

# PLATO'S CAVE

## A fiction by Michael Picardie

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I was 15 in the summer of 1941 on the day the Germans invaded eastern Poland and Lithuania.

My maternal grandfather, Rabbi Philip Oshry, carrying a hunting rifle, took me and my friend Estrella from my aunt Faith Rosen's house – for our own good - to a cave in the Belarus forest which was to be our refuge during the war. We were to stop going to the boys' and the girls' *gymnasia* in Bialystok. A world was coming to an end. We knew from history that the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian and the Second German Reich had all come to a more or less bloody end. Now, again, from Germany a new monster had arisen whose aim was to attempt to strangle the life out what democracy there was to be found in any part of Europe, the Americas, colonial Africa - to reveal the abysmal truth of the dark heart of humankind.

The war against the Jews had spread eastwards. I was both afraid and aflame with a kind of rage that was kindled by a sense of being betrayed by the love of God induced in me by faithful Jews. We were supposed to be God's chosen. My family loved me. I was grateful to be alive every spring and every summer and autumn and even winter had its freezing, sparkling snow and icicle covered beauty. But where was God? There must be some meaning in it?

A holocaust was originally just a sacrificial cauldron. We, the Jews, were going to be roasted alive in an orgy of hate to purge the world of a perceived disease. It would start most systematically in what, before the German invasion, was Russian-occupied eastern Poland. It would spread eastwards into the Baltic states and Belarus. By the time the Nazis arrived in Russia itself they had their hands full of the Bolshevik backlash and the Jews would become just another anti-Nazi enemy. The concentration camps were mainly in Poland. Goods trains filled with what the Germans call "stucke" – items – would be gassed in the course of the greatest crime against humanity the world had ever seen. In my opinion God had a lot to answer for. If His intention was to force us to create a Jewish State out of the remnants left, this mass-murder was certainly a way of precipitating a Hebrew-speaking homeland in Palestine.

God: I looked for Him and in a primitive sense found Him in the forests around us, in the fields and hedges, which were lovely with may blossom. The sunny clearings of the forests, springing with bluebells, hyacinths, wild roses, blackberries, hazels encouraged, some even planted by the Polish lord Stanislaw Lubliniewski, an anglophile, an ecological enthusiast, an archaeologist who owned thousands of acres around our village on the border of Poland and Belarus.

So, this was God: was this not the God of the synagogue but the God of nature, Being Itself, celebrated by the Hasidim, the joyous and pious who danced, drunk, before God? Unfortunately, as Stalin asked about the Pope: “How many army divisions, has he – have the Jews. Nothing. A few badly armed partisans?”

I was surrounded by believers including two rabbis. And disbelievers, my aunt Faith (Frumste) my mother’s sister who was a Zionist and a musician, a violinist, who, in her heart of hearts knew that God didn’t exist except as an idea which only the Jewish people could make “kind of” Real. She carried me away with her idea of a fighting Jewish force which would stop beating the Jewish breast with the idea of sin against Adonai Elohim, but would overcome some of the sins of un-holiness (like excessive humility – apologising for being alive as Jews who were neither chosen or unchosen) by exercising our basic right to life itself. If there was a God, would he want us to go like lambs to the slaughter? No. YHWH - Jah-Ha-Ve-Ha- the holy and forbidden name of HaShem, the Name, was probably a battle cry chanted in unison by the ancient Israelites as they charged into combat against the Philistines and the Canaanites with axes, swords, shields, chariots, spears – cutting off heads, arms, legs. Zionist nationalism was both terrible and it was *us* – a *raison d’etre* for our despised people who from now on would fight back.

I wasn’t a bloodthirsty child. I was very gentle with animals and women but aggressive men made my blood boil. Perhaps I was an aggressive male myself. The earth belonged to all of us, to everybody in the world, “primitive” and “civilised”. Kindness was to be found as much and more amongst the uneducated than the sophisticates. Think of all the Nazi German barbarians with doctorates. We all had to die, and my ambition was to die fighting the German barbarians with their shiny boots, dressed to kill in their smart Nazi and SS insignia and uniforms. They were a reversion, a regression back to the Goths and the Huns who destroyed Rome and “western civilization”, such as it was, once before. I thought of myself as a kind of Maccabean or a Jewish druid or ancient British Jew under Boadicea painted with blue woad waiting in ambush for a Roman legion. Jah-Ve-Ha-Ve! Jah-Ve-Ha-Ve!

*Ish ha Milchamah!* God of war!

War is politics by other means. War should now be impossible what with mutually-assured-destruction. War is or was for race- and class-conscious and nationalist and religiously psychopathic animals who know no better. Animals kill to eat and establish dominance hierarchies of species, sub-species and have their own animalistic cultures. But amongst *Sapiens*, war seemed inevitable in a world divided by race, class, religion, atheism, gender, sex, age, wealth, health, education. Animals kill to eat and establish dominance hierarchies. Animals other than *Sapiens* are not so stupid to make total war. I and Estrella respected animals. We became vegetarians and would not drink milk or eat cheese or butter or eggs, let alone meat. Because we lived in the countryside in Poland and we knew how animals suffered in the slaughter they endured having their throats cut by the *shochet*.

Curiously enough Hitler was a vegetarian and was at something of a loss with women. He more than compensated for that by his excessive courtesy to "Aryan" women when he recovered from his disastrous affair with his niece who committed suicide with his pistol. Besides he knew nothing of Kant or Aristotle or Kierkegaard and he perverted Nietzsche's "superman" idea. Nietzsche would have despised Hitler, the charlatan, just as he loathed Wagner's nationalism and anti-Semitism and the weakness of the purely "Christian" ideas of Jesus of Nazareth. What a religion created by Paul: worshipping a poor Jewish charismatic Galilean healer with a gift for encapsulating moral ideas in parables. What went on in Paul's mind when he had his epileptic fit or some other psychotic episode on the way to Damascus so as to convert him from an orthodox Jewish fanatic when in the "aura" of the seizure he hallucinated Jesus resurrected somehow. All the seeds of a messianic religion were already there in a misunderstanding of Isaiah's prophecy, not in Jesus' claims, but in some *messhuggener* idea which would give hope especially to women and the poor, the sick and those in despair, whereas there was only a vacuum created by the decline and fall of the pagan Roman empire. God had sacrificed his only begotten Son for the sins of mankind? It was weird! Primitive! Kneeling before a poor tortured, dying Jew and symbolically eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Freud had plenty to say about the ancestral ontogenetic memory of a band of woman-less brothers revenging themselves on the God-Father who monopolised the women and killing and eating the Son who was the favourite – and then vowing never to kill and eat God or any brother of theirs ever again. And commemorating this vow in their religion.

Five years previously, on the day my own family, the Groenblatts, emigrated to South Africa - in 1936 when I was 10 - I hid over the border in Belarus in a barn on the estate of the Polish lord, Stanislaw Lubliniewski. His wife Luna Lubliniewska was Jewish and Estrella Lubliniewska, their daughter, my age. Whilst I hid, before anyone could discover me, I milled flour in the barn by rolling the millstone over ears of wheat after locking the axle of the windmill designed for that purpose, and baking the flour with "borrowed" yeast kept in a fridge, the loaves put in tins in a wood-stove to rise and cook. It was a holiday and no one was around in the estate's bakery to give me away. I washed the baked, salted bread down with water from a stream, ate wild spinach and wild nuts and berries which I knew from books would give me protein and vitamins.

As the Jews had allegedly conquered the world with Christianity and capitalism and socialism, their ideas (Moses, Jesus, Marx, Freud) spread like a viral disease. The German Nazis caught the disease we never really had except in the minds of our enemies. I know that now. Then I had omnipotent dreams of fighting fascism and going to a Jewish state in Palestine.

