



Picture by Ruth Ellen Gruber

### *Henryk Halkowski*

"In 1997 I took a picture of Henryk, a wry grin on his face, as he posed a trifle awkwardly at a Krakow souvenir stall selling T-shirts and carved wooden figures of Jews".



Picture by Yale Storm of Henryk

*Wherever one walked in Kaczimierz, regardless of the time of day or night (and Tsvi particularly liked to walk the streets at night), you couldn't help but run into him, then have a drink, then have a meal. I endearingly called him "The Mayor of Kaczimierz". Tsvi's last project was editing Khasidic stories of the Bratslaver Rebe and we talked about this over latkes at the Klezmer-Hois. His intellect was eclipsed only by his gentle sweetness. His ghost, like so many others, will hover over Krakow.*

*Yale Storm*

Jewish history is about absence and silence, European capitals have Jewish Quarters filled with museum shops housing ritual objects and scrolls. Mostly Japanese and Germans visit these tourist places. How ironic that Hitler's plans for a Jewish Museum in Prague's Jewish Quarter have been fulfilled.

In the absence of Jews I walked around the old quarter in Krakow so eerie with all the hassidic melodies wafting out of the restaurants and bars and the ham sandwiches with vodka being consumed within. Little figurines of hassidic Jews with beards, side locks and hooked noses being sold for the tourists, it's like a nightmare in a horror movie.

The silence of those murdered a few streets away is deafening the entire quarter emptied out and taken to the local cemetery not the famous one near the *Rema Shul*, mind you just the new cemetery that housed the recent and mostly alienated from Judaism are buried.

My friend<sup>1</sup> Henryk is buried there  
sudden death Marta said,  
he was the heart of post war Krakow Jews  
translated Rabbi Nachman's stories into Polish  
he haunted the streets of Kazimierz  
bumping into American tourists  
Oh how I miss his gentle voice.

In truth my visit was preceded some 40 years  
when at age 11 my father took me to Vienna  
his first visit since leaving in 1939,  
I never saw my father cry before  
and in so many ways I am a weird kind of "child of a survivor"  
For he survived alright  
But not through the hell of Hitler's inferno  
Rather by escaping  
And living with that fateful decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Henryk Halkowski, the heart and soul of Jewish Krakow, died suddenly of a heart attack in Krakow the night January 1-2. Henryk was full of history, opinions and stories. Among his projects at the time of his death is a volume of translation and commentary of Rabbi Nachman's Stories. I met him the three times I visited Krakow over the course of ten years.

I am the son, the physical presence, and reminder  
of my father's fateful choice in 1939  
to leave and abandon his family  
at 17  
for freedom and survival.  
His sister refused  
and paid for the choice with her life.

As such,  
I reflect that genetic choice  
that betrayal,  
and as such  
it is etched into my soul.  
It infects all my choices too.

So when I made my move to the States in 1974  
for my medical internship and residency  
my father was heartbroken  
and accused me of handing Hitler a second victory.<sup>2</sup>  
"Hitler took my first family from me, now you are breaking up  
my family once more" he exclaimed.  
It is this I carry for him.  
It is this guilt I bear because of him.  
It is this nightmare that haunts us both.

I must learn to own this too-  
since my life owes its very existence to his fateful choice,  
it is suffused by that choice,  
and marks my choices genetically with the same stamp.  
My life is incarnated with its implication of his betrayal.

This dark unacknowledged mystery  
this un-admitted secret  
seems to motivate so many of my bad choices.  
that choice between survival and freedom and honor,  
family and sacrifice,  
moral ambivalence and expedience.

How can I come to see this inherited genetic double-edged sword  
that both wounds and heals simultaneously as a source of blessing?  
for the very betrayal means living  
the cutting of corners means getting to the finish line  
and the flight to a new country means a fresh start.

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<sup>2</sup> to borrow Fakenheim's expression

Can I not see the character defects as measured by the perfection scale?  
Can I rather accept the genetic trait that allowed him and I to live and  
to survive-above all to see the blessing of children and grandchildren?  
So his choice back then and my choice now  
of just what is, the soul's code  
Even this I must love too.

My history is also about absences and silences.  
I never met my grandparents and would love to see and touch my aunt Alice  
whose devotion to her parents  
represented the light side to the father's dark choice  
in her accompanying her parents to Izhbitz transit camp  
then on to Sobibor or Belzec to their deaths.  
In that silence of their screaming presence we inhabit  
this nightmare.

In the absence of Henryk and the silence of the old city  
Where I walk alone now  
Is the secret of the Jewish soul