

I was past fifty when the pull made itself apparent.

I had left Mexico, my place of birth, decades earlier and now lived a comfortable life elsewhere. Yet I had kept close ties with my family throughout the years. Then an unexpected rift took place among them, with immediate and far-reaching consequences. One consequence was that I suddenly felt uprooted.

This sense manifested itself in a bizarre, prophetic dream. In it I was walking in Colonia Copilco, the neighborhood in Mexico City where I grew up and to which I hadn't returned for ages. In the dream I looked for my old house, but block after block I couldn't find it. I became agitated by its absence. After a while, I finally stumbled upon it. A mysterious man was waiting at the door. He saw me but didn't make any gesture.

He was in his mid-sixties, disheveled. He wore thick glasses, a long, unkempt, salt-and-pepper beard, and a small hat that looked disproportionately large on his round bloated head. Under the hat I could see a yarmulke. There was something feminine about his lips. I had the vague feeling of having met the mysterious man before but I couldn't remember where. I was sure he wasn't Mexican. I approached him hesitantly. For some reason I don't understand, I decided to address him in French.

“Monsieur, voici ma maison.” I explained that I had come from far away and needed to get into the house. He didn’t budge. For a moment I thought he was mute.

When I was growing up, there was a small park around the corner from my childhood home. I walked toward it. It had changed tremendously. In fact, in the dream it was now an amusement park. There was a carousel, a Ferris Wheel, bumper cars, a rollercoaster, and some other attractions.

I found the ticket booth. An old lady was inside. I handed her money and told her I wanted to purchase a ticket.

“¿Pa’ qué?” She spoke a working-class Mexican Spanish. “What for?”

I told her the ticket was to go to my old house. I hadn’t seen it for a long time. I feared I was forgetting what rooms looked like, what it felt to be inside, how the morning light projected itself against the house walls.

She smiled and handed me a ticket and some coins. I walked back to my house. The mysterious man was still there. I showed him the ticket.

He looked bewildered and laughed euphorically. “Bienvenue au septième ciel,” he announced. “Welcome to the seventh heaven.”

At this point, I woke up . . .

I seldom remember my dreams. In fact, every morning as I wake up I go through a certain motion. Eyes still closed, I become aware I’m about to lose grasp of the images in the dream and futilely attempt to freeze them. I open my eyes and close them, in quick succession, but it is pointless. Throughout the day I also foolishly look for these images, again to no avail.

This particular dream was different. It was stamped into my consciousness, bouncing spiritedly from one corner to another. Interpreting it became a sport of sorts. I looked for photos of the façade of my Copilco house, the interior, the third-floor deck, a tree in the front yard. And I tried to retrieve the identity of the mysterious man. One thing became clear to me. The fact that I couldn’t just reenter my childhood house meant I was now a stranger to it. More than a stranger, a tourist, because to get in I needed to pay the price of admission. In other words, my house was mine no more.

Plus, there was the expression *au septième ciel*. I had heard it at a dinner table just a few days prior, I believe for the first time. I remember being puzzled by it. The guest at the party had used it to refer to a mutual acquaintance whose life was somehow out of focus. “He is in seventh heaven . . .”

In any case, the dream became a kind of obsession. I thought about it constantly. Its deeper implications frightened me. It made me feel disconnected from my past.

Something else happened at the time. I had been reading a book origi-

nally written in Yiddish called *The Enemy at His Pleasure*. (The original title is *Khurbn Galitsye*, the destruction of Galicia.) The author was a folklorist called Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, who went by the penname of S. Ansky. He is best known for a classic theater piece, *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds* (1920), a haunting play about an exorcism. I have seen the play staged half a dozen times.

The action of the play takes place in 1882, in a shtetl in Miropol, Volhynia. In it there is a girl who is the daughter of a rich Jew. The father makes it difficult for suitors to satisfy his demands for his daughter's marriage. At the same time, a yeshiva student is in love with her. But in the father's eyes he is unworthy. Distraught, the student dies. Soon a match is made for the girl to marry a man who is finally approved by the father, though not before the yeshiva student's malicious spirit, known in Jewish folklore as dybbuk, takes possession of her.

Ansky was a socialist as well as a "Yiddishist" who believed that the soul of people was to be found in their language. He was from Chashniki, Belarus, which at the time was part of the Russian Empire. And he died in Otwock, Poland. In other words, he was from the so-called Pale of Settlement, the territory in the western region of imperial Russia where the Jews were allowed to live between 1791 and 1917.

He was appalled by the miserable conditions in which they lived in the region. Poverty was endemic. Anti-Semitic outbursts—called "pogroms"—were at a premium. This was the age of revolution. It was the age of large-canvas social engineering, of Communism, Anarchism, Nihilism, and other doctrines intent on remapping human interactions. And this was also the time when Jewish philanthropies were committed to relocating enormous masses of people to destinations such as the United States, Palestine, and Argentina.