Estrella and I went to the junior branch of the Jewish boys' and girls' *gymnasias* as boarders with my cousins in Bialystok. We came home to our village for Shabbat and holidays. My and Estrella's

parents and my grandfathers had motor cars and horses – *Soos, Soosa, Soosa Katana* and *Soos Gadol*. On horseback, we took two days to get home from Bialystok and yet we were little more than children and stayed overnight with relatives halfway between my *shtetl* and Estrella's mansion and the city. I thought of the whole of the Pale of (Jewish) Settlement in those days as *der heim* ("the homeland").

It was both hard and easy in for 15-year-old children in 1941 to understand what was going on. We were surrounded by histories of our people some of whom, like aunt Faith Rosen ("Frumste") told the truth without the gloss of religion. Love and comradeship were stronger than hate. The alienation of militantly nationalistic ideology had not yet eaten into everyone's soul.

I could not bear to be separated from Estrella who lived on her stepfather's estate near our village when we were not in Bialystok at school. We shared everything and kept our very young, naïve love, secret.

Can you be in love in childhood and early puberty? We had played together since we were very small children in the grand estate of her step-father Stanislaw. I spoke Yiddish and we both spoke Polish and Russian and she taught me Ladino, the medieval Spanish her mother's family brought from Spain when they, the Sephardis, were expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. She could play the piano and by the time we were 12 we could read music and sing old-fashioned folk songs from different countries including Negro spirituals. She might play the simpler movements from the Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin Impromptus and sonatas. Sometimes I would play the left hand and she the right if the score was in front of us: "Für Elise" "The Moonlight", the Fantasia Impromptu number 66 (without the fantastic opening chords and arpeggios), Four Impromptus by Schubert. How was it possible that such love, tenderness and erotic passion could be generated by two Germans or Austrians and a Polish composer whose countries were to be the scenes of slaughter unimaginable in the history of mankind?

By 1941: there was an enormous Palaeolithic cave which the Count and my mother's father, Rabbi Philip Oshry and our rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, a descendent of the famous philosopher and doctor of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain, had turned into a refuge.

It was all extraordinary. I had to keep a diary in case we were all killed tomorrow. I had developed the skill of mirror-writing so it would be hard for intruders or enemies to read it.

Estrella's step-father, the Count, and her mother Countess Luna Cordavero-Lubliniewska knew exactly where she and I were - in the secret cave. They were prepared to protect me and my aunts

and uncles and other relatives for Estrella's sake and would join us in hiding. They too were at risk from the German Nazis. And the Russian communists. Katyn had happened. More of that later.

My three aunts and their husbands owned or rented shops and smallholdings and even farms around the village of Milejczyce in eastern Poland and western Belarus including fields and woods in the surrounding countryside.

In a growing atmosphere of anti-Semitic terror, what power did any of us have? We were all in grave danger. Even the young Polish lord was threatened. Russia would take over eastern Poland and he was an army officer – an aristocratic land-owner. Overnight he became an “enemy of the people”.

Because he was very young - 25 but looked 20 - the second husband of Luna - who was 36 - he survived the Katyn Massacre of Polish army officers. The Russians just let him go. In a state of shock, he described it to us: the shooting took place in a wooden cabin, muffled by bags of some heavy substance whilst machinery was allowed to run so there was no panic or mass resistance by the disarmed soldiers who innocently obeyed the orders of their seniors and the heavily armed Russians assuming they would be mobilising in the event of war with Germany.

My maternal aunts and uncles were averse to “running away to South Africa”, being determined anti-fascists, intellectuals, Zionists too. They knew all about what most of the whites of South Africa did to Africans. They feared the African revenge which would come someday. But what would be done by Jews to Arabs and vice-versa?

So, Pan (Count) Stanislaw Lubliniewski had survived the supposedly secret, already notorious Katyn Massacre (*zbrodnia katyńska*) of Polish army officers, but also professionals, the gentry, Polish and Jewish intellectuals, perhaps 22,000 of them, carried out in the spring and early summer of 1940 in Russian-occupied Poland on the orders of the NKVD (the Soviet secret police of the interior department) - on Beria and Stalin's authority - not just at Katyn Forest and but in other secret places. We could feel ourselves go pale with terror when we heard of it.

Afterward the Russians blamed the Nazis.

This killing, on the written authority of Lavrenty Beria and Joseph Stalin had come about after the Russians had occupied eastern Poland, the Germans western Poland, as a result of a Russian-German pact which lasted from August 1939 until 22 June 1941. Meanwhile, until the German

invasion, as I say, Estrella and I went back and forth to school in Bialystok to Milejczyce in our parents' cars and sometimes riding our horses – 13-15 year old children with Grandfather or the Count or the Countess. There was fury amongst the Count's family when they got to know of relatives, army officers, who just disappeared after early to mid-1940. Stanislaw's marriage to a Jewess was shocking enough without this assault on their race- and religious-purity,

When we went riding or driving to and from Bialystok we would take short cuts or diversions through the forests only to be confronted by Russian soldiers, at first the regular army, later after "Operation Barbarossa" began, partisan commando groups. The Russians were sometimes cheerful, almost comradely, sharing their food and, if they had wine or beer, tempting us to drink and sing with them and dance their *Cossackska*. We could speak Russian and addressed them as comrades. They would flirt with Estrella and the youngest amongst them, who looked like boys, would challenge me to wrestling contests or teach us card games. The Count and Countess reckoned it was politic to stay friendly with the Russians' regular army units and even more so the partisans they left behind. But we could have got into trouble with these drunkards roistering around the forest, if things got out of hand. We would untie the horses and gallop back onto a good bridleway or reverse the cars into the nearby road which would get us to Milejczyce and the Lubliniewski estate.

Sometimes Estrella and I we would sleep at each other's houses. If we were left alone we would try not to give way to our desire – even by the age of 15 - but to sublimate it with sport and play: in games of tennis on the estate or studying or reading or playing music and singing.

Stanislaw was a liberal Catholic and Luna an enlightened Jewess and both of them wanted to guide us away from the cauldron of a Europe about to be thrown into moral chaos. It would be made worse if we plunged too deep into a sexual relationship that we were too emotionally immature to handle. We promised each other we would "wait" at least we were 16.

After the terrible tragedy of Katyn, Hitler's war against the USSR, Operation Barbarossa, began. And the anticipated backlash: the Russians were preparing the way for a post-war communist government with as little presence as possible of the Polish haute-bourgeoisie and intelligentsia.

So, 22,000 less of the Polish military and political leaders were tricked into assembling so that the USSR's NKVD could wipe them out. This pact created a sense of security amongst the Nazis and gave the USSR extra-time – two years – during which the Soviet Union could produce weapons and resources for the war effort.

One can say with certainty that the USSR *did* resist the Nazis in Stalingrad, Leningrad, Moscow and Kharkov, with more success than if Hitler had ordered a *blitzkrieg* against Russia in 1939 instead of 1941.

But at what a price?

After the war I read the famous novel in which all this was cleverly represented by George Orwell. After the anti-human revolution in *Animal Farm*, Napoleon (modelled on Stalin) the leading farm creature in Orwell's allegory (who was a pig – an animal who is clean and intelligent if properly looked after) affirmed his belief in animalism (“socialism”) in one country/farm.

The real historical Napoleon *did* export some aspects of the French Revolution.

But Orwell's animal leaders created an elite whilst the rest of the farm creatures had to make the best of being followers and endure scapegoating within the same and single “socialist” dictatorship (the farm run by the pig elite, who now walked on their back legs and dressed like humans).

The loyal farm horse – supposedly sent off to his “retirement” – is actually destined for the knackers' yard – sold by Napoleon the Stalin character. Like the Stakhanovite - the loyal worker who exceeds his production targets out of patriotic duty – the loyal Party horse is betrayed.

The Ukrainians of whom three million starved to death because Stalin confiscated the wheat harvest especially of *kulaks*, rich peasants, were betrayed. Some of them may have believed the Bolshevik promises. Ukrainians now had different views of the glorious Soviet motherland. It was a partly ethnically prejudiced dictatorship not a place of non-racist egalitarian socialism.

With Stanislaw miraculously alive, there was one less amongst about 22,000 Polish and Jewish corpses dumped in mass graves all over eastern Poland including Katyn Forest with bullets in the back of their necks. And the specifically Jewish-oriented Holocaust killings had not yet begun.

