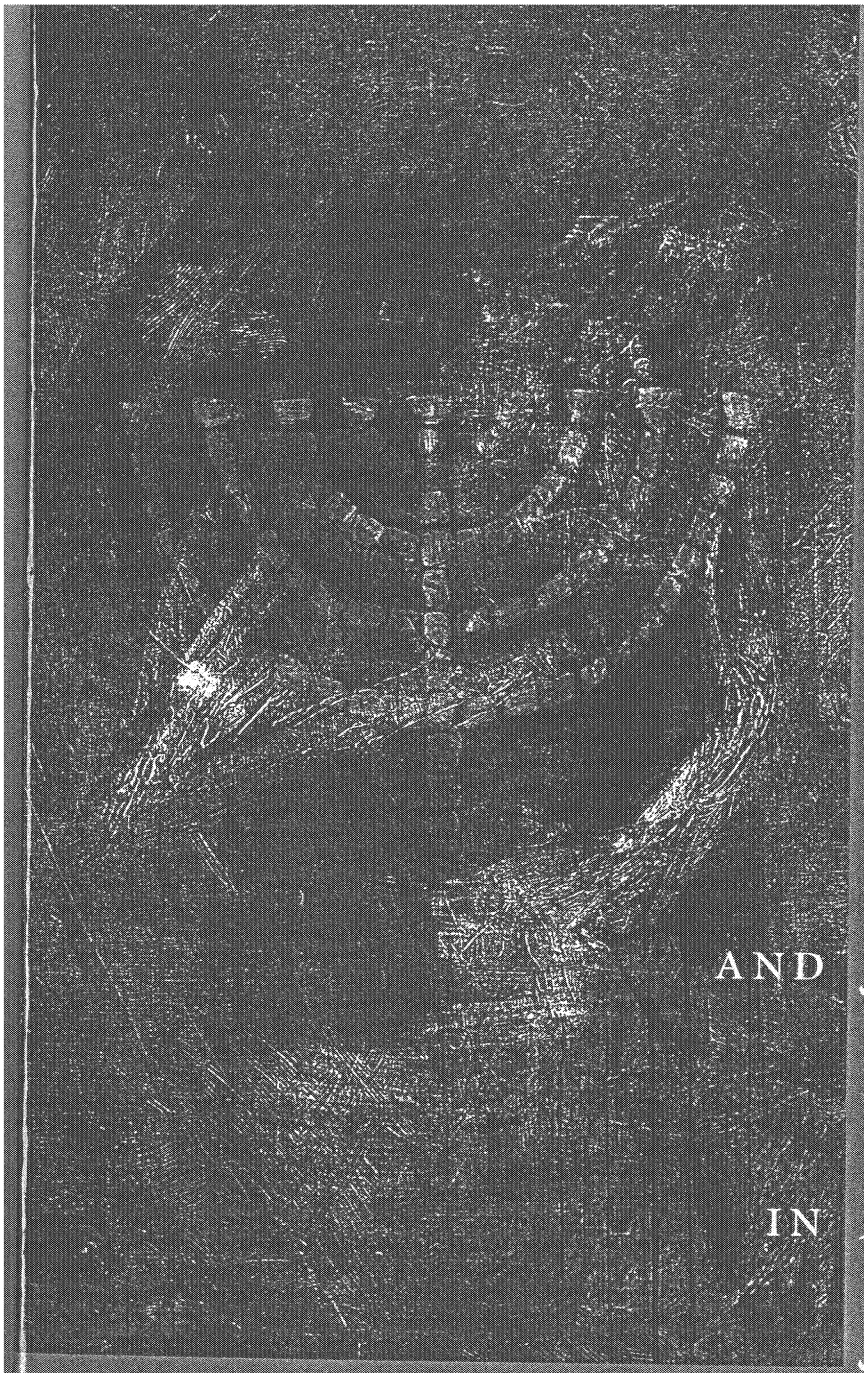

Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America

Edited by

MARJORIE AGOSÍN

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MURRAY BAUMGARTEN

My Panama

Not that it was any of my doing: running from the Nazis, we were penniless, frightened, wearing out. In the terror of flight and confusion I came early from my mother's womb, popping out on the ship that was taking us to Panama. Was it a premonition that mine was not to be the ease of a citizen relaxed in the amniotic fluid of home? And it was a while after I emerged before I caught even a glimpse of the sea-green Caribbean on whose shores in Colón we lived for the first ten years of my life.