Around the First World War, struck by a sense of urgency, Ansky headed an ethnographic expedition to towns in Volhynia and Podolia, which covered parts of Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. He took it upon himself to compile a multifaceted narrative (when first released, *The Enemy at His Pleasure* was in four volumes, the version I read in English being an abridgment) that offered a portrait—physical, psychological, and religious—of a society, the poor Jewish people of the Pale of Settlement as they struggled to make ends meet.

To accomplish this, Ansky and a set of teammates he assembled interviewed hundreds of people with a questionnaire of more than two thousand questions. They recorded five hundred cylinders of music and acquired pho-

tographs, manuscripts, and religious paraphernalia. From these he drew natural and supernatural stories, some of them about sheer survival, others about violence, and a few more about angels and demons and golems and goblins. The result, as I once saw it described, was “a Brueghel-like canvas” of a world on the verge of extinction.

In spite of this background, my reaction to *The Enemy at His Pleasure* was one of disappointment. It wasn't that Ansky's worldview was bleak. How else could he respond to the wretched conditions he and his team found surrounding this population? The world itself was against these Jews. But he wasn't really so interested in their economic and political situation per se as much as he was attracted to the way they steadfastly held to their beliefs. He was fascinated by folklore, which, as J. R. R. Tolkien believed, “keeps in memory what it was once needful for the wise to know.”

What really troubled me was that Ansky didn't quite analyze his material as much as he simply collected it. This, in his opinion, was the role of an ethnographer: to observe and not judge. Consequently, the book, in my view, lacked insight. And whenever it did offer a viewpoint, it was to portray modernity as a threat, which was in and of itself disheartening, for I am one of those who think that progress is inevitable and that the best response to it isn't rejection but accommodation. Ansky idealized the spiritual qualities of the Jewish people he encountered, the way they embraced their redemption within, not beyond, the circumstances in which they lived. He admired that tenacity, never second-guessing it.

Yet I was in awe at Ansky's ambition. The book was a methodical exploration of the environment that Ansky himself knew well. He took his expedition not to a distant land but to the locale he himself inhabited. His findings are invaluable precisely because of this unfolding, this doubling of the self. It is easy to spot exotic traditions in a set of Polynesian islands, but to research one's own peers in an objective way demands humility.

He was at once a step behind the times in which he lived and stunningly prescient. Ansky embarked on his expedition between 1911 and 1914. As a result of pogroms and other xenophobic outbursts, Jewish emigration from that part of the globe had started in the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century. In the worst years, between mid-1903 and mid-1906, starting with the first of two cathartic pogroms in Kishinev, then the capital of Bessarabia, more than 250,000 Jews left the region. By the time Ansky concluded his fieldwork, 350,000 had abandoned Galicia alone.

He was right where the action took place. Had he not traveled around, we would have missed a rich multifaceted description by a chronicler who

intimately knows the stuff on the ground. His oeuvre—along with Roman Vishniac's photographs of the ghettos of Poland, Romania, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe between 1935 and 1938, allows us to glimpse a civilization as it vanished from the face of the earth.

All this to say that such occurrences—the unpleasant dream that I sensed had an oracular quality to it and my gut reaction to Ansky's ethnography—pushed me into an introspective mood, which in turn heightened a state of alertness. I began to feel that my responsibility was to explore my own roots more exhaustively. And not only my Jewish roots in Mexico but, more broadly, the labyrinthine path of Jewish life in Latin America as a whole.

Demographically, these communities are minuscule. Yet as a conglomerate they represent the third-largest concentration of Jews worldwide, after the United States and Israel and before France and Canada. Little is known about them and what is perceived through the prism of exoticism. In a region where democracy struggles to endure, where tolerance and pluralism at times become casualties, their history is a thermometer of society's overall health.

While I was languishing in my introspective mood, there were constant anti-Semitic surges in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia. Dictators such as Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro regularly inserted anti-Zionist slogans in their rhetoric. In Montevideo a cemetery as well as the Memorial del Holocausto del Pueblo Judío were vandalized. Mexico and Colombia *secuestrados express*, fast-paced kidnapping, regularly targeted Jews. And in Argentina, aside from periodic anti-Jewish statements in the media, a prominent Jewish prosecutor who accused the country's most powerful of a cover-up was found dead in his apartment. Not long after, a treasure trove of Nazi artifacts, including a magnifying glass allegedly used by Hitler on maps of Europe while he was strategizing with his commanders about the invasion of Poland and other countries, had been enshrined in a collector's apartment.