Despite all this, to me, Estrella, Luna, Stanislaw stood as living symbols for the future, because of the values they shared with our partly-western- educated rabbis, Moshe ben Maimon and Philip Oshry, who all went to Freiburg University in Germany before going to the Jewish seminary in Vilnius the capital of Lithuania – the famous Slabotka Yeshiva. Stanislaw had gone to Freiburg years later, but

the two rabbis and Stanislaw were friends in the locality although separated by age, class, wealth, nationality, religion.

Luna's Cordovero family were originally Spanish Jews, exiled in 1492 from, as their name suggested, Cordova. Their forefathers had become wealthy merchants and lived in Bulgaria which had been part of the Ottoman Empire which rescued the Spanish Jews when they were expelled. The Sultan sent a ship to transport the expelled Jews to what became Istanbul and elsewhere in his domain. To the Sultan the Jews were valuable as tradespeople, bankers, literate officials and teachers.

The Cordeveros already had Turkish-Jewish relatives (Sephardis) in Bulgaria before and after the First World War. So, the Cordeveros lived outside the Jewish Pale of Settlement. The Pale was a region of the Baltic states, western Russia, Ukraine and Poland where local and central governments restricted Jews to the demarcated Jewish quarters of towns and Jewish villages within the Pale of what was the Tsarist Empire. To control an economically valuable but often troublesome and certainly troubled – victimised – group.

When Luna was in her twenties married to her Bulgarian-Jewish husband, Estrella's father, they went to Palestine to help found a collective farm with other Zionists. Natan Cordevero was killed. Arab peasants attacked the settlement - the land of which had been sold over their head by absentee Turkish landowners.

Luna returned to Bulgaria and then went to Germany to study medicine with Estrella, a young child. There she met Stanislaw. The marriage between a Polish aristocrat and a Bulgarian-Turkish Jew who had met at university in Freiburg was an unprecedented event which totally altered Count Stanislaw Lubliniewski's relationship with his Jewish and Polish tenants and neighbours.

The fact that he survived the Katyn Massacre had already given him an almost messianic status. Of all Poles, a Pole in love with a Jewish woman and a lord at that, an officer in the Polish army should not have survived given both Russian and Polish anti-Semitism. The Bulgarians were less violently anti-Semitic.

Both the Jewish and the Polish communities were as much shocked as amazed at this unprecedented turn of events. Stanislaw had survived Katyn by a stroke of luck, but others saw God's hand in it.

My mother's father Rabbi Philip Oshry was a farmer and a scholar rather than a practising rabbi. He regarded God as an ethical hypothesis who had become tangible, Real. God was embodied even in nature. He and Rabbi Maimon, our peripatetic rabbi served a number of synagogues in Poland and Lithuania. They had all been students together at Freiburg University in the late 20s and early 30s – before the two Jewish men went to Vilna/ Slabotka for their religious ordination. As European rabbis went, they were extraordinarily liberal.

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Now in 1941, I, Jacob, couldn't write letters any more to my parents, my older sister Eve, my twin brother David, and my father's kin, or my paternal uncles, the Groenblatt brothers, who are already in South Africa. The borders were closed to the postal services.

I had always been a strange and difficult child. In 1935 as a boy of 9, I had fought like fury against going with my mother, father, twin and sister to Africa.

My father was a poet, Eli Groenblatt, and as well as writing, actually farmed on land adjoining Philip Oshry's small farm. The Lubliniewksi dynasty under Stanislaw's father had freed themselves from the feudal anti-Semitism which prohibited landholding by Jews. My father published in Polish, Russian, German, Hebrew and Yiddish. I must have inherited some imaginative ability from my father the poet/writer for I had dreams of being swallowed up by huge cities with robotic miners and machines digging gold and diamonds out of the agonised African earth. Like in the German expressionist film of Fritz Lang - *Metropolis*.

Unlike the belief in Rabbi Loeb of Prague's *golem* – a robot made of clay of superhuman strength – I knew that only by force of arms and by exile and silence can the potential victims survive. The Zionist "dream" – "it is no legend" – is won by force of arms and the dream of Arab nationalism can only come about when it comes to terms with the nuclear-armed Jewish state, which one day will no doubt become a bi-partite or one state.

But as a boy I had only a vague intuition that South Africa would destroy my identity. The truth was I wanted to stay on amongst the people, the farm animals and the wild creatures that I loved. I was devoted to Rabbi Moshe Maimon, our man of God. And I grieved that my grandfather Rabbi Philip Oshry seemed at first to want to establish the family in South Africa where they already had cousins. I feared that he would never come back to Poland. But he did. If God, the ethical hypothesis, which became Real because you believed in it worked for him why not for even more fervent believers - us?

Rabbi Maimon, on the other hand, had to be more careful with his Jewish theology. He could not afford to offend the rabbinical establishments in Grodno, Bialystok, Kaunas and Vilnius. Rabbi Philip Oshry, who farmed and studied but preached and taught occasionally, could extend his knowledge of the Enlightenment. He took science in his stride, he read Einstein and the latest advances in cosmology.

So, I too knew that the universe was not created in 6 days, Moses did not receive the whole Torah directly from God's mouth, the whole contents of God's mind, past, present and future was an admirable subject for meditation, but eventually I learned, by the time I was 15 in 1941, that the idea of God's mind was not an empirical truth but a hypothesis based on ethics, yes, *but also on a leap of faith*. Everything fell into place after I read Kierkegaard.

Nothing wrong with that. At Freiburg University the two future rabbis and after them, years later, Luna Cordovero and the much younger Count Lubliniewski even later, had heard lectures on Soren Kierkegaard which argued persuasively for faith attained after a leap across the abyss of unbelief that separated aesthetics / ethics – the beautiful and the good – from some sort of sophisticated or fundamentalist myth about God.

Rabbi Maimon, being a practising rabbi, had to avoid the sophisticated philosophical God of Maimonides, Spinoza and Einstein insofar as Einstein said, metaphorically, "God does not play dice," as if someone had asserted that accident and chaos *did* play a part *after* creation but the *laws of physics* covered exact events and *possible* events not strictly determined only were only statistical *probabilities*.

God does not play dice in this universe despite chaos theory because there is only one group of related laws governing physics. But God *as an idea* or even as a symbol of the laws of nature may coexist with some degree of chaos in this universe, and *may* "allow" other universes where the laws of physics *may* be different. They may be so far away we will never receive their background microwave radiation, the electro-magnetism, the nuclear forces and the gravity they generate – that is their light and sound.

Now we had more mundane concerns. Maimon and Oshry were worried that the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany caused such doubt about the efficacy of God's intervention in history on the side of the good that Judaism (and Christianity for that matter) were more or less doomed – for the time being.

Hitler also made the leap of faith, although definitely not from a firm ground in ethics and aesthetics although he *thought* he was talking racial *science*.

A charlatan had taken possession of the mind of a whole nation.

The Chosen were treated like unclean, leprous animals. Chosen for what? Historically, suffering exile from Zion, persecution by raving mobs of anti-Jewish townspeople, Dominican friars pursuing the alleged Christ-killers, exclusion from professions, usually banned from owning land, accused of killing Christian children at Easter time to make unleavened bread out of the blood of these young martyrs.

England had made saints - little Hugh of Lincoln and little William of Norwich in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in England as victims of Jewish blood-thirstiness at Pesach time: our festival of the exodus from Egypt, their Easter when Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, a kind of communalist Essene who followed Pharisee rabbinical interpretation of the Torah, was crucified as a subversive, died, was buried, went down into hell and resurrected to sit on the right hand of God...

Aaron of Lincoln financed numerous cathedrals and abbeys and lent money to King Henry II himself in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, and was the richest man in Norman England, yet the Jews of England were expelled in 1290 after the York massacre of hundreds of Jews by an anti-Semitic mob. All debts owing to about 3000 English Jews were thereby cancelled and the king, the nobility and the clergy benefitted from no longer owing money to Aaron of Lincoln.