Now the town map spread before me, I am in Panama once more. Here is the Avenida Roosevelt: turn left and go west at the open-air market with its smell of penned-up chickens and bruised fruit. Two more blocks, left at the Cine RKO, and you reach our New York Store, with the late afternoon sun cutting in below the awning. If he had named his place in New York the Panama Shop, would my father have prospered as he did in Colón? Continue on Bolívar, cross Centenario, a five-minute walk, and there is the synagogue. Go north to the water, follow the curve of the land. and at the bulge into the dreamy Caribbean the school stands, next to the Washington Hotel. Then follow the railroad tracks to the entry into the Zone.

Panama and Suez—why did de Lesseps succeed in the East and fail in the New World? Do you always pass through canals en route from one home to another? Can Columbus's voyage be reversed? Take the car back down the Paseo, past the Colegio, right on Santa Isabel, and when you smell the plátanos frying and can taste the sugarcane growing in the field near the stadium, you are at the house we used to live in.

On our side of the street the rain obscures everything. On the Ostroviaks' side the sun is shining. I am Noah and the flood is beginning; the gutter overflows and the water rushes over the pavement. Next door, the

Cantina, at sidewalk level, has five inches of water cleaning it out. We watch the ominous waves lap up to our front step, but God relents and spares the family store, which specializes in ladies' fashions and souvenirs of Panama made in Brooklyn. The next day, rain stories are told everywhere—who was saved and who went under, how the Americans rescued hundreds in small boats. That's why we live on the third floor.

At the doorway, Uncle Eli stops a customer. She hasn't bought anything. He lifts her skirt and takes out the three dresses tied around her waist. Without a word she hitches up her clothes and plunges into the streaming water. He stands with the dresses in his hands, peering into the mist after her as she disappears, a Camel dangling from the corner of his mouth, the ash growing longer and grayer till it drifts onto the taffeta and satins.

The sun comes out and the water rushes off. On the corner a one-armed woman with a caved-in face sells lottery tickets by waving the stump in time to her sales pitch. She isn't so hard to look at, which must be why the police haven't moved her to the waterfront, where lottery tickets are usually hawked. I imitate my tall, handsome father's gait as we walk hand in hand through the throng of buyers and sellers on Front Street and wave to the passersby as he does. (Is it to acknowledge them or to ward them off?) Nestling into his broad side, I don't get more than a glimpse of what becomes a composite image of beggars without noses or ears, some with wounded faces and humped backs. The legless ones have surprising strength in their arms, maneuvering their wheeled carts across streets and through crowds, pushing down hard with blocks of wood, which they use like oars.

After the canaries and the pigeons, the macaws and the parrots. On Sundays, the bird market bulges with the flood of humans, tourists, Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Jews, priests. "Compre pa hablar" (Buy one! He'll talk to you), the handlers call, displaying beak and wingspan. The bamboo cages are open; the parrots perch outside.

Canaries sing as brightly as their vivid yellow feathers. I covet a parrot with its riot of tropical colors, but we are there to look, not to buy. It is an occasion, a birthday perhaps, and we go to Feldman's for ice cream. The chairs are filigree wicker, the elegant tables glass, the floor tiled, the customers subdued and European.

Why are there so many palm trees here and even more cockroaches? Once a snake gets into our house and we wait downstairs till Maria finds her friend Juan, who knows about such things, to catch it. It has silver and

green markings and hisses so viciously that we instinctively fall back even though Juan has it secured in a net.

In the morning the noises come from within as the household stirs. Awakening movements of sweaty, squeaking beds, rattling of pots and pans, the bathroom door opening and closing, squealing springs and faucets make a river of sound that is dissipated in the outside quiet before it can disturb the Wachtels across the street.