I grew up with these kinds of assaults. Like other Latin American Jews I learned how to cope with them, how to insulate myself from them. I remember reading, in my early twenties, Jean-Paul Sartre's diatribe *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1943). Over time, its principal argument—anti-Semites need Jews as much as Jews need anti-Semites—has been consistently debunked by psychologists, historians, and others. (Sartre, I should add, wasn't Jewish, though in the latter part of his life, controversially, he underwent a spiritual conversion that brought him close to Kabbalah.) Still, all these years later, it continued to resonate with me. Anti-

Semitism is not the reason Jews remain Jews, I would tell myself. There is plenty more: love, friendship, learning, entrepreneurship . . .

I love the combination of Jewish and Latino. There is enormous joy in that encounter. Over several centuries Latin American Jews have thrived in multiple spheres, from economic well-being to the scientific, artistic, and educational realms. But the formula for success contains within itself the traps of ostracism. One doesn't need to be a catastrophist to realize that the region contains seeds of hatred and that Jewish life in general is fragile. All life is, of course, but as the diplomat and all-out Renaissance man Abba Eban once purportedly stated: "Jews are like everyone else—except a little bit more."

And so, after the rift with my family, recognizing that something inside had broken, I felt *the pull*—surreptitious, overpowering—to chronicle that life in a firsthand account, wandering from place to place just in case home too abruptly became susceptible to obliteration.

I have always enjoyed traveling. It is second nature to me. I like listening to people, getting the gist of a place, mapping its past. Travel, for that reason, is not only about relocating the body. It is, just as much, about opening up the intellect. And about looking for spiritual solace.

I never travel lineally. Instead, I twist and turn, allowing my itinerary to shape up spontaneously. Before I depart, I teach myself as much as possible about my destination. Then, once I'm there, I hunt for the type of information that is only available on-site: what people think about, how they see the world, their fears and desires. I know that information isn't knowledge; to become knowledge, it needs to be personalized. Someone has to own it for it to come alive.

For years Latin America has been one of my favorite destinations. I feel quite comfortable there. Some places I enjoy more than others. But each trip I make is autonomous. It is completed in a matter of days, a week at most. Whenever I zoom in and out, I don't keep a notebook in hand. Nor am I deliberately looking to make overarching connections.

For this endeavor I chose to make time more elastic. I gave myself roughly four years to accomplish the task, the same amount of time Ansky took for his tour of Galicia. Together, Volhynia and Podolia comprise about 40,000 square miles. That's the land Ansky surveyed. According to the famous 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the overall population before the First World War was approximately 5,500,000. In comparison, Latin America is 7,412 million square miles. In 2015 there were 626,741,000 people living in the entire region.

Healthwise, I was at the right moment: vigorous yet seasoned. My regular teaching gig allowed me substantial flexibility in terms of schedule. My children were older. I was happy.

The itinerary of my expedition wasn't fixed. I let my instinct take me where it wanted. In the end I zigzagged my way to countless different destinations, and sometimes to the same one several times over. Obviously, I had been to several places before. In this iteration I came across countless aspects I hadn't paid attention to before. I attended Shabbat services in Havana, Santiago, and other cities. I had extended dialogues with Crypto-Jews, whose Jewishness was kept in secret to avoid persecution. I visited the site where Adolf Eichmann was kidnapped by the Israeli secret service, Mossad. I looked at neo-Nazi literature and its followers. I roamed through ruined buildings used a long time ago as synagogues, schools, and ritual baths. I delved into the topic of Jewish self-defense groups. I went to cabarets and ball games and I drifted through cemeteries. I talked to families of the *desaparecidos*. I was in torture chambers maintained by the Argentine military junta and saw the instruments used to brutalize victims—not only victims of state violence during the Dirty War but those of Holy Office inquisitors in colonial times. I wandered in Israel in search of a Spanish-speaking diaspora that made *aliyah* (Hebrew for “ascendance”). And I was in the Amazon, searching for aboriginal communities that believe themselves to be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Although I traveled alone for the most part, I never felt lonely. My wife and children occasionally came with me. As a result of my previous travels I had acquaintances in most places, with whom I kept in communication before and after my visits. Among others, I talked to vocal activists, engaging taxi drivers, despicable Holocaust deniers, retired postmen, enthusiastic soldiers, shrewd politicians, and perplexed Talmudic scholars. I also met with engineers, actors, lexicographers, curators, lawyers, photographers, students, entrepreneurs, journalists, academics, rabbis, teachers, artists, and translators. The composite picture ended up being intricate, elastic, and multifaceted.

Indeed, it was in the conversations, perhaps more than in the actual places, that I found meaning. A place is a place is a place. I feel galvanized when it has historical value. But it is the people who make my journey worth the effort. They give it depth. The way their words, the storytelling, and their reminiscences come to life through free association to me feels like an injection of adrenaline. That's what culture is about. And it was this culture that I desperately wanted to capture.

This and the angst I wanted to assuage, of being excluded from my childhood house and of meeting the mysterious man I saw in my dream, standing outside my childhood home.