The medieval expulsions and massacres of Jews was now industrialised by Hitler in Europe and Russia.

Rabbi Maimon warned his congregations that God veiled his face in shame and horror at the history of the Jews' suffering down the ages, *and it was God who allowed free will even Hitler's*. Free will was brought about by consciousness. In the end Hitlerism would be destroyed because righteousness would always eventually prevail. Eventually? Eventually we would all be dead, murdered perhaps.

There was, perhaps, only one solution to the so-called Jewish question: Palestine. But this solution of the Jewish question also raised another problematic question: that was the question of Palestine itself: the *human* rights of the indigenous Arabs, Christian and Muslim.

Although the Palestinian Arabs may originally have been Judeans and Israelites before Mohamed's armies from Arabia converted them forcibly to Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century of the common era, by now they and their leaders like Al Hussein were entrenched Muslim Palestinian Arab nationalists. Al Hussein, the grand mufti of Jerusalem would become a guest of Hitler in Berlin. The solution lay in secular political action once the extremes of war were over.

Could you have a Jewish Palestine without a war against the Arabs who were already fighting mad about Jewish purchases of land from absentee Turkish and their own Arab landowners? There had already been violent attacks between both sides – going on since after the Great War when Ashkenazi Zionists arrived. Unlike the previous Jewish populations, the Sephardi and the Mizrahi Jews (the Spanish and Oriental Jews) the Ashkenazis wished to establish a Jewish state, not remain a colony within a Turkish or British empire or even under an Arab nationalist government.

Just before they went to South Africa without me in 1936, David and I and Eve would spend hours, sometimes whole days reading children's encyclopaedias in one or other of our languages, Polish, English and French about Palestine, Arabs, Jewish history, Africa, Germany, Russia, how weapons of war were constructed, battle tactics, and in very simple terms, about the conflict between religion and science. My sister Eve who was older would explain to David and me when we didn't understand.

In Hebrew and Yiddish, we struggled through the impenetrable mysteries and over-simplifications of the children's bible and the latest children's novels by pioneering Zionists. Our teachers at the Jewish schools expected great things from us. Now, my siblings and parents were gone and there was no more school except in the Palaeolithic cave in which we took refuge. Hitler had determined that being Jewish would be something that would disappear from the face of the earth.

David was interested in science and astronomy. I on the other hand was inclined towards romantic fiction, poetry, religion. Eve couldn't wait to get to Africa and was fascinated by the whole question of ethnicity. She wanted to be a social anthropologist.

After they left without me, I missed them terribly. What would become of us? How could I and Estrella and Luna and Stanislaw have been so foolishly heroic as to not to emigrate when there was still time?

None of us feared Africans or the wild animals of Africa. Only I feared the mines. David really wanted to go to South Africa where we had relatives who were engineers and medical scientists. David couldn't wait to leave Europe. He and everybody else knew that Hitler had to be fought even

in Africa because he would spread like the disease he said we were - everywhere. So why did I stay on in Europe?

I confided in my beloved maternal grandfather Rabbi Philip Oshry, who had undertaken a dangerous journey from safety in Africa back into the European cauldron in 1937 to try to rescue the relatives who stayed. That year at the age of 11 I wanted to fight the Nazis and die if necessary!

Because my aunts and uncles in Poland were country people, educated farmers rather than urbanites, they knew about guns, explosives needed for quarrying stone, hunting, living like guerrillas off the land – if necessary. They had the mentality of fighters.

We all knew from radio broadcasts and newspaper reports how Germany was rearming with tanks, planes, machine-guns, cannons, ships comprising armies, an air-force, navies staffed by millions of highly trained men organised into squadrons, battalions, fleets.

Traditional Jewish passivity in the face of God's supposed wrathful punishment was, I thought, simply an historical error, a circumstantial accident. It was more to do with what to *do* with freedom now that the Enlightenment had, supposedly come about. A bright boy of 10 in 1936 brought up in a philosophical Jewish atmosphere, understood intuitively what was free will. And that it did not contradict an ethical God, or even the tribal God of the old Israelites Whom the prophets said was concerned with universal not just particular Jewish or Israelite justice. Who hated sacrifices and incense.

Even the Ba'al Shem Tov, Eliezer ben Israel, the founder of Hasidism believed in a mystical Judaism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the very century of the Enlightenment, believed that the Shekhina, the holy spirit could pervade reality as if it was a kind of intelligence.

But my grandfather Rabbi Oshry prayed with me for a redeeming divine intervention as fortunately happened to my namesake in the book of Genesis when the biblical Jacob encountered "*ish*" "a man" – perhaps an angel – with whom he wrestled all night.

As a result of this spiritual encounter the biblical Jacob's name was changed. Jacob became a true descendent of Abraham and a transmitter of moral sense, no longer the cheater of his brother Esau's inheritance.

*Ya'akov* meant "heel". Jacob held onto his twin-brother's Esau's heel when Esau was born first. With his mother Rebecca collusion, the biblical Jacob' was "holding on" – his dubious behaviour supplanting Esau's birth-right and his fraudulent acquisition of their father Isaac's final blessing.

Rabbi Oshry asked me, Jacob Groenblatt, if I wanted my name to be changed to *Yis'ra'el* - Israel - "champion of God" as happened to the biblical Jacob.. I said I was quite happy to be called *Ya'akov*.

I – *Ya'akov* felt myself to be a tiny speck of humanity faced by a seemingly insuperable military, naval, air power coming from Germany. In synagogue at services taken by Rabbi Maimon I prayed to the Jewish God who had singled out his chosen people to be a light unto the nations.

God would help Joseph Stalin re-arm Soviet Russia, even though, like the Tsars before him, Stalin also hated some Jews who, in his paranoia he felt threatened him - as "rootless cosmopolitans" and he hated and wanted to, and did destroy part of the Polish gentry – hence Katyn.

I prayed for God to stop Stalin killing Polish army officers and Jewish members of the old Bolshevik politburo - to put aside his anti-Semitism - in the service of a war effort. But soon Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov would be executed after show-trials and Trotsky was assassinated by Stalin's agent in his exile in Mexico.

Rabbi Philip Oshry's first emigration to South Africa was after the Great War. And so, he went on back and forth to Poland.

After he bought a farm for my father outside Johannesburg, his son-in-law Eli Groenblatt, Eli ran it productively as well as writing poetry, essays, novels.

Grandfather Philip came back to Poland. Moral sense, courage, fidelity were wiped out in the oncoming Holocaust and in the death of millions and millions occurred in the most destructive century the world has ever known.

They were all frantic with anxiety that I would rather hide in the woods in the freezing cold, hidden away in the attic of the forester over the border in Belarus, not hungry, but preoccupied with the troubles of the world, rather than leave for South Africa. Rabbi Philip Oshry had made a niche in South Africa for the family and desperately wanted me back with them – all of us together.

They even got a distant relative, a psychiatric doctor who was once part of Freud's psychoanalytic circle in Vienna, to come from Warsaw to try extricate me from the house of my friend the Belarussian forester, who lived next to the mill and ran the bakery to reason and relate to me. How could a mere child want to fight the impossibly powerful force of anti-Semitism?

In fact, it was quite simple. The fact was that until the age of 4 in 1930 I spent most of my time with my maternal aunts, my mother's three sisters, who stayed behind in Poland. I listened to talk of the national liberation of the Jewish people which, if it was going to happen, would take place in Palestine.

But with heavy hearts the adults foresaw yet another military struggle after Hitler had been defeated. Everyone marvelled at how much – at 14/15 in 1940 – I knew so much about politics and history. David and Eve were much more attached to our mother and father but I preferred my aunts. And the forester and his family. And Estrella, Luna and Stanislaw.