From the balcony I can see their movements. Soon breakfast is served in both households, after the men have folded up their enveloping *taleysim* (prayer shawls), rewrapped the strong tefillin. Their morning chants have answered each to each. While we prepare for school, the men walk into town together, going to work in the lengthening rays of the sun.

We often go to see the *shokhet* (Kosher butcher) kill the chickens my mother takes to him, and we pluck the feathers on the balcony. On Fridays everyone helps make noodles, kneading and rolling out the dough. I punch the challah; my sisters braid and decorate it. Every day we have coconuts, bananas, mangoes, and avocados. Always peel the vegetables and fruits, my mother repeats over and over.

The sight of my father turning an orange skin into a twirling snake is a delight that, alas, emphasizes my own inadequacies. Would I grow up and amount to anything? I wonder, as I watch my father thread the gold chain of his pocket watch through his belt loops. Proudly he displays the glittering *magen david* (Star of David) the congregation gave him, letting it dangle outside his watch pocket.

Uncle Phoebus, my mother's brother (whose name utterly confounds me), lives with us. I watch him rise red-faced from his bed, adjusting the wire-rimmed glasses bent from being slept in. He has the most trouble breathing in the heat, and his sheets are more rumpled than any of ours. He sleeps in his undershirt, and the blond hairs of his chest stick through its weave like wire mesh. Though he does not pray like my father, everyone calls him the doctor and the scholar. He gets up late, long after my father has gone to work. Some mornings he is still asleep when we go off to school.

At night, as everyone gathers after supper for tea and fruit and recounts the day's events, Uncle Phoebus lies on his bed reading large, heavy books and is spoken of less respectfully. My father calls out to him: "Why do you want to go to Haifa?" voicing the thought we all have. He would be a fool not to go north like Harry and Marcus, the other uncles, but he persists.

When he finally leaves for Israel, my pale mother cries, shaking her reddish blond hair from side to side, and asks who will take care of him in that difficult land. Yet she knows he is only following the other Rosenbergs—Emanuel and Fanka, Misha and Annie, Leo and Sophie, Pinchas and Gertie, Rutie and Zvi, who made aliyah in 1938. Their father, Maier Yosef, whose name I bear, had been a rabbi in Vizhnitz. He and his twin brother were rebels: they were learned scholars, honored in their community, and yet they advocated Zionism and life in Israel as the future of the European Jews. Every year, during the month of Elul, as she prepares for Rosh Hashanah and my father thinks about *kapoyrus,* the atonement ritual, and who will swing the chicken over our heads in preparation for atonement, my mother puts a twenty-dollar bill inside a purse and sends it to Rutie, Phoebus's sister, in Haifa.

When he leaves in 1947, Phoebus's round face and blond hair, sparkling blue eyes and stooped shoulders, vanish for us. We never know what gauntlets he ran, how he got there. We never hear stories about him in Israel, like the stories from New York where the Baumgarten boys—Harry, Marcus, and Eli—merge into our vision of the successful businessman. Phoebus was the only one in the family who lived with us who went to a place we knew rather than all-promising America.

One day we get a letter from him, with a photograph: he is standing next to a motorcycle framed by the Carmel and the whitewashed houses marching down the hills of Haifa. He has found work as a doctor. My mother gasps, my father tells us the story once more: to take his last exam at the University of Vienna and receive his medical degree, the Nazis made him walk on his knees to the lecture room.

When Israel declared its independence in 1948 my father joined the Wachtels, Angels, and Ostroviaks, friends dancing the hora in the street in front of the synagogue. Three years later, when I was Bar Mitzvah in New York, Phoebus sent me a khumash—the Torah—from Haifa with an inscription in fine black lettering. I think of him because my glasses too are wire-rimmed, and I have seen pictures of the German Jews of the second aliyah that like Phoebus's echo my own features. A year later we get a letter from Rutie: Phoebus has killed himself.

