Jews and leftists had 'stabbed Germany in the back', bringing about the downfall of the German empire and the country's defeat in the First World War. These extreme right-wingers sought vengeance through anti-Semitic agitation. *Ostjuden*, in particular, were denounced as carriers of bacilli, criminality and Bolshevism.

In the early post-war years many immigrants were rounded up in Jewish districts of Berlin and threatened with expulsion to their places of origin. Polish border officials often refused to admit them. As a result, several thousand '*fremdstämmige Ausländer*' (foreigners of alien stock), including women and children, were interned in former prisoner of war camps in various parts of Germany. There were complaints of poor hygienic conditions and ill-treatment of internees. Mathilde Wurm, a Jewish member of the Reichstag representing the USPD (the far-left Social Democrat party), denounced what she and others called 'concentration camps'.[6] They were eventually closed, partly on the ground of cost. Some of the inmates were deported, others allowed to remain in the country. But the position of *Ostjuden* in Germany remained fragile. Jewish applicants for naturalization, even under the Weimar regime, confronted almost insuperable obstacles and most *Ostjuden* remained Polish citizens.

Although by 1938 Berl Wasserstein had been living in Germany for nearly two decades, he had never attempted to take out German citizenship. As things turned out, it would have made little difference had he done so. From August 1933 the Nazi regime prohibited naturalization of *Ostjuden* altogether. Many of those who had previously been granted German citizenship were now denaturalized. Actually, Berl's legal position might have been even worse if he had been naturalized, since, upon revocation of German citizenship, he would have become

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stateless, as happened to many German Jews, whereas he still held a Polish passport.

Anti-Jewish oppression in the Third Reich quickened after the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Germany in March 1938. Hitler was accorded a hero's welcome when he arrived in Vienna to inaugurate the union of his native land with Germany. Cardinal Theodor Innitzer, later a critic of Nazism, ordered church bells to be rung in his honour. German anti-Semitic laws were extended to the 182,000 Jews of Austria, who became victims of vicious persecution. In the Austrian capital they were subjected to public humiliation. The elderly chief rabbi was among those ordered to clean the city's pavements with a toothbrush in front of jeering crowds. Jewish-owned businesses were seized. Jewish children were ejected from public schools. The concentration camp at Dachau, near Munich, saw an influx of new inmates. In consequence of all this, the many thousands of Jewish residents of Austria who held Polish nationality desperately sought refuge elsewhere.

A mass migration of Polish Jews from Austria to Poland suddenly seemed imminent. The Polish government reacted with dismay. Poland already held more than three million Jews, 10 per cent of its population. Anti-Jewish feeling was rampant and the government was, if anything, inclined to seek avenues for Jewish emigration rather than open the door to immigration. On 18 March, just six days after German troops marched into Austria, a bill was presented to the Polish parliament providing that Polish citizens who had lived abroad continuously for more than five years and who 'had given up all contact with the Polish state' could be deprived of their citizenship. Such persons would consequently no longer possess any automatic right to re-enter Poland. The bill passed through all its stages in the lower house and Senate within eleven days. A communiqué issued by the semi-official Iskra news agency explained that the purpose of the law was 'to make all Polish citizens residing abroad realise that the Polish state requires them to maintain an actively favourable attitude and not a passive and indifferent one towards it'.[7]

German officials viewed these Polish actions with concern. They feared that the Polish measure would saddle them with large numbers of Jews who could not be removed. On 9 April, Werner Best, head of

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the Foreigners Police Department of the Gestapo in Berlin, issued a circular ordering that Polish citizens seeking renewal of their residence papers must henceforth be granted no more than six months' permission to stay. Best's order did not mention the word 'Jew'; but to make his meaning clear, he specified that the order would not apply to *Volksdeutsche* (i.e. those regarded by the Nazis as 'Aryans', racial Germans) who were Polish citizens. Polish agricultural workers in Germany, very few of whom were Jews, would be similarly exempt.[8]

In the course of the summer of 1938 conditions for Jews throughout Germany worsened. In Berlin, houses, cafés and cinemas were raided in search of Jews to be sent to concentration camps. Jewish-owned shops were attacked and looted. 'It is no exaggeration,' wrote a British consul, 'to say that Jews have been hunted like rats in their homes.'[9]

On 15 October the Polish Minister of the Interior issued a regulation requiring the inspection by consular personnel of all Polish passports that had been issued abroad. Those considered valid would be stamped accordingly. Those without such an endorsement would become invalid for admission to Poland at midnight on 29 October. Once that happened, it would be impossible for the Germans to send home Polish Jews, of whom there were estimated to be as many as seventy or eighty thousand in the Reich. Long lines formed outside the Polish consulate in Vienna as Jews sought to validate their passports to enable them to return to Poland.