As one can imagine this created a colossal rift in the family. David and me were Minna and Eliezer's second and third children - twins. Eve my sister was amenable, charming, pretty, kind, obedient. David too was a good boy. Yet partly because Eliezer and Minna, a farmer/writer and a piano teacher, were so busy working, and partly because the three aunts, Minna's sisters had flocks of their own children around them in the village south east of Bialystok, I formed a special attachment to them. Although the aunts lived in the same village as we did, the aunts were highly interesting and, for their time, unusual intellectuals. They travelled, they had trained overseas, they drove cars and rode horses, were feminists, socialists, Zionists, linguists who spoke, read in English, Polish, Russian, German and French – achievements and accomplishments they transmitted to their nieces and nephews and children. Their husbands were strong men too and proud of their wives: Jeremiah Edelstein Vita's husband a musician and composer, Benjamin Blumenthal, Rebecca's husband, a doctor, and Mendel Rosen, Faith's husband, a farmer and business-man.

My mother Minna-Fayge simply could not make her sisters promise to join them in South Africa with me. Barely holding back her tears, as if part of her body was actually being torn apart, she left a long letter for me, her beloved other twin child, trying not to upset me by hunting me down and giving way to her devastated feelings of loss, face to face.

I was nowhere to be found: eventually my hiding place was known only by grandfather Rabbi Philip Oshry: the Belarus forester helped me find the Palaeolithic cave on the estate of the Count who with the other rabbi, Ben Maimon were making it habitable. My parents left without me.

As if the Katyn and other forest massacres by the time I was 14 in 1940 were merely the prelude to the Holocaust proper, we soon learned that Hitler's devastating death-squads, the *Einsatzgruppen* and the "police battalions" would begin the Holocaust in Lithuania, Belarus and Poland soon enough. It happened in 1941.

Of course, it was common sense that this would happen. Actually, the Polish lord had a two-way radio and was in touch with a Polish resistance group and raised the alarm amongst the Jews of the village much of which he owned. God had apparently covered His face in shame and horror.

In retrospect, with hindsight one can understand it: mass-killing in the more backward areas of eastern Europe (creating living space for ethnic Germans - Hitler's *Lebensraum*) would attract less attention from the western powers, who might even welcome Hitler's attack on Bolshevism and the Jews. Churchill called the Nazis barbarians but Halifax and Neville Chamberlain were prepared to appease the German monster in the 1930s with tentacles everywhere (in Franco's Spain and Mussolini's Italy and Japan) as long as it left Britain alone.

My parents Minna and Eli now in South Africa and the local maternal grandparent Philip as well as the maternal aunts were in an acute state of anxiety. There was no time to talk any more. Rabbi Philip Oshry tore me out of his aunt's Frumste's (Faith's) arms and bundled me out of the house in the rose-red dawn light.

Rabbi Philip had the horse just called "Mare" in Hebrew – *Soosa*. My grandfather who was huge and strong even at 65 lifted me into the stirrups and I tugged on her bridle and embraced her neck. *Soosa* I had known since childhood, and the Rabbi mounted the mare's brother *Soos*. Then there was a third horse called *Soos Gadol* – "Big Horse" and *Soosa Katana* "Little Horse" who followed on a lead. The three of us included Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, and we galloped out of the little town. The Rabbi's wife was literally *fainting* – lying down in her synagogue clothes, prostrate in prayer and anguish.

We evaded the border post between Poland and Belarus and made for the cave hidden 20 kilometres away in the forest accessible only through bridleways.

Ever since he re-arrived secretly first passing through Palestine, Rabbi Philip Oshry joined Rabbi Moshe Maimon and our Count Stanislaw Lubliniewski. They had been turning the cave into a

dwelling knowing that this was our only hope now that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was coming to an end.

The Sephardi Jewish wife Countess Luna Cordevero and their daughter, my friend, Estrella would be hiding in the cave too. The cave was in a hill rising above the forest which they had turned into a dwelling, installing it with stoves and chimneys. There must have been a small volcano there in the early years of the earth's formation because there were dried out lava holes outside the cave leading to subterranean water contained in pools and stalagmites. The water must have come from deep below the earth's surface because it was warm and smelt of sulphur – a geyser. You could swim in it. In the cave itself there were prehistoric paintings on the walls showing huge stags, bison, boar, wolves, people hunting with dogs surrounded by these animal deities to which the Palaeolithic inhabitants of the cave prayed. Their skeletons could be found if you dug down into graves just outside the cave. They were buried with their hunting weapons and digging sticks. Some of the women were buried with necklaces of decorative stones.

If Elijah had lived in a cave fed by ravens, that was good enough for us, fugitives from murder squads knowing what our fate would be now that Hitler had finally broken his pact with Stalin and what would accompany the war – indeed what was a major cause of Hitler's insane aggression – a hate campaign of extermination against the Jews.

Most of the Jews would not believe reports of concentration camps even though the *Einsatzgruppen* were already at work in the summer of 1941 murdering Jews and getting Russian P.O.W.s to bury them in trenches and pits, going from village to town, to city-suburbs where they created ghettos and from which eventually the Jews would be transported to death-camps. Their ambition was to wipe out every Jew, man, woman and child on the planet earth. The Jews had lived amongst gentile neighbours some of whom joined the Nazis to annihilate Jews, gypsies, the old, the handicapped and the sick from multi-religious and multi-racial communities which had been extant for between 500-800 years.

The Jews having fled from Germany from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards from places like Speyer and Worms where, inspired by Dominican friars, mobs killed Jews, the so-called Christ-killers, they were welcomed by the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Jews were needed – by the aristocracy, the ruling class, who wanted farm bailiffs, shopkeepers, artisans, money-lenders, teachers, literate people to develop these backward places. They would use Jews as a buffer between themselves and the peasants whom the churches could inspire for the occasional *pogrom*. Frequent expulsions against the Jews diverted the people away from dangerous doctrines emanating from Polish and Lithuanian nationalisms and as regards the educated middle classes, the ideas of the French Revolution.

Despite the scholar-farmer Rabbi Philip Oshry, most of the rabbis did not trust the European Enlightenment, or the Protestant upheaval which urged literacy so that every person could find God in the newly translated Hebrew Bible and more so, in their own New Testament. The trouble was Matthew, Mark, Luke and especially John put words in Jesus' mouth condemning Jews.

Religious literacy was double-edged, like the turning, flaming sword guarding the Garden of Eden against the return of Adam and Chavve, his wife, Eve. Chavva-Eve had brought knowledge into the world through disobedience of patriarchal authority. That was the opinion of the proto-feminists, Frumste (Faith Rosen), Chaitse (Vita Edelstein) and Rivste (Rebecca Blumenthal).

The ones who left for South Africa before and after the Great War were often intellectuals and artists as well as the petit-bourgeoisie, but so were some of the ones who stayed. My eldest aunt, Frumste, going under the English equivalent of that name, Faith, had managed to travel from Poland to study in London. Minna-Fayge Groenblatt my mother had become a pianist and teacher.

Frumste (Faith Rosen) had become a violinist who also trained at the Royal Academy of Music – and eventually was in the Palestine Orchestra later the Israel Philharmonic.

My paternal grandfather, Joseph Groenblatt, ran an agricultural store in our village Milejczyce selling seeds, produce, small farming machinery and implements to the Polish and the few Jewish farmers who had been, unusually, granted land by the Polish lord. He and my paternal grandmother were now both in South Africa with their nuclear and extended kin.

Joseph Groenblatt was a respectable man, very orthodox. Before they left for South Africa, his son, my father Eliezer referred to Jesus Christ in the house during Shabbat lunch. Joseph threatened to shoot him with his revolver used for guarding the house and the shop in the event of a *pogrom* - for mentioning "Joske Pandera" a taboo person.

My father Eliezer had read the Christian bible secretly with a friendly Polish Catholic priest who was unusually well educated in the Jewish background of Jesus and his apostles. Pandera was allegedly the name of the Roman centurion who witnessed the crucifixion and it was, according to scandalously hostile Jewish orthodox tradition, he, Pandera, who had illegitimately impregnated Mary – Miriam - the Virgin. It all had to do with a terrible, tragic mistake. "*Aalmah*" means "young woman". "*Betulah*" means "virgin." The prophet Isaiah was simply reassuring King Ahaz that a prodigy would be born to a *young woman* as a sign from God that Israel would be protected from Assyria.