Some days when my father came home, we knew he had been with *them* by the queer look his eyes had, as if something terribly cold had been placed there. He went every day for a month. We always wanted to see them too, for we were told that they were also Jews, but Dad never consented to take us along. We helped to make potato salad and cook chicken for them. My mother went once and came back pale and shaken. Her hands patting

our cheeks were very cold. She'd never looked like that before, nor did she ever again until she was dying in the hospital in New York. "Living skeletons," my father called them, but after a while he said they were beginning to recover from the ghastly things they'd been through in Europe. They were going through the canal on old troop ships, to start new lives.

Glistening Colón, Columbus's city: a city of refuge not mentioned in the Bible that yet gave us shelter, and gathered in the survivors and then passed them on to other countries. They passed through, and we remained; without knowing them, they became part of us. We had survived too, escaping from Eichmann after Anschluss in such haste that I was born on the ship.

The day before I married Sheila—Tziril Esther—I asked my father what he said to them. For a moment his eyes sank into his head, remembering, and resenting my question. Finally, shrugging his shoulders, he explained that he was the official representative of the Jewish community: "I brought schnapps and we drank *lechayim* and said a *shekheyanu.*" Knowing I didn't have the right to speak, I queried him with my eyes. "I told them how I had learned Spanish and English by reading the papers," he said, passing his fingers through his silvering hair. "The news is always the same anyway. And that way I could make a living."

After the refugees moved on, or perhaps when someone else was delegated to visit them, my parents stopped talking German. Since we kids were all in school by then, learning both English and Spanish, my father decided we would speak English at home in preparation for the hoped-for move to the United States. For mother it was a struggle, and she often lapsed into Yiddish. My father's accent didn't improve for some time, but his decision stuck, as we neglected the Yiddish and the Viennese German that had been our mother tongues.

When Hitler's soldiers marched into Vienna, my father tasted the bad time to come. One spring afternoon he left work early, stopped at the bank for some travelers' checks, making sure to leave some money in the account so as not to arouse suspicion, bought bread, cheese, and mineral water, and hurried home. There he put some things into an overnight bag. At the railroad station he showed the soldier his passport, keeping my mother's, which had expired, under his arm. The soldier chucked my sister Theadora under the chin. As a baby she had blond hair and blue eyes. "What a beautiful Aryan child," he said, waving them through. "Have a good vacation at the seashore."

The family stories say that the train got us to Rotterdam; the ship took us to Curaçao. Then the *Simon Bolívar* ferried us to Panama. As we left the

dock, my mother went into labor. She gave birth on that ship that dodged the U-boats. Later on in the war, one of them fired a torpedo into her and she went down with all hands. In Curaçao the doctor had told my mother she had weeks to go. No one expected me so early.

Three days later the family arrived in Colón, Panama. They watched young boys scamper up the trees to pick coconuts. They ate sticky papayas, sweet mangoes, guavas, and avocados. The peddler told us you could pick them from the tree and eat them. It wasn't stealing. As long as you peeled them, like bananas, you could eat Panamanian fruit and vegetables and not catch tropical diseases. My parents found an apartment near the Washington saltwater pool, built by Americans at the end of the blue-green Caribbean.

They circumcised me at eight weeks, in Panama, when I was finally out of danger and home from the hospital. My parents thought of naming me Simon Bolívar for the ship that had brought us to the new world, and constantly watched me for signs of sickness. No matter what they fed me, I stayed skinny.

In Panama the powerful American soldiers ate spinach. They drank milk and devoured steak and potatoes. At night the voices of their planes never stopped telling us we were safe. "Democracy," my uncle Eli, who lived with us, said over and over, looking into the distance. Perhaps he was thinking of his future in New York, where he would precede us by four years. Or meditated on how he had escaped from Vienna: a friend at work told him not to go home on Kristallnacht and gave him some money and a fake ID. And he started running and hiding.

People helped him while others hunted this Viennese Jew. Somehow he made his way to Colón, where he found us. Tall and thin, Eli, my father's youngest brother, took a special interest in me. He insisted I eat my soup and once dunked my face in it to make his point. He used to read to me, and he taught us the words of the Panamanian popular song. "La cucaracha, la cucaracha," we three children chanted over and over. It was easy to learn. We liked talking our broken Spanish with our friends.