Polish policy-makers were plainly responding to the events in Austria, and the new measures were directly aimed at Jews. Although this was obvious to all, the Poles were somewhat embarrassed about the law's reception overseas. An official of the Foreign Ministry, in conversation with a British diplomat, 'denied that there was any connexion between events in Austria and the Polish Government's decision to proceed with this law which he described as only an instalment of a long overdue revision of the Polish nationality laws'. He admitted that the new edict 'might apply amongst others to persons of nominally Polish citizenship resident in Austria', but denied that it 'had any specific anti-Semitic significance'. In any case, he added reassuringly, 'it was intended to apply the new law, if and when it came into force, with moderation.'[10] In conversations with foreign diplomats, the

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Foreign Ministry maintained that the object was to prevent mass expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany. The Poles' action, however, had the opposite effect.

On 26 October, just seventy-two hours before Polish citizens with unendorsed passports would lose the right to return to their country, the head of the German security police, Reinhard Heydrich, ordered the termination of all residence permits of Polish Jews in Germany.[11] His subordinate, Best, immediately issued a top priority instruction that all Polish Jews in possession of valid passports were to be arrested immediately, assigned for deportation, taken to the Polish frontier, and expelled. The operation, dubbed the '*Polenaktion*', was to be completed by 29 October and the highest possible number, especially of adult males, was to be dispatched across the border before the deadline.[12]

A few days before the arrests, rumours began to spread that something sinister was afoot. Fearing the worst, some Polish Jews in Berlin went into hiding or took the train to Poland to beat the deadline for validation of their passports. Most, like Berl Wasserstein, awaited events, half-expecting, or at any rate hoping, that somehow things would work out.

According to a police report, about three thousand men were arrested in Berlin on 28 October.[13] Berl and Addi were taken with the others from the police headquarters to the Ostbahnhof station and put on trains heading for the Polish border. Up to seven hundred people were put on each train. Some were given pork sandwiches, a typical Nazi provocation directed at orthodox Jews like Berl, who had never in his life allowed pig-meat to touch his lips. The carriages were sealed and guarded. Passengers were not permitted to leave their compartments. Seven kilometres from the border, they were ordered off the train and told to walk forward. The Berlin police, with their punctilious decorum, had been replaced by other uniformed men with more brutal methods. By now it was dark. There was great confusion. People were screaming. Stragglers or those having difficulty with their luggage were beaten. When they arrived at the frontier village of Bentschen (Zbąszyń), Polish border guards admitted the first few but then forbade entry to the rest. Consequently a great mass of terrified

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people, including Berl and Addi, were stuck in darkness in no-man's-land, in open countryside. Fortunately the weather was mild.

Then it began to rain.

Although the Germans had forewarned the Poles, the expulsions came to them as an unwelcome surprise. The Polish government had made no preparations to deal with the arrival of thousands of deportees, perhaps not believing that the Germans would really carry out their threat.[14] The head of the Polish border police reported that armed units were massed in large numbers on the German side of the frontier. They stamped their feet and rattled their weapons as their commanders bellowed out orders, 'in order, it seemed to me [the Polish commandant stated], to ensure that we wouldn't try to send the expellees back.' At one point a group of several hundred Jews staged a sit-in on the German side of the frontier, refusing to set foot on Polish soil. 'As the [German] police and border guard units couldn't deal with that,' the Polish officer continued, 'German soldiers charged at them with fixed bayonets, punching and kicking. With blows from their bayonets and rifle-butts, they forced them over the frontier.'[15]

This description was corroborated by many journalistic and diplomatic accounts. The British ambassador in Warsaw reported:

> The worst conditions were at Zbaszyn on the main line from Berlin to Poznan. Here some 6,500 arrived, of whom a proportion were women and children. They had been compelled to detrain at the German frontier station and to proceed on foot across the frontier. Germans are alleged to have fired a machine-gun into the air, causing utter confusion and panic, so that families scattered and lost what few belongings they had been able to bring with them. The local Polish authorities showed goodwill, but had no accommodation and many of the Jews had, of course, no idea where to go, having had little connexion with Poland. After some delay the military authorities provided tents. I understand that 1,500 have now left for various destinations, but that 5,000 still remain, since the Polish authorities hope that the negotiations with Germany may result in their being allowed to return to their homes.[16]

Other diplomats sent similar dispatches. The American Embassy in Warsaw informed the State Department: 'At Zbaszyn, on the main railway line from Berlin to Warsaw, it has been learned that the

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