Would a Jewish God bring about a virgin birth of a messiah in whose name Jews would be killed for 2000 years? Zeus might, Jupiter might. What do you expect from pagans? Colonising imperialists – even their gods... (Joseph Groenblatt had picked up a bit of political consciousness in his youth in the Jewish Bund – a sort of Socialist Workers Party for Jews.) On that my father Eliezer tried to clarify the issues with his father Joseph, to which Joseph responded: “From you, an *Epikoros* (an Epicurean) I have to take lessons in Yiddishe belief? You should have gone on at the Slabotka Yeshiva. Now, look your father-in-law, Moshe Oshry, a degree from Freiburg and a rabbinical training to fall back on in hard times - with these German bastards and the Bolsheviks are attacking Jews in the west and the east. Do you know that Stalin has killed all the Jews on his Politburo who also actually made the Russian revolution in 1917? Rootless cosmopolitan is the new communist word for Jew!”

“The Torah was finally written in Babylon not conveyed *b’ al pey* from the mouth of HaShem to Moshe Rabbenu,” said my father Eliezer.” And it says in the Torah that we should love our neighbour. And Rabbi Hillel, blessings be upon him told us....”

Out would come the revolver at this declaration of historical truth, as a response to Joseph Groenblatt’s heresy. Of course, by this time it was a joke.

But it was Rabbi Philip Oshry’s opinion that Leviticus may have been written or collated by the Priestly author of the Hebrew Bible in Babylon post 586 BCE after the Judean king’s court was exiled following Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of the first Temple of King Solomon (the existence of which and whom trained archaeologists who had done digs in Palestine doubted: this *might be* more mythology.) In the presence of two Rabbis, Joseph kept quiet albeit stunned by heresy from such distinguished sources.

My ancestors, then, were Polish or Russian or Lithuanian Jews depending in what historical epoch you placed them. The sovereign or imperial power changed many times in the 500-800 years they lived in eastern Europe – ever since they were driven out of 13<sup>th</sup> century Germany and later as a result of *pogroms* in cities like Speyer and Worms – and – with often fatal consequences - actually welcomed in by the gentry in the Pale of Settlement. They became middle-men – retailers, wholesalers, bailiffs, tax-collectors, estate-managers, innkeepers – occasionally farmers or even horse-breeders and of course rabbis and teachers. Another even more humorously radical cousin declared he was descended from Alsatian horse-thieves. Not any old horse-thieves but from a civilized Franco-German place like Alsace-Lorraine.

Every so often, especially at Easter time, the local peasants could be and were incited to attack the Jews – the scapegoats - siphoning off discontent generated by serfdom, feudalism, oppression

fundamentally caused by the Polish and Russian and German landed classes and a growing capitalism spreading east from central and western Europe and the Americas, a capitalism of which the Jews were seen as the malign agents from which the landed gentry benefitted but from which the peasants were excluded unless they emigrated or submitted to proletarian toil and hideous conditions in the new industrial cities. Jews who became socialists were also seen as enemies of the nationalisms which gripped the local working classes and the indigenous bourgeoisie in a fever of anti-imperialist and anti-socialist discontent sometimes tinged with anti-Semitism.

The peripatetic Rabbi Aaron Moshe Maimon, was deeply versed in religious and secular knowledge and said to his congregants early in 1941 that they and all of them should listen to him and to Rabbi Philip Oshry and find somewhere to hide. They were already deeply depressed about the rumours flying around especially because their relative Rabbi Philip Oshry risked his life returning to Poland from South Africa where he had lived with his wife Rose Oshry, near his oldest daughter Minna-Fayge. There was only one *shul* in Johannesburg which opened in 1936, Beit Israel, which would employ a progressive rabbi. They kept his job open, so he could go back and rescue relatives stuck in the little towns – the *shletlach* – who would not or could not emigrate or hide or join the guerrilla bands putting up resistance to the Nazi invaders.

One way or another the old country, *der heim*, gripped me tightly to its suffocating bosom. No one except Minna-Fayge and Eliezer Groenblatt and my siblings had wanted to go with Moshe Oshry to South Africa in the 1930s where it was feared that would all succumb to the evils of British South African and Afrikaner savagery, barbarism, materialism, not knowing, not believing *at that stage* that it was true that the Holocaust was around the corner, waiting to slaughter all of them.

If only they knew that the Teutonic and Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian barbarians were ready to smash down the door with their rifle butts and their automatic weapons, and the death pits would eventually be dug in the forests by Russian prisoners of war.

The *rebbetzen*, the rabbi's wife, Miryam Maimon lay down, face down, totally prone like the high priest in the Temple clad in his magnificent robes (she was wearing her very smart summer frock printed with daisies in white and blue, the colours of a *talith*) to pray on a veranda floor which faced south in the summer and was dripping with jasmine, poignantly lovely in summertime on the very cusp of catastrophe.

How was it that God would not intervene to save them?

My wandering grandfather Oshry had been treated as part of the secure, white ruling class in Africa as early as 1918 in the exploratory foray, and out of heroic desperation, had returned to the hell-hole of and Russian occupied Poland and then German Poland and Belorussia to get the ones left behind, wife, parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, who could not get visas or passports, who *would* not, or *could* not sell up, pack, to get out of Hitler's, the monster's fatal grasp. Besides, many of the Western democracies had after the Great War tended to close the doors of immigration to any more Jews except those with a good deal of political influence, sponsors and money.

Rabbi Maimon and Rabbi Oshry both had the good fortune which to some of the rest of the family was a source of danger and taboo: their great blessing was also their great sin: they had gone to Freiburg to study philosophy, and knew about biblical archaeology. They had read about digs in Palestine looking for evidence of the exodus from Egypt and Joshua's conquest of Canaan. They were both poisoned by the Enlightenment although Maimon, a practising rabbi kept quiet about it! The archaeologists found nothing concrete except the possibly untruthful *stele* of the pharaoh claiming that Israel had been destroyed in the second millennium (coinciding with Moses and the exodus). At least Israel did exist then!

Rabbi Maimon had been infected by the Enlightenment, much to the horror of his wife. There she was, the *rebbetzen*, lying on the veranda floor prostrate with agony and fear and the heavenly scent and sight of the jasmine, there too, a reminder of an Eden that had been replaced by *Gehinnom*, a pit of inconceivable devils, barely human, robotic, insensitive, utterly brutalised, noxious half-insects, half-simian monsters as if the reality depicted by Hieronymus Bosch, was waiting to annihilate them. And not just a quick bullet to the head. But to beat them, to undress the women naked, to blow apart the heads of little children in their parents' arms.

Which Temple was it the high priest of which once a year lay prone like the rabbi's wife, pleading with YHVH whose most holy name could be uttered only by a descendent of Aaron, Moses' brother, a *kohan*, and even so the sacred Name of God respectfully muffled out by the music of the Levites – choral voices, trumpets, drums, cymbals, harps, lyres, flutes, tambourines?

The second Temple were rebuilt on the ruins of some of the Judean and Israelite remains - *possibly* Solomon's Temple.

Judean scribes wrote up and edited the previously scattered scrolls of the Hebrew Bible in Babylon. So much torment, execution, torture and pain had come from the two Bibles and their interpretation. Jewish fate was surely also "written" by the Jewish God and the followers of *Joske Pandera* in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles as the heart of a really heartless world.

These contradictions of a hellish world, compensated for by heaven were, some said, understood by Karl Marx – self-hating Jew that he was. However, in this respect, his followers said he was correct: religion is the heart of a heartless world. And Sigmund Freud – who called himself a godless Jew: the seemingly ethical Jews *suffered* from their ethics, *and really hated God the Father*. Circumcision and the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants were displacements of men, their holiness belied by the actual *enslavement* of women, symbolically chaining them to the maternal workplaces: the nursery and the kitchen and the marital bed. The contradictions of capitalism, the contradictory return of the repressed came back to strangle even those who sought to mitigate the effects of Money, Greed, Lust, Class in the more humane intellectual and artistic segments of various diaspora societies.