In the store, Eli and my father sold women's clothing, souvenirs of Panama, watches, underwear. Business was good, but you had to keep your eyes open and watch the customers even if they liked the salesman's style. My father told them jokes. After school we came to the store for a snack and then went to the synagogue to study.

Fridays they closed early. My mother held her hands over the candles and swayed back and forth, her eyes shut. "Gut shabbos," she sang. She wiped her eyes and kissed each of us. And my father blessed us so that

we would grow up like our biblical namesakes, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, Ephraim and Menashe.

When he returned from a Zionist meeting in Baltimore in 1941 my father brought us American silver dollars; they are about the size of biblical shekels, he said. Can we go through the canal to get to the United States? my sisters ask. Are they thinking of the PX? I wondered.

Because the killing machinery of the Third Reich was not yet geared up in 1938, we were able to slip out and journey across a green ocean. Syrian Jewish merchants in Colón staked my father to shirts, handkerchiefs, and socks; the proud businessman with a degree in commerce from a fabled Viennese vocational school started commercial life in Panama as a peddler.

When I think of those Aleppo Jews who had escaped the riots of the Arab uprising in 1929, and preceded us to Panama, I am drawn to my bookshelf. I take down the Keter Yerushalayim, also known as the Aleppo Codex—the Jerusalem Crown Bible published by the Hebrew University last year—which a friend has just sent me. The Keter Aram Zova, as the manuscript of the Aleppo Codex is known in Hebrew, is the oldest masoretic text of the Bible, newly printed in a magnificent edition in Jerusalem. These Aleppo Jews saved the manuscript through centuries of turmoil and homelessness till it could find renewed life as this handsome book. One copy now resides in the house of a Jew born of refugees from the shtetl of Sborov near Lvov and the city of Czernowitz, a haven of Jewish life, to whom they gave aid and succor when they arrived in Panama. Is this too not a sign of redemption?

We were used to lots of people, gatherings of worrying relatives and friends, where we children went unnoticed. At night every room had someone sleeping in it. One day Grandmother and Grandfather arrived with Aunt Ina. She had gotten them out of Vienna after Kristallnacht; Uncle Marcus had sent them a visa for the United States. He had enough money for three affidavits: they were the oldest, and Ina was the youngest. Panama was their way-station en route to New York.

In the hot summer months my sisters and I took our pillows to the balcony, as the locals did, only to be chased back by our irate parents. We returned reluctantly to our sweaty beds, to be tucked into the security of the mosquito netting that draped us even in our dreams.

Out there, where the planes droned, was the war. In the mysterious interior the dreaded German sympathizers massed and the Americans hunted them. They found German documents, my father said. "They asked me to translate some of them," he told us.

To us the war meant that the relatives lived with us. We accepted their presence like natural forces, and wove around and between them in our children's games. We never thought to ask why so many of us huddled together in the four-room apartment; it had always been that way. As Grandma and Grandpa, Aunt Ina, and Uncle Eli left for the United States, they were replaced by the American Jewish soldiers who came for intermittent visits. We grew up with them.

When they came to town Chessie, Simon, and Sidney took us to the PX for chocolate, sugar, and Lucky Strike cigarettes for Dad. Lots of kids were always wandering through with their parents, and no one took any particular notice of us. I think it was the first time we ever passed, and all because father brought these three GIs home from the synagogue one Friday night. They introduced us to Campbell's soup and told stories about Brooklyn—where there are more Jews than Indians with sticks through their noses in Panama.

Chessie, my favorite, had broad shoulders, soft eyes, and thick brown hair; I promised him I would eat my spinach, and he promised I would end up with bulging muscles like his. Sidney was short and toothy, and hated to take off his khaki cap even when he played with my sisters because he was getting bald. Simon imitated clowns and made faces.

We never learned where they worked or what they did, though we begged them to tell us. When they left us, they disappeared like figures in a dream, forming our first image of the meaning of the Canal—it brought everything to us and just as readily took it all away.

Coming home after Talmud class one Shabbat afternoon in New York, my father told me I had spent my first two weeks in the hospital. I was premature and didn't get circumcised till I was more than a month old, following the talmudic discussion that coincided with the best Panamanian medical opinion. It couldn't have been much of a party, more like a loud sigh of relief, especially for my mother.

Was that why she kept crying when Mordecai and Mr. Kelber, who kept his hat on even in the house, came and gave me my first haircut? I was three and watched in amazement as my blond curls fell all around me, and the men raised glasses for a *lechayim.* My sisters found some of my curls in the drawer when they were cleaning it out after mother died.

I was saying kaddish, reading the prayers harder and harder, my knowledge of Hebrew—the first language I'd learned to read and write—leaping ahead. *Modim anachnu lach,* I said, standing and reciting the Amidah, bowing low and thanking God *al khayenu hamesurim beyadekha,* for our lives, which are all in Your Hands. Then why did my mother wake up

in the middle of a humid Bronx night in June, hardly more than a year after we arrived in this promised city, screaming and holding her burning head as if it would break? Why did she need a cerebral hemorrhage to kill her and make me use all the Spanish curse words I know?

We always had company and Mordecai for *shabbos* dinner. He was our teacher. And a refugee, like us. Mordecai was a small man. His eyes never stopped moving, darting from place to place like the darker eyes of the Indians who came to town to sell white hats and many-colored serapes. He wore a dark suit of my father's that almost fit him. Except when he was teaching, he rarely spoke. At dinner he would stare at the gefilte fish on his plate for a long time before starting to eat.

My older sister was his best pupil. My younger sister always started to cry when she saw him. I was going to be my father's "kaddish" and had to study harder. The obligation of reciting the prayer for the dead, after he was gone, to honor his memory, required learning. That would prove I was a grown-up Jew. At five I was almost grown up and going to kindergarten. Next year I would be the watchman carrying the rifle in the play about the kibbutz.

Friends always dropped in on Saturday night. After bathing in the washtub, the kids were allowed into the living room. "Anu banu artza livnot ulehibanot ba," my sister and I sang the song Mordecai had taught us. "Build the land," Phoebus translated, "and Israel will rebuild us."

When we knew it perfectly he was going to take us to sing it in front of the British Consulate. Then the gray-haired Englishman would tell His Majesty to open the gates of Palestine to the Jews.

My father forbade the demonstration. Jews had to be careful how they protested. It was 1942, and refugees weren't allowed to be rowdy.

My father and Phoebus always argued in German.

My mother served coffee.

One Shabbat morning, when we lived in the Bronx, as I was leaving for the synagogue she told me that Phoebus had been a young radical. They had agreed that Stalin was a murderer but Lenin had been a good man. The Jews were caught in the class struggle, she said. Not what your father liked to talk about, she added. He was a businessman who thought the market would take care of him.

Did she know he had an eye for the ladies? He was a handsome, dark-eyed man, and I'd watch the reactions of the women he worked with when he gave a hello and a smile and launched into one of his flirtations, "Mejor trabajar ahora y bailar esta noche," work now and dance tonight, he would say, with that irony of encouraging the seamstresses and playing with them

at the same time. Was he stuck in the struggle that is mine too? the argument with sexual passion?

How different were we? Two Jews launched by Enlightenment and Emancipation into the adventure of modernity who had given up the *arba kanfot,* the ritual fringes at the corners of the undergarment that recall us from the seductions of eye and heart? I laugh and tell Sheila she is my addiction, Tziril-Esther, come to my rescue.

Only Aunt Ina talked about our parents' wedding in Vienna. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she told us that Dad's latest girlfriend—or was she his mistress? was she the Shushu the family whispered about?—broke in while Mother was adjusting her wedding gown. Shushu insisted she should be the one under the Huppah with Max. Emanuel, the lawyer, my mother's brother, shut Shushu up and got her to leave by giving her the money the brothers and sisters, orphaned of both mother and father and banded together to succeed in Czernowitz and Vienna by studying at the university, had collected for the dowry. My mother had just finished the first year of law school. She never went back, devoting herself to this marriage she was hustled into by friends. Was that why my mother had sad eyes?