But anything philosophically pessimistic or merely scientific which shook up and threatened newly hegemonic clerics, traders, merchants, gentry, nobility, monarchs, generals *could* be utterly and viciously destroyed. Until the Enlightenments brought a temporary relief, in between further periods of war, famine, refugees, desperation without end in an overcrowded and ecologically damaged world.

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The cave was an enormous Palaeolithic place in which human beings had sheltered tens of thousands of years ago.

Unlike Plato's allegorical cave we were not slaves chained in such a way that we could only fixate on the Palaeolithic animals painted on the walls showing a spiritual hunt-scene where our *homo sapiens* ancestors worshipped their stag, bison, boar, wolves and great hunting birds on which they depended after the great ice age receded. We were indeed constantly on the hunt for meat to feed about 50 of us who eventually joined us, but we also had a cow and calf for milk and cheese and chickens in the stable. I grew thin surviving on the vegetables and fruit that Stanislaw brought in and, like a squirrel had collected hazels and berries. When I grew weak the two doctors, Luna and Ben Blumenthal persuaded me to eat meat, eggs and cheese.

I, and my grandfather Philip Oshry and Moshe ben Maimon and all the others that eventually joined us slept in one half, with a brick wall separating us from the other half for the horses. The mouth of the cave was bricked up, but there were even windows knocked through the brickwork with glass which opened out into the clear, fresh, forest-scented air. And wooden doors. And wood-burning stoves. None of us, human or animal could survive the winter without them. When the rest of our kin and some Jewish neighbours arrived chopping firewood to keep the stoves going for baking and cooking became my special role.

It was still late summer, August 1941. The horses were hobbled and grazed near the cave. They had bales of hay and water in the stable (half of the bricked-up cave) with their own wood-burning stove to stop them freezing when the winter came. Lonely and anxious I put my arms around Soosa's and Soos's and Soos Gadol's necks and fed them juicy carrots stored in a sack hanging from the ceiling of the human half of the cave. Grandfather and Rabbi Maimon and all the others were asleep on camp-beds in sleeping-bags, the woodstove burning at a low heat. Chimneys pushing through the brickwork high up near the ceiling of the overhanging arch of the cave let out the smoke we just hoped would not give us away to our enemies – Russian, Polish, German.

I looked up at the sky through grandfather's binoculars. He stopped himself going mad with anxiety about the Nazis killing every one of his beloved family when their death-squads would, they reckoned, had by now arrived in their village: I wanted to shout out what I knew of the truth but he had shout silently in my mind.

I looked through the windows up at the stars.

My mind had been set on fire thinking, remembering everything I had learned, in the *gymnasium* library in Warsaw where I boarded with cousins so that I could get a good education.

Now that they had made the cave habitable, now that, through Count Stanislaw's two-way radio they knew the police-battalions and the *Einsatzgruppen* were already conducting the genocide led by the SS, was the time to rescue my aunts and uncles and cousins from the village.

I woke grandfather and brought him coffee heated on the wood-stove and brown bread baked in the oven inside the stove. He let the horses out and gave them fresh water and hay and saddled them. We would ask Stanislaw for a milking cow and calf.

Rabbi Oshry had drawn maps for Rabbi Maimon and the relatives, showing where, using tractors pulling wagons containing 50 or more people and supplies, including tents, they could meet up on a bridleway leading from Poland across the Belarus border into the otherwise impenetrable muddy forest on this very morning.

Count Lubliniewski, in the Polish army before the Katyn Massacres in March-April 1940, had permission to take arms and ammunition, tents, sleeping bags, medical and tinned food supplies

from an arsenal in Bialystok in a heavy lorry with colossal wheels and huge tyres to supply those he called partisans from his village. That they were Jews could not be mentioned.

By the evening there was a gathering of re-united relatives. Stanislaw organised the younger men and able-bodied women into rifle /machine gun infantry groups which went deeper into the forest to learn the rudiments of this kind of mechanised warfare. There were mortars and small cannons.

Latrines were dug well away from the cave.

The cave was huge. There must have been 50 people in it including my aunts and uncles and cousins. In the spring, summer and autumn we could camp out the khaki tents. In the winter everyone was accommodated in the cave. The others brought a couple more horses and a cow and her calf to put in the barn section of the cave.

Estrella and I were allowed to sleep side by side in Polish army sleeping bags. We were 15. Luna, now a doctor, gave us advice about contraception, as she did all the younger men and women. We were not really hunter-gatherers although we would half-become ones. None of the women or girls got pregnant in the four years we spent in the Belarus forest.

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For four years we remained in seclusion surrounded by 50 relatives who watched each other's every move, for fear that someone might go for a walk in the forest, get lost, alert the local German and Belarus army and police patrols or Russian partisans that Jewish refugees were hiding. Stanislaw drove his tractor and trailer to his estate and round the villages fetching and buying and selling supplies to and from his Christian tenants and neighbours as if he was still in residence in his own mansion. He relied on the servants' loyalty. Luna and Estrella had gone to Bulgaria was the story he put out. He would stay in his mansion for days on end as if it was business as usual managing his estate. He brought us meat, vegetables, flour, sugar, tea, coffee, even fruit. There was cold, hunger, sickness, old age and death amongst us but we had Polish army medical supplies. Luna was our doctor and Ben Blumenthal my uncle by marriage – a specialist physician who could turn his hand to surgery now that Stanislaw had brought a camouflaged Polish army ambulance, a four-wheel drive, with battle-station equipment, and although we had guns and ammunition we did not yet need to fight and kill other human beings to survive. We even had Stanislaw's two-way radio and could listen in to local resistance groups and the German army talking in code. With the aerial pointing the right way we could even get Moscow, Berlin and London with news of the war.

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Many of us had become ill in the cave. Some had died. A few developed mental illnesses. We had learned how to hunt, fish, withstand the cold, deal with the constant fear of betrayal and discovery. We emerged like hibernating animals, blinking at the bright sunlight. Most of us decided we didn't want to live in a communist Poland where the new pro-Russian regime showed signs of returning to the old anti-Semitism after 1945 allowing *pogroms* against the surviving Jews – the few thousand who escaped murder in the concentration camps and the siege and destruction of the Warsaw ghetto. Where to now?

Most of us wanted to emigrate to Palestine or South Africa where we had relatives. Stanislaw and Luna and Estrella feared that the mansion and the estate would be confiscated by the commissars following in the wake of the Russian army and they would be lucky to escape execution as members of the old ruling class.

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When we were 18 in 1944 Estrella and I saw our future as man and wife. Luna, had warned the men and women against pregnancy but how can you legislate against the human heart and the human body? Stanislaw's army supplies included contraceptives. As it was, the crying of the older children amongst us would have been enough to alert any of the invading and retreating armies to a human presence in the middle of the forest in Belarus. Sometimes people woke up in the middle of the night screaming with terror after frightening dreams.

We made love only at safe times of the month for her.

She had curly dark brown hair. She was full of fun and humour. Jewish jokes: the one about Goldberg. Goldberg in the 1930s. Goldberg walking down *Unter der Linden*.

There has been a parade. The army in Berlin still have horses for some regiment or other they inherited from the old post- Great War German Reich. The road is full of horse-shit. Hitler, Goering, Goebbels and the rest of them are travelling in an open white Mercedes. Hitler sees old Goldberg going home. Hitler stops the car, gets out and orders Goldberg to eat the horse-shit. Hitler's body-guard, an SS man, puts a gun to Goldberg's head. Goldberg eats horse-shit. Vomits. They all laugh –

except Goldberg – and drive off. Goldberg arrives at his flat just off *Unter der Linden*. With trembling hands puts his key in the door, opens it and goes in. His wife greets him. “Goldberg, Goldberg, what’s the matter? Did you have a hard day at the office? Goldberg, your face – it’s ashen.” “No, fine, fine.”, says Goldberg, Everything’s fine. But you’ll never guess with whom I had dinner.”