But I have to remember that Viennese mistresses weren't all bad. It was his non-Jewish mistress who told my Uncle Leo, the admirer of Jabotinsky, that he should leave town. Like his hero, he was a snappy dresser favoring a felt hat with a sharp brim, a political intellectual and Betar speech maker. (All this time, I imagine Mordecai at the Teachers Seminary, studying Hebrew grammar.) Leo's mistress, Ina told us, was connected to an Austrian Nazi—was he her husband?—and knew things. Listening to his mistress, Leo took Sophie, his wife, and headed for the train station. His connections had gotten them visas, which got them to Tel Aviv. I used to visit them once a week, when I was teaching there in 1969.

After a year in Colón, Mordecai got a job in Ecuador. It was a larger Jewish community and had a day school. Before he left, he showed us the book he had copied in Prague as a young Zionist waiting for his visa. "*Ahavat Zion,*" my sister read the flowery script of the title. "Love of Zion. The first Hebrew novel," he told us. "Here is Jerusalem," he said, pointing to the shining word.

Facing the curlicues of his handwriting, I stuttered.

My father's face was red.

I have no pictures of Mordecai.

We believed our skills had saved us. We practiced them night and day. Theadora-Teddie, the oldest, is an awesome pianist. She started play-

ing at five. After dinner she would perform Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff for my father, as my younger sister, Gertie, and I would become drowsy and were led to our bedtime Shma and sleep by my mother, so exhausted from the endless household work of caring, cleaning, cooking, worrying, she fell asleep beside us.

No matter how we excelled in school, our skills were never good enough for our father. Though we were praised, the engine of history breathing down my father's throat urged us on. What skills could give us security and ease, so we could sit under our own biblical fig tree and not be afraid? Gertie, a genius with color, shape, and line, invented games from thin air, into which we escaped. I lost myself in texts. Would those be powerful enough to keep us out of the jaws of the dreadful Jewish destiny Hitler had planned for us?

Later, in college, I squeezed a Hebrew class into the chemistry requirements. In the summer between my junior and senior years when I had changed my major to European history, I wandered into a bookstore on the Lower East Side and found the novel Mordecai had copied. His version was at the bottom of my sock drawer, and I pulled it out to compare them. The parts about love sounded biblical. Mordecai had managed to copy only a third. What he had done was accurate.

I wanted to send the printed book to him, but my mother had told me Mordecai had left Ecuador the year before we moved to the United States. Like Phoebus, he too had gone to Israel in 1947 to fight in the War of Independence. He had been killed at Bab-el-Wad, trying to break through to a besieged Jerusalem.

Last summer I dreamed that I flew over the ocean. In my sleep I heard the pilot say we were passing Vienna. A while longer, and we landed on Zion's shores. I took a taxi into the Judean hills. At sunset I walked on Jerusalem's rocky ground, along the steep and narrow streets of the old city to the Western Wall. I wanted to say kaddish for him.

I open Mordecai's book. A photograph falls out.

It is autumn 1943, and the Jews have organized a protest march. Mordecai has brought word of the mass murders of the Nazis to the Jews of Colón.

Mordecai's photo shows eight dark-haired girls in white dresses carrying a white flag with two blue stripes and the Star of David down the middle of the street. A dozen solemn-faced men in suits and ties walk behind them.

People lean out of balconies to throw money, as the girls hold the flag open to catch the fluttering bills. Their skirts furl over their legs. The

girls bear the flag between the palm trees that line Avenida Guerrero. I imagine the parade crosses the ocean. At the dock in Haifa, Rutie and her husband, Zvi, are waiting for Phoebus and Mordecai. They hug the dark-haired girls. In 1938 Rutie and Zvi arrived in Haifa, with the last visas for the Jews of Czechoslovakia the British issued. Each visa entitled a couple to make aliyah. When they arrived in Haifa, Rutie and Zvi divorced their spouses on the dock and promptly married each other.

Why is the parade silent?

One of the girls has lost the white flower from her hair.

Did I remember to wave at my father?

He wears a brown suit and striped tie as he marches behind my sister down the left side of the snapshot.

Five years later we immigrated to New York. We were helped to the top of the Panamanian quota by money my aunt Ina gave to a government official. The Baumgarten family was reunited in the Bronx, where we went to school and celebrated Shabbat and holidays together. And Eli and my father opened Doreen Shops, a women's clothing store, in Queens.

The isthmus turns eastward to reach for the looming mass of the southern continent. The Canal foils expectations and runs almost due north-south. It separates the land as it brings people together. Machines strain; dark loam is chewed by metal jaws; water rushes through. Ships float immobilized like painted images on a bobbing pond as locks groan and fill. Metal engines—"mules"—churn on gleaming tracks and haul the laden vessels to the next level. The process is repeated until the ships burst free into the wide ocean.

When the battleship *Missouri* came through at the end of the war, it scraped the sides of Gatun Lock. As we waved at the sailors, people were saying the days of the Canal were over.

We saw Eisenhower at the end of the war. It was a grand parade with flags and soldiers striding down the broad Paseo del Centenario, with trucks and marching soldiers and brass bands of sailors playing. The most impressive were the motorcycle policemen who roared up and down the street doing crowd control, their engines deep-voiced and full of power. When the parade was over we walked along the street and looked at the marble statue of Christopher Columbus. Tensed between majesty and humility, he guards the hope of the liberties of the Republic.

We switched schools, transferring to the Canal Zone Academy. Since we were not American citizens, we got into the school through connections and our father paid a higher tuition than the other parents. Our schoolmates lived at the other end of town in large mysterious houses and

we played with them only on weekdays. My teacher told me the sun set at ten o'clock or later in the summer in Minnesota, where she had grown up. In Panama, which is just north of the equator, days were always the same length, sunset bringing its sudden darkness regularly at six o'clock in the evening. It was just one more bit of evidence convincing me that Americans were even bigger liars than the Panamanian fathers who always talked about the ruins of Spanish galleons and forts we never saw.

It was then that my father started calling me his *kaddishel* and requiring that I accompany him to shul on *shabbos.* In the long afternoons, we used to play in the store, shooting our cap guns at the Ostroviaks, who were similarly occupied across the street at their parents' place of business.

Friday evenings my father and I went to the synagogue and brought soldiers home with us for our Sabbath meal. On Saturday mornings we prayed in the Centro Israelita Cultural my father had helped build—that is, the men prayed while the children ran in and out engaged in hide-and-seek or cops and robbers, silenced occasionally by a *sha* or a *klop.* We finally learned decorum in American synagogues in Manhattan. There even on Yom Kippur my father couldn't clutch the curtains of the Ark and scream and plead, rocking on his heels and toes till his head beat against its wooden walls, as he had in Colón.

Saturdays dribbled away; we played at the store, or talked and read and slept. After sundown we bathed in the metal washtubs with water heated in the tea kettle, taking turns washing each other and being washed.

Sundays were the hardest—not because it was their *shabbos,* but because it was bullfight day. Sundays in Panama were the days that counted, when large sums of money could be realized and great emotions felt. Terrible things happened that my father would mention in a whisper to my mother—fights, knifings, shootings. Once I overheard him tell of a machete duel fought not far from our house, in which both men cut each other to shreds. The worst of all Sundays was New Year's, when garbage was thrown off the balconies and people danced in the streets. On Sundays we stayed indoors. It was lockup day for us.

Once more in Panama, I revisit my childhood, only to discover parts of it have never left me. One experience, when I was five, emerges from memory like a premonition of what I would become. I was playing on the balcony by myself with my favorite stuffed animal, a toy bear, when I slipped, and the bear toppled three stories to the ground. I was not allowed to go out on the narrow winding stairs by myself, so I tried to climb after him. My head fit through the bars of the railing, but my shoulders didn't, and suddenly I was stuck. I was suspended, almost weightless, for

a time. Finally it was lunchtime and my father came home from the store and rescued me. My mother rubbed mentholatum on my ears, my sisters petted me, and he tugged until I popped loose.

When we left Panama I was ten. As I looked through the open porthole of the ship taking us to America, I felt again the giddy sensation—Mauricio, dangling in space—and knew that feeling would remain.