Knowing that the Russians would collectivise everything Stanislaw, cleverly sold his lands and mansion before the German invasion of the Soviet Union to his younger brothers who had themselves avoided Katyn. They felt confident that, without Jewish encumbrances, they could do a deal with the Russians at the end of the war by joining the Communist Party and keeping some stake in a Soviet-style Poland. Stanislaw put all his money in a Swiss bank account, filled the wagons with all the cave-dwellers and pulling the vehicles by tractors by avoiding the main roads and using extensively detailed maps, got to Vienna which was jointly occupied by the Allies. The younger brothers soon got to know how the Soviet Union would collectivise and expropriate or just allow soldier to loot the gentry and emigrated to Vienna and then Istanbul with what little fortune they had been able to save.

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We dispersed to the various countries where we had relatives and friends. We stayed with Polish and Jewish friends and relatives who had somehow survived war-time Vienna and others of us stayed in the refugee camps in Vienna. We managed to get the British military and civil authorities to give us visa or entry permits to settle in Palestine in 1946. We had, like all the others, to go via Cyprus in dangerously unseaworthy vessels and some of the ships were blockaded and not allow to dock in Haifa. Despite our papers being in order we were interned in camps yet again for our cases to be reviewed by the British authorities.

We eventually got to Kibbutz Mishmar Ha’Yezre’el. We had cousins there Aryeh and Miryam Hertzman originally from South Africa who had emigrated to Palestine as soon as the war ended. Their parents had been in correspondence with us just before the war. The parents were a German-Jewish doctor and an accountant, Sophie and Arnold - both originally from Freiburg - who were now also valued kibbutz members.

We were given huts to live in whilst the *chaverim* the comrades, were resolved to build proper chalet-bungalows of brick – bedsitters with their own bathrooms, children’s nurseries and children’s and teenagers’ houses, schools, a modernised dining room and kitchen and offices when the on-coming war of independence was over – after the United Nations resolved to demarcate a Jewish and Arab Palestine as it promised to do. In the meantime we celebrated our re-union with the Hertzman family.

They had military-style jeeps with hard roofs, armor-plated in case of attacks by snipers holed up in the neighboring Arab villages who would use roadside rocks and houses as cover. These vehicles were bought with funds from local and world-wide Zionist agencies, the *bete noir* of the anti-Semites. We wanted to drive to the coast to a beach near Acre – Akko. We had hidden weapons ourselves underneath the chassis of the jeep. The British Palestine police were on the hunt for Zionist saboteurs, as they called us. It was the summer of 1947. It had taken us all of two years to leave Poland and Belarus, and get to Palestine.

The jeep was pulling a covered trailer. The kibbutz wanted us to sell their kibbutz-grown supplies of vegetables and fruit to our customers – shops and shipping companies on the way to our party on the beach with our long-lost South African cousins.

Aryeh and Miryam took turns in driving the jeep and negotiating the sales of our produce on the way. It was a hot summer's night when we got to the beach and celebrated with a barbecue and wine our reunion with relatives my parents had contact with in Johannesburg. There were letters which Aryeh and Miryam had brought from the kibbutz written by my mother and father begging us to come to South Africa as soon as possible. Estrella didn't want to go to Africa without her parents and Stanislaw wanted to convert to Judaism giving him the "right of return" to Palestine as if he was, symbolically, genetically Jewish, staying on with Luna and Estrella with whom we were all mutually bonded, having spent so many years together, struggling to stay alive. I went into Akko and found a post office and wrote an airmail letter to my heart-broken parents and affectionate siblings suggesting they come to Palestine to visit.

Aryeh and Miryam as well as being kibbutz members working in the dairy, the furniture factory, the orchards of apples, pears, the vineyard and the winery, the fields of crops like melons, tomatoes, or the greenhouses for peppers and aubergines grown even out of season, also had part-time jobs in Haifa and Jerusalem. Aryeh was a political philosopher who had written books in English and Hebrew on Marx, Herzl, Stalin, Trotsky and taught at the Hebrew University. Miryam was a journalist for an English-language Zionist newspaper and news-agency.

It was so hot we could sleep overnight on the beach, although with half an eye open in case the Palestine police or hostile Arab people wanted to search the jeep or attack us.

Estrella extracted some South African jokes from Aryeh and Miryam and told them her own. She was now playing a guitar and singing Hebrew poetry. The funnier she was, the more romantically lyrical, the more I loved her. She didn't want to settle down and have children. As for me I wanted to become a member of Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'Yez're'el, but hoped they would help me do medicine at

the Hebrew University. I wanted to become a psychiatrist specializing in what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorders. This is what Luna was doing in Poland and in the cave and the kibbutz wanted her to stay on doing this for new immigrants to Palestine and soldiers in the Haganah and what would become the Israel Defence Force.

We swam in the sea, told jokes, swapped stories about our terrible and adventitious happenings, went home to the kibbutz.

Only to discover there was a security-related crisis on. We walked into an evening meeting in the kibbutz dining-room. A transport lorry carrying Arab workers who worked as builders for the kibbutz has been attacked by invisible snipers as it passed a village on its journey home one evening. Rifle fire and grenades had been used. There were casualties who had to be taken to hospital in Haifa, the lorry had been destroyed. What to do? How to react? Should the kibbutz try to find the miscreants and take them to the Palestine Police who in all probability would be in sympathy with the Arab cause. Should there be a punitive raid on the whole village?

Would we never find peace?

Aryeh and Miryam whose Hebrew was good proposed that we send peace delegations to the Arab villages and offer wage increases to the builders and speed up the building programme so that there would be more employment and the complaints about the purchase of Arab land by Jews might be offset.

Estrella and I were depressed by this turn of events, which could only get worse as these incidents developed into a full-scale war between Jews and Arabs as 1947 became 1948 and the Jewish state would be declared independent after the British left and the United Nations endorse a partition plan.

The next day we decided to at least try to take a holiday from war and the threat of further war by going to South Africa to stay with my parents and siblings. And, of course, to fulfill my parents, grandparents and siblings' dreams of being together again.

We decided that, love, even first love, meant attachment, tenderness, nurturance, kindness not only to each other but to those who were of our flesh and blood, our culture, whose forefathers and mothers had, in a sense, died for us – so that we would inherit a happier life. Abstract socialism, even the concrete welfare community were only contexts.

There was an essence, an existence in us which was, after all, in the human species, African.

There was a spirit not necessarily of God, but of Being which we would discover in Africa with my flesh and blood which was in affinity with Estrella.

That whole night we read the Hebrew bible together, especially the psalms. Estrella picked up her guitar and composed a rendering of the most famous almost spoken in husky, imploring terms:

Mizmor l' David: a psalm of David: Adonai ro'ie , the LORD is my shepherd, lo ech'sar I shall not want..... [...] Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....

Someone had given me a box of tempera paints, charcoal and cartridge paper... I drew and painted her when we were not reading and singing softly... Her curly brown hair, her dark olive skin, yet her blue eyes so startling against that skin. But they were almond shaped. Her long, slender hands, her almost Grecian nose, her high Slavic cheekbones: as if we had the genes of so many ethnicities, as if we, as we all do, in part represent the human race to ourselves and to Being. To being-in-the-world, the "real world" ready-to-hand. No wonder this Palestine was chosen as the promised land if it brought together so many arts, science, civilizations, the cross-roads of civilizations, East and West, North and South.

But after all a child's first love is also towards his mother – and father. They were waiting for us south of the crocodiles of the Limpopo. To the far north of them there were the hippos of the Zambezi, and the tortured torrents of the Congo which had seen so much colonial blood.

She stopped playing and starting weeping. I took her in my arms. She said: "Please, Jacob I don't want children. This world is too much for me and for a child." I said it didn't matter. I would always love her.

So, we mothered and fathered each other. That is what we learned in our version of Plato's cave when we turned round and looked out at the sun. That first love can be many things. There is no twist to this story. No hidden meaning. We found peace. We found we could remain